

**Mark:
The Napa Valley Parable**

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October 5, 2005

Turn with me, if you would, first of all to the prophecy of Isaiah and to chapter five, and as we shall see in a minute, Jesus seems to be basing the parable that we'll be looking at this evening on the opening verses of Isaiah 5, the so-called "Parable of the Vineyard."

It would be interesting to know (we are making something of a conjecture, of course) just how much the teaching of Jesus is from time to time dependent on passages of Scripture that He studied in the synagogue in Nazareth and Capernaum and elsewhere, and particularly, I think, in the closing weeks of His life. What passages of Scripture weighed down upon Him as He meditated more and more on His calling as the Messiah, as the sin-bearer? We'll see again this evening how one of the Passover psalms, Psalm 118, a Psalm that has already been quoted in the incident when Jesus came in on the colt into [Jerusalem] and the crowds began to sing "Hosanna!" - yet another passage.

Well, that's given you enough time now to find Isaiah 5! Let's pray before we read.

Father, again we bow in Your presence. We thank You for Your written word, this divine gift given by the out-breathing of God and profitable for doctrine and correction, and reproof and instruction in the way of righteousness, that we might be thoroughly equipped unto every good work. Now bless us, we pray, as we read Your word together, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let's read first of all in Isaiah 5.

Let me sing now for my beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it,
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.
And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,

Judge between Me and My vineyard.
What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?
So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.
I will lay it waste: It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.

And then, in the Gospel of Mark, and we begin back in chapter eleven at verse 27, and reading through into chapter twelve and the so-called “Parable of the Tenants.” Mark 11:27.

And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, and scribes, and elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, “By what authority are You doing things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?” And Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me.” And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From men?’”—they were afraid of the people, for everyone considered John to have been a real prophet. Answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

[Chapter 12] “And He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard, and put a wall around it, and dug a vat under the wine press, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. And at the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some, and killing others. He had one more to send, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” But those vine-growers said to one another, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!” They took him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others. Have you not even read this scripture:

‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; This came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’”

And they were seeking to seize Him; and yet they feared the people; for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him, and went away.

Now, you'll remember that moment (some of you, I'm sure) in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has died, and the ghost of Hamlet appears. And there's a famous line in which a prophecy of evil lurking in the person of a new king, and the line of course is that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Well, you have to be fans of Shakespeare, I suppose.... But it's a defining moment in the story of Hamlet.

There is something rotten in the city of Jerusalem, and this week as Jesus makes yet another entry from Bethany with His disciples that evil is now coming to its full and malevolent climax. We've already seen portents of this evil and of Jesus' attitude towards it in the cursing of the fig tree. As we saw, the fig, as here the vine, representative in Old Testament of Israel itself, and Jesus' signaling the coming of divine judgment and retribution upon Israel.

We saw last week in the temple when Jesus upset the tables of the moneychangers, and for a brief moment made it impossible for the ritual procedures of the Passover to actually take place, as though Jesus was signaling the end of the temple, the end of Israel as a covenant community. And so He tells a parable here, the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard, a parable—there aren't many of them in the Gospel of Mark; this is the second one that we've seen—a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, we sometimes say. It's like the political cartoon in the newspaper. It's a particular genre designed to hyperbolize, to exaggerate, in order to make a very dramatic and sudden point. It's like the graffiti on the subway.

The context of this one is important. It's the issue of authority. They'd just asked Jesus this question: 'By what authority or by whose authority do You do these things?' It's a typical question of religious folk to ask that kind of question. They weren't interested in what Jesus was doing; they were just interested in how to control it. Who gave Him the authority to raise the dead, to walk on water, to multiply loaves and fishes, to say 'Your sins are forgiven you'? Their intent, of course, was to try Him and to make Him condemn Himself. Later, of course, Jesus would say categorically, "All authority in heaven and earth is given unto Me." We live in an anti-authority age...perhaps not so much here, but ask school teachers in the public school system, or ask yourself as you drive home and you see a sign for 55 miles an hour!

There are two related contrasting issues emerging here, and both of them hinge on the issue of authority. The first is that Jesus is a king who is rejected by men; and secondly, that Jesus is a king who rejects those who reject Him.

I. Jesus as a king rejected by men.

In the first place, we see here Jesus as a king rejected by men.

If you look back at the section that closes chapter 11, you'll see that when Jesus is asked this question 'By what authority or by whose authority do You do these things?' He responds with the maxim of the Proverb: You answer a fool according to his folly.

The baptism of John—was it from men or from God? It was the perfect question to ask. Why is He asking that? Because the Sanhedrin are now caught in a net of their own making. If they say 'from men' they're in trouble, because the public went out in their thousands and tens of thousands from the city of Jerusalem and their cultic worship of the temple, in order to be baptized by John in the River Jordan. Their own standing in the eyes of the people would then be in jeopardy.

If they say 'from God', then they have to answer the question, why is it that they haven't believed in Jesus.

Mark makes mention of three groups of people in the temple area: the priests, and the scribes, and the elders. These are representatives, in all likelihood, of the Sanhedrin council. The Sanhedrin council was made up of 71 members during the time of Roman occupation of Jerusalem, and they were made up of representatives of these three groups of people. They were, first of all, the chief priests or senior temple priests, the teachers of the law (otherwise known as the Pharisees) who were to be found often in various parts of the temple answering questions given by folk, and then the elders - the lay aristocracy of the land. They met in a place called the *Lishkat Ha-Gazith*. It was a building structure, a stone structure built into the northern wall of the temple area, half in the temple and half out of it. This is the body that will bribe Judas with thirty pieces of silver in order to betray Jesus. This is the body who, finding no evidence against Jesus, will bring false witnesses to accuse Jesus of blasphemy, a capital offence in the Jewish law.

All of this is evidence of the rejection of Jesus. It's taking place in the highest court of Jerusalem. And Jesus tells them this parable, the parable of the tenants. It's the story of an absentee landowner, who leases his land (and in this case, a vineyard) to tenant farmers, with the expectation that he will profit from it. Usually the customary amount in this period would be anything between a third of the harvest or half of the harvest that would go to the landowner. He had that right; he had that expectation.

When the season for produce comes, he sends one of his servants, and they beat him and send him away empty-handed. And he sends them another, and they strike him on the head. And he sends another, only to be killed; and another, and another, and another...and finally he sends his beloved son. And the tenants

kill him in the expectation that the inheritance will now go to them, since the son is dead.

It's interesting that in 1662, in the edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* that was published in 1662, there was a mandatory fast day on January 30, to be held for the offense of regicide, the killing of a king, namely Charles I, who had been killed in 1649; and the reading, one of the readings, for that mandatory fast day service was this parable of the tenants. The Puritans saw foul as a monarchist plot on behalf of the framers of *The Book of Common Prayer*, and they would have nothing to do with it.

Jesus is of course alluding here to a picture of the Jewish people, of Israel, particularly these members of the Sanhedrin. He's alluding to the metaphor of a vineyard - representative, as it frequently is in the Old Testament, of Israel. We've just seen in chapter five of Isaiah almost the exact same parable being told. He plants a vineyard in the expectation that, as he leases that vineyard to tenant farmers, he has the right to expect fruit. He has the right to expect the produce of grapes and of wine. God had built a strong wall around it to keep it from wild boars and to discourage thieves, and He dug a pit for a winepress, and one shallow pit for the grapes to be trodden upon, and then another deeper one to hold the juice as it flowed out of those grapes, and He built a watchtower and shelter and storage as a vantage point from which to view the whole vineyard. The climax of that story as it's told in Isaiah is, "I looked for justice, *mishpat* in Hebrew, and behold, bloodshed *mishpach*." It's a play on words. The two words sound the same. I looked for justice and what I got was bloodshed. I looked for righteousness *tsedeqah* and behold, an outcry *tse'ahqah*.

This had been Israel from the time God had made a promise to Abraham, through the days of the conquest of Canaan, and through the heady days of the kings and the prophets; and God had been calling for fruit, and expecting fruit—the sweetest grapes, they say, grow closest to the vine— God had every right from Israel to expect fruit. To them had been given the covenants and the law and the teachers...and what had they done? They had persecuted and killed: Elijah, driven into the wilderness; Zechariah, stoned to death near the altar; Jeremiah, beaten and placed in the stocks; Uriah, killed by a sword; John the Baptist, whose head was cut off; Isaiah, sawn in two, according to tradition; and Jeremiah, killed eventually by the sword.; and last of all, as the last Prophet, the final Prophet, He sends His own Son, His beloved Son. And Luther says, as only Luther could say it, "If I were God and the world had treated me as it treated Him, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces!" Send in the Marines, is what you'd do!

It is impossible to understand such love. You remember how Paul puts it in Romans: "He that spared not His own Son...." and Paul is picking up the language from the Greek translation of the Old Testament of the story of Abraham and Isaac, because God spared Isaac. He spared him, but He did not spare His own Son. They killed Him — the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the

Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Lord of glory. They reject the King's Son.

II. Jesus is the King who rejects those who reject Him.

And there's another side to the story. There's a hinge upon which this now turns, because Jesus is the King who was rejected by men. But, in the second place, Jesus is the King who rejects those who reject Him. Jesus asks this question: "What will the owner of this vineyard do?" And He says, "He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others." And of course it is descriptive of exactly what happens, because in The Acts of the Apostles, that's precisely what you see occurring: that the kingdom of God now systematically leaves the synagogue, and the people of God are now no longer ethnic Jews, but the people of God are Jews and Gentiles called by faith into union and communion with Jesus Christ.

And Jesus cites now this Psalm, one of the great Passover psalms no doubt being sung by groups of people in the streets of Jerusalem as they're going to this celebratory festival of Passover - the Hallel psalms, Psalms 113-118, and Psalm 118 being the climactic psalm sung at Passover. One of them, this one, Psalm 118, has already been sung when Jesus came in riding on the donkey into Jerusalem, and now Jesus alludes to that part of Psalm 118, a Messianic psalm, a psalm that speaks about Him, about Jesus, about His mission: "The stone which the builders rejected...." It's a picture of the builders building Solomon's temple, and they've come across this stone and it doesn't fit, so they cast it aside. And then it becomes the chief stone.

And it's exactly what's happening here. Isn't it interesting to contemplate for a moment how assured at this moment Jesus is of His mission and destiny: that He is the stone that is being rejected by men, but He is the chief cornerstone that His Father will place in the edifice in which you and I, by faith in Jesus Christ, are also living stones being built up by God into this glorious temple, which is His church?

Luke adds a little rider of his own when he comes to tell this parable: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

What Jesus is saying is clear enough: If you reject Me, I will reject you. You see, there are those in this world who think that God owes it to forgive...that's His business. It doesn't matter how I live, it doesn't matter what I believe, because in the end God will forgive everybody. Well, that wasn't the belief of Jesus, and Jesus makes it abundantly clear here that those who reject Him, who say no to the overtures of mercy in the gospel, who refuse to have Him reign over their lives as Lord, as King, He also will reject. There will come a day when He will utter from His throne in glory, "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire,

for I never knew you.”

What is this parable teaching us tonight? That God expects us to bear fruit for Him.

It's been so heartwarming to see in very practical ways how that fruit has been borne through this hurricane...the acts of kindness, the giving of money and help and muscle, and gas, and a thousand other things. I have an email from a former student at the seminary...where Ligon was on Sunday evening...Dave Skinner...just overwhelmed by the generosity of First Presbyterian Church, a church that I think he barely knows, and how through this evil and wicked and terrible thing enormous good has emerged through the intervention of the sovereign hand of God, weaving His mysterious providence to bring glory to Himself. His goodness is such to lead us to repentance; but if we spurn that goodness...if we spurn that goodness, we only have the severity of God to deal with.

Isn't that what Paul says? “Behold the goodness and severity of God.” Let's pray together.

Father, as we approach these final days of Jesus' life in Mark's gospel, we're overcome once again by the solemnity of all that happens in all of its detail, how inexorably there are those who reject Christ, and how by turn He also announces His rejection of them. Our Father, our hearts tremble as we think of it, but our hearts rejoice, too, in the knowledge that whosoever believes will be saved. We thank Thee for the assurance that is ours tonight, that having believed and having trusted we may reckon ourselves to be amongst those who are the children of God; and, if heirs, joint heirs with Jesus Christ. We pray from the very bottom of our hearts that by the strength of Your Spirit You would enable us to bear much fruit for You and for Your glory. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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