

Ben Leney

Salvation's Plan

So we are on Mark 12:1-17 and we've got two sections to look at - the parable of the wicked tenants, and the question with the Pharisees - is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

Parable of the Wicked Vine-dressers

Mark 12:1-2 " Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vine-dressers and went into a far country. 2 Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vine-dressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vine-dressers."

Although it says he began to speak to them in parables, we only get one parable at this point. (In the gospel of Matthew this reference to 'parables' it seems to trigger three parables: the two sons working in the vineyard, the wicked vinedresser's parable as in Mark, and then the king inviting guests to a feast.)

ALLEGORY (Gk. *allegoreō*). The term occurs only once (Gal. 4:24), "This is allegorically speaking," NASB ; "these things are an allegory," KJV ; "these things may be taken figuratively," NIV . "To allegorize" means to express or explain one thing under the image of another

1 Unger, M.F. et al. (1988) *The new Unger's Bible dictionary*. Rev. and updated ed. Chicago: Moody Press.

Talk to the person next to you for a moment. What do you get out of the parables? Do you find them helpful or find them difficult and if so why?

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So he plants, digs etc. This shows the vineyard owner is wanting the vineyard to be profitable. He's going about it properly. In first century Israel they all had hedges, they had a trough for the wine, they had a tower to provide shelter, and you could keep an eye out for thieves too.

This sounds very much like Isaiah 5.

Isaiah 5:1-2 "Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. 2 He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in

its midst, And also made a wine-press in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes.”

In Jesus’ parable, the problem is with the tenants of the vineyard.

Mark 12:1–2 “1 Then He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. 2 Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers.”

At vintage time - now the vines would not have been yielding grapes after one year. It’s worth looking at Leviticus on the fruitfulness of the vine:

Leviticus 19:23–25 ‘When you come into the land, and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised. Three years it shall be as uncircumcised to you. It shall not be eaten. 24 But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to the Lord. 25 And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, that it may yield to you its increase: I am the Lord your God.”

It’s possible the man is not returning until the 5th year. Why would the tenant farmers take it on if they have to wait so long? One commentator suggested the vine would be planted in wide rows, with space to plant other crops between. Maybe the owner was coming back for some of those crops, or in the 5th year for the grapes.

Brooks says this:

Mark ((2) About the Rejection of Israel: The Parable of the Wicked Tenant Farmers (12:1–12))

Second, absentee landlords of huge estates and landless tenant farmers were quite common in Galilee in Jesus’ day. The tenants usually were required to turn over between one-fourth and one-half of the produce to the owner’s agents. As a result they were barely able to survive—a situation that produced much discontent.

Mark 12:3–5 “And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. 5 And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some.”

Discuss with the person next to you: How do you react to this behaviour of the vine-dressers?

So picking up our ‘allegory’ again. Who are the vine-dressers? The vine-dressers are the religious leaders or the priests. The vineyard is Israel, just like in Isaiah 5. These servants are the prophets that God has sent to give his message about turning from idolatry.

... the allegory allows us to see these events from the perspective of God’s long and turbulent relationship with Israel. Garland, D.E. (1996) *Mark*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan

'Servant' is often used in the OT to describe God's prophets, for example:

Daniel 9:6 "6 Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land."

2 Chronicles 36:16 "But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy."

Many prophets were beaten and killed. Zechariah the son of Jehoiada (not the one who wrote the book) was stoned. Read about that in 2 Chron 2:24. The prophet Uriah was killed with the sword (Jer 26.23). John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, had his head chopped off. Some wonder if this is John. But it doesn't seem to fit as other servants are sent after him.

The shock of the son being killed is slightly lessened by the fact many servants have already been killed. Luke amends this in the version we read. Matthew abbreviates the account of the stream of servants being sent (he often makes Mark more concise).

Matthew 21:35–36 "And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them."

This verse is the centre of the parable:

Mark 12:6 "Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.'"

Discuss with the person next to you: what's your response to the landowner's action here?

Cranfield makes this remark:

'Would a landlord whose slaves had been maltreated by rebellious tenants proceed to send his only son to them without taking precautions for his safety?' *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary on Mark*, Cranfield, p.367

It's worth looking to see whether they have included 'beloved' in your translation or not. It could have the meaning of 'only' son, or of 'loved' son.

'The force of ἀγαπητός (agapētos) is often "pertaining to one who is the only one of his or her class, but at the same time is particularly loved and cherished" (L&N 58.53; cf. also BDAG 7 s.v. 1).' BDAG A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. 3d e.d.

I quite like the way the NIV puts this verse:

| Mark 12:6 (NIV)

| ⁶ "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying,

| 'They will respect my son.'

The word for 'beloved' echoes

Genesis 22:2 "Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.""

The word 'beloved' isn't in the Greek. It's his 'one' son, or his only son. Also Mark 1 Jesus' baptism, my beloved son, and the transfiguration in Mark 9 - this is my beloved son. The readers of Mark's gospel are knowing where this is going.

Mark 12:7-8 "But those vine-dressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' 8 So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard."

This phrase 'come let us kill him'. Where have we heard this before?

Genesis 37:20 "Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him.' We shall see what will become of his dreams!""

Joseph as one of the pre-eminent 'types' of Jesus in the Old Testament!

Again a mysterious point of interpretation. Why did they think if they kill the son, the vineyard will be theirs?

Joachim Jeremias suggested they believe the reason the son is coming is not simply to get the produce, but because his father is dead, and the son's coming to claim the vineyard for himself.

It's interesting to study what the Bible says about the wicked - we learn a lot by doing so. This thought here:

It says something about the foolish hubris of those in every age and in every walk of life who think that they can seize control of everything in their lives and push God out of the picture. Did these tenants really believe that by killing the son they could become the owners of the vineyard? Apparently so. Do humans think that by erasing God from their lives they can take control of their earthly and eternal destinies? Apparently so. The allegory reveals the utter foolishness of sinful rebellion against God.¹¹ Garland, D.E. (1996) *Mark*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House (The NIV Application Commentary), p. 456.

In Matthew and Luke they take the son out then kill him.

This is the height of shame, indignity and offence. And at this point - Mark may be writing it like this - it makes us think of Jesus. The Son of God, sent to earth, to reclaim what is rightfully his, on behalf of the Father. The religious leaders, the Romans, all of us - casting him out of the holy city, murdering him on a hilltop.

Hebrews 13:12-13 "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. 13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside

the camp, bearing His reproach.”

Mark 12:9–11 “Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-dressers, and give the vineyard to others. 10 Have you not even read this Scripture: ‘The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. 11 This was the Lord’s doing, And it is marvellous in our eyes?’”

In Matthew he asks it and his listeners reply. Possibly here the only point in Mark where Jesus answers his own question.

Jesus makes no bones about it that these vine-dressers are ripe for judgement and are deserving of death. This raises the question - what happens to the Jews? It’s not the Jewish people, but it’s the leaders of the Jews, the Sadducees, the Chief Priests - those who are about to condemn Jesus to death - who are going to suffer. Wuest says this:

Here we have the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the world-wide dispersion of the Jews A.D. 70, the call of the Gentiles, and the Church of Jesus Christ, the latter being the channel through which God is operating temporarily while Israel is in dispersion, and until Israel will be regathered at the second Advent, and restored to fellowship with and usefulness to God. Wuest’s Word Studies in the Greek New Testament (Chapter Twelve)

In Hebrew son is ‘ben’. Stone is ‘eben’. Young says this:

It should be noted that the key terms in the parable make a play on words. They look and sound alike in Hebrew. The word play focuses on the terms “son” (in Hebrew, *ben*), “sons” (in Hebrew, *banim*), or “builders” (in Hebrew, *bonim*), “stone” (in Hebrew, *even*) or in the plural “stones” (in Hebrew, *avanim*).¹¹ Young, B.H. (2011) *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, p. 219.

Here is the OT reference:

Psalm 118 (NKJV)

¹ Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for *He is good!* For His mercy *endures* forever. ... ²¹ I will praise You, For You have answered me, And have become my salvation. ²² The stone *which* the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. ²³ This was the LORD’s doing; It *is* marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴ This *is* the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵ ... ²⁹ Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for *He is good!* For His mercy *endures* forever.

Note that this Psalm would have been sung by pilgrims going up to the Temple - what’s known as a Hallel psalm.

Brad Young says this:

Third, in Jewish thought the stone (even) mentioned in the end of the illustration would make a clear reference to King David. In the context of the parable, the stone would point toward Jesus as the son of David. This is confirmed by the Jewish interpretations of Psalm 118:22–23 in light of King David’s life. At least the

Jewish commentaries on this psalm related the stone to King David. At the beginning, young David, who was destined to become the greatest of all the kings of Israel, was rejected by the builders. Young, B.H. (2011) *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, p. 218.

Before reading Brad Young on this parable, I hadn't made the connection between David as the rejected stone, and Jesus. David was rejected by Jesse as king, and was rejected for a long while by Israel while Saul was king. In the same way, Jesus is rejected by Israel, although he has now become the Chief Cornerstone.

The 'builders' for David included Samuel and Jesse - but God had selected David in spite of looking too small and insignificant!

Jesus is the rejected stone. He's been rejected by the builders, cast out of the vineyard, but he's become the chief cornerstone, and it is marvellous in our eyes. Did the imagery have to change to stones here because in the parable the son had been killed and couldn't be resurrected?

Mark 12:12 "And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away."

The 'they' is the elders the chief priests and the scribes. There was no doubt to Jesus' audience who the wicked vine-dressers are referring to.

Cranfield suggests this is a full allegory in order for Jesus to give due warning to the religious leaders of the consequences of the actions they are planning against him:

'The centre of interest is the murder of the owner's son...Jesus has made no direct claim...But he has gone as far as he possibly could, within those limits, to open their eyes to the truth.' *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary on Mark*, Cranfield, p.368

Brad Young also helps to explain the purpose of this parable here:

Jesus is concerned about the hostility he will be required to absorb. He has many supporters among the people on the temple mount, though some of the Sadducees cooperated with the Romans. The parable is a way of talking with those who would cooperate with the Romans. Jesus desires to speak prophetically in a nonthreatening way. Jesus is sharing his pain with those who will listen. The parable of the Only Son portrays Jesus' strong confidence in his special mission.¹¹ Young, B.H. (2011) *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, p. 222.

This is Jesus' indirect answer to the earlier question: whose authority do you act on? The answer in this parable is clearly: God's - the owner of the vineyard. The others can't carry out their plots against him at this point due to the crowds.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

Mark 12:13 "Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words."

That 'they' is the same they. In

Luke 20:20 "So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on His words, in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor."

Here we are told that they are spies pretending to be righteous. This word 'catch' is like a hunter catching their prey.

Mark 12:14–15 "When they had come, they said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and care about no one; for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? 15 Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see it.""

First of all we get flattery - 'Rabbi'. They're buttering him up to tricked into saying something he'd regret.

Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers, Volume 2: St. Mark (12:13–17)

PSEUDO-JEROME. For they questioned Him with honied words, and they surrounded Him as bees, who carry honey in their mouth, but a sting in their tail.

There is a poll tax that came in - Judas (not the disciple) revolted against it in AD 6 and everyone has to pay this expensive tax to the Romans.

Acts 5:37 "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed."

Some of them wouldn't even touch these coins with Caesar's image on due to breaking the second commandment:

Exodus 20:4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;"

Just like Mark 2 he knows their hypocrisy. He sees into their thoughts, and says 'Why do you test me?' In Luke it says that he 'perceived their craftiness'. They're just trying to get rid of him. Paul Barnett comments:

This was a very dangerous moment for Jesus. To reply 'No, don't pay the tax to Rome' would identify him as a new Judas and bring his immediate arrest on the charge of treason against Rome. But to reply, 'Yes, pay the tax' would imply his support of Rome against Israel and therefore against God. This would seal Jesus' fate with the Passover crowd. Either way the chief priests' worries would be over: Jesus would be removed from the scene—and by his very own words. We can imagine the stillness as they awaited his reply. 1 Barnett, P. (1991) *Mark: The Servant King*. Sydney, South NSW: Aquila Press (Reading the Bible Today Series), pp. 220–221.

1. He says bring me a denarius.

Mark 12:16–17 “ So they brought it. And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” 17 And Jesus answered and said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they marvelled at Him.”

2. He clearly didn’t have a denarius on him.

3. Those who are asking had the money on them. This shows their hypocrisy as clearly they are prepared to pay the tax.

A denarius is a day’s wages for a labour. Quite a lot of money.

But what actually belongs to Caesar? It also echoes the parable of the vine-dressers. Does the vineyard really belong to them? What our hearts about property, our bodies and our family, money, and our allegiance. Do we owe allegiance to secular authorities? Do we owe allegiance to God?

Jesus would say this:

Psalm 96:7–8 “7 Give to the Lord, O families of the peoples, Give to the Lord glory and strength. 8 Give to the Lord the glory due His name; Bring an offering, and come into His courts.”

N.T. Wright suggests that Jesus’ response would have left his listeners in controversy and dismay:

Jesus says, in effect, ‘Well then, you’d better pay Caesar back as he deserves!’¹⁰² Had he told them to revolt? Had he told them to pay the tax? He had done neither. He had done both. Nobody could deny that the saying was revolutionary, but nor could anyone say that Jesus had forbidden payment of the tax. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N.T. Wright p.505

Drawing it together

Just a couple of assorted points to make here.

The son cast out of the vineyard remains dead. But the reference straight after to the stone rejected, becomes a key passage in several NT epistles after the resurrection for the understanding of what has taken place.

Ephesians 2:20 “20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone,”

We also get this wonderful phrase in Acts 4:11, 1 Pet 2:6-7 and a similar reference to Jesus as the foundation in 1 Cor 3:11.

It’s worth noting the Luke ending to the parable:

Luke 20:18 “Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.””

Brad Young says the point is that the stone remains. It doesn’t make any difference

whether you're broken or ground to powder - the emphasis is on the enduring nature of the Son of God. There is also the suggestion that the Jewish people also will remain.

| The Bible Knowledge Commentary (12:10–11)

The stone (Jesus, like the son), which the builders (the Jewish religious leaders, like the tenant farmers) rejected has become the capstone ("cornerstone," NIV marg.; lit., "head of the corner"). This was considered the most important stone of a building. This dramatic reversal of the builders' decision and exaltation of the rejected stone was God's sovereign doing, a remarkable thing. God overrules in amazing ways rebellious human attempts to block His purposes.

Perhaps this should be called the Parable of the One Son - according to Brad Young - but it off-centres the message here, but reminds us of the importance of obeying God, honouring Him and recognising the true authority that is God's. Isn't that something we need to bear in mind ourselves?

'A long-range application to church leaders who cease to be servants and stewards and seek to be owners and lords.' Brooks, J.A. (1991) *Mark*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers (The New American Commentary), p. 191.

'Those in occupation of God's estate are not its owners, are never its owners... entirely a tenancy - and we must be alert to, ready for, open to the emissaries of God the rightful owner' *A Reading of the Parables of Jesus*, Ruth Etchells, London 1998, Darton, Longman & Todd

As those who are guarding and stewarding salvation, the gospel, the church - called either to return it to God as he comes back or hand it back to the next generation. We're not keeping it for ourselves or benefiting from it personally - it's for others.