

“The Tenants and the Vineyard”
Mark 12:1-12
February 1, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning to the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus is in Jerusalem, teaching in the Temple, where Mark describes a series of conflicts that occur between Jesus and the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. This morning we come to the second of those conflicts.

With that in mind, let’s turn to our text: Mark 12:1-12.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{12:1} And he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. ² When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. ⁶ He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ⁷ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ ⁸ And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹ What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this Scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
¹¹ this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?”

¹² And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, your word is a lamp to our feet

and a light to our path.
In the trials we face,
we ask you, Lord, to give us life according to your word.
Teach us the way you would have us go.
Let your testimonies be the joy of our hearts,
and incline our hearts to keep your statutes forever, to the end.
We ask this in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:105-108, 111-112]

Introduction

So we have here a parable. But as suggested in verse 12, and confirmed more directly in Matthew's account of the same parable [Matthew 21:43], this is a parable aimed at a specific group of people in Jesus's day: namely, the leaders of God's people in Jerusalem. [Edwards, 357; Horne, 155; Witherington, 323; Wright, *Victory*, 178]

In that sense, this parable is firmly rooted in a particular moment in redemptive history: directed to the leadership in Jerusalem, and pointing forward to the judgment that will fall on them in 70 AD, and their replacement with the new mix of Jewish and Gentile leadership in the Church, as a result of their persistent refusal of God's calls to repentance, and their rejection of his Son, when they crucified Jesus.

But even as this passage is firmly rooted in that moment, it speaks to us and to our moment as well. Because we too can fall into the sin of the Sanhedrin. We too can fall into the sin of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We too can face God's judgment for the sins described here. And it's happened many times throughout Church history.¹

And so as much as this parable speaks to a specific moment in redemptive history, it also speaks to us today – as the Apostle Paul reminds us: These things which were written down were written for our instruction. [Romans 15:4] They are important for us and for our relationship with God. [1 Timothy 3:16]

And as we'll see, this passage applies to us in at least two different ways.

First, it applies to us to the extent that we ourselves are workers – laborers, tenants – in the Kingdom of God. Because as we work in God's kingdom, we too can be tempted to the sins of the tenants described here in this parable.

¹ One reason we know that texts like this are still relevant for us, so removed from this historical setting, is that Paul says explicitly that what God has done with unbelieving and unfaithful Jews in the first century, he will do with Gentiles in the generations that follow, if they fall into similar unbelief or unfaithfulness.

In Romans 11:17-24 the Apostle Paul specifically warned Gentile believers that what God had done to unbelieving Jews he would also do to unbelieving Gentiles. Gentiles, grafted into the people of God should not be arrogant towards others who were broken off for their unbelief, because if the Gentiles fall into similar unbelief, they too will be similarly broken off.

And so, we cannot lock parables like this up in the past, or see them as limited to that moment of redemptive history. While this parable is certainly grounded in redemptive history – in God's judgment towards those who rejected Jesus in the first century – the same dynamic continues today. If we, today, act as these tenants acted, then we will fall under the same judgment.

But second, it also applies to us to the extent that we live out our Christian lives under the leadership of others. The vineyard is meant to represent the people of God here. Jesus makes this clear as he alludes to a similar parable in Isaiah 5, where the fact that the vineyard represents God's people is made explicit [Isaiah 5:1-7; Edwards, 356; Horne, 155; Leithart, 255; Witherington, 320-321; Wright, *Mark*, 159]

To the extent that we minister to other people, we are the tenants. But to the extent that we are ministered to in the Kingdom of God, we are the vineyard.

And this parable has words to speak to us in both capacities.

With all that said, what is it that we see here?

Well, what we see in this parable is that God is building his kingdom, and calling his people to serve in it and bear fruit for him. But God's people (especially those in leadership) can be tempted to think that God's kingdom is really their kingdom. When that happens, God patiently calls them to repent and serve him. But if they persist, God will judge them, and remove them, and he will put faithful servants in their place.

Let me say all that again: What we see in this parable is that God is building his kingdom, and calling his people to serve in it and bear fruit for him. But God's people (especially those in leadership) can be tempted to think that God's kingdom is really their kingdom. When this happens, God patiently calls them to repent and serve him. But if they persist, God will judge them, and remove them, and he will put faithful servants in their place.

Let's walk through that one step at a time.

God is Building His Kingdom and Calling His People to Serve in It and Bear Fruit for Him

The first thing we see here is that God is building his kingdom, and calling his people to serve in it and bear fruit for him.

Look at verse one. The owner represents God. It's the owner who plants the vineyard. It's the owner who puts the fence around it. It's the owner who makes the winepress. It's the owner who builds the tower.

The owner builds everything – not the tenants.

And with that, Jesus is reminding us that it is God who builds his kingdom. God establishes his kingdom. God grows his kingdom. God fortifies his kingdom. Not us. That is a key starting point.

Next, we see that the tenants are called to be servants in the vineyard. They enter into a lease with the owner. They come to an agreement at the end of verse one. They will serve in the vineyard. And for their labor, they will be rewarded from the vineyard.

And it's important to see both those elements: both the blessing and the labor.

Vineyards are places of blessing in the Bible. They yield wine, which makes the heart glad, and they are symbols of God's abundant blessing. And being called to dwell in the vineyard, and to receive wages from its fruit – that is a blessing.

But also, at the same time, tending a vineyard is very hard work. And a call to tend a vineyard is a call to serious labor. As one commentator notes, compared to other kinds of agriculture at the time, a vineyard required special care. The crop itself was especially valuable, representing a significant investment from the owner, and so a heavier responsibility fell on the one tending it. The vines were slow to bear fruit – taking five years before the first real crop came in. A vineyard could also more easily “suffer damage through neglect.” And unlike some other crops, a vineyard “required constant irrigation” and “periodic manuring.” [Edwards, 356 n.14]

This is worth pausing to reflect on. Being given any role of influence or leadership – big or small – any aspect where you minister to other people in the Church, whether it's in an up-front role, or a behind-the-scenes role, whether as an officer or a volunteer, whether explaining complex theological mysteries to adults, or teaching small children the basics of who God is, whether it's something that happens in this building, or a way you minister to others in your family or among your friends – being given any role in ministry is an honor and a joy and a blessing. But it's also very hard work. Those you minister to are often slow to bear fruit. Their progress may be easily damaged through neglect. They may need constant watering. You may have to deal with a lot of manure along the way.

In ministry, as in a first-century vineyard, there is both joy, and also hard, slow, labor. [Leithart, 156]

So ... are there ways that you're trying to avoid that reality?

Specifically, are there ways that you're dodging the call to serve?

If you look at your life and there's nowhere that you're serving as a tenant – laboring in God's kingdom ... then that itself is a call for you to find such a place.

If you've read the annual report from our children's Sunday school director, then you know we need more children's Sunday school teachers. That's a wonderful place to minister to little ones – tending to new, young vines in God's kingdom. Also, if you've ever had a conversation with Jonathan Nichols then you know we need more volunteers at Better English on 6th. That's an opportunity to love others, and maybe even help bring others into God's kingdom. We still need more nursery volunteers. And other opportunities abound too. If you're not already laboring as a tenant in God's kingdom, then you need to respond to that call.

That's the first thing we see here: God is building his kingdom, and as he does, he calls his people to serve in it and bear fruit for him.

God's People (Especially Those in Leadership) Can Be Tempted to Think That God's Kingdom Is Really Their Kingdom

That's good. But then the next thing we see is that God's people – and especially those in leadership among God's people – can be tempted to think that God's kingdom is really their kingdom.

Now, sometimes we do this by neglecting the call to serve, and acting like we should just be served by others – like we are princes or princesses in God’s kingdom, rather than servants ourselves.

But another way we can fall into this error – and the way highlighted here in this parable – is that when we do labor in God’s kingdom – when we do serve, and work, and have some measure of authority or influence in the Church – then we can quickly be tempted to start thinking that God’s kingdom is really our kingdom – that we own it.

Most obviously, this can happen among pastors. Pastors can easily be tempted to think of the church they serve in as “theirs.” Often it’s subtle. But it can, in some moments, become more overt. In one infamous example, a pastor who used to lead a very large church in our region declared to his staff, “You’re not the brand. I’m the brand!” Most pastors won’t say that out loud. But we can start to think that way.

Other officers in the church can fall into this way of thinking too, whether individual elders or a Session as a whole, whether deacons or a deaconate.

But it’s not just officers who can fall into this error. In fact, it’s a common issue among congregants. “Turf wars” are not uncommon in church life. Different people may start, or lead, or serve in some aspect of the church’s ministry ... and soon they begin to signal to everyone that that ministry is “theirs”. And maybe soon they, or their family, or some other group within the church decides that a larger segment of the church is really “theirs.” And they’re offended if anyone fails to recognize their “turf,” or their “ownership” – if anyone treats them like servants rather than like owners of the ministry they’re involved in.

And we can do something similar with the ministry God’s called us to outside the church walls. Whether it’s a gathering of Christians you organize and lead outside formal church structures, or it’s your own children whom you minister to and try to raise up in the faith at home, as we invest in others, we often begin to believe that the ministry we do, or the person we minister to, or the spiritual fruit that that other person bears, belongs in some sense to us.

And it’s that shift from service to presumed ownership that we see in this parable.

The tenants are called, in verse 1, as servants. But after they’ve labored for a significant amount of time, when the owner seeks to collect the fruit of that vineyard, the tenants assert their ownership over things.

First, in verses three through five, the tenants act as if the produce of the vineyard belongs to them.

Then, in verse seven, they begin to act like the whole vineyard should be theirs as well. That’s what’s going on in verse 7. It’s a grasp at ownership of the vineyard itself. There was, at the time, a sort of squatter’s rights that these tenants could appeal to, but they could only appeal to it if the only legitimate heir was dead. [Witherington, 320, 321] And so with the plan to kill the son, the tenants move from claiming ownership of the produce of the vineyard, to claiming ownership of the vineyard itself. [Edwards, 359]

Now ... why do they do this?

There are some obvious answers. Sin, and our hearts' fallen nature and rebellion against God, of course. Pride. A lust for power. A desire to be God ourselves. Many obvious sins can lead to and combine to push us in this direction.

But there are also more subtle ways I think this tendency can develop. And one of those has to do with what we said just a few moments ago: Tending a vineyard is really hard work. Because of the value of the crop, and how much the owner had invested in it, there was great responsibility on the shoulders of the tenant working it. The vineyard was much more slow to bear fruit compared to other crops. The irrigation needs were constant. The vines were easily damaged and required extra care. You had to deal with a lot of manure to fertilize the vines. [Edwards, 356 n.14] And when you put that much work into something, you start to feel like it should be yours.

Ministry can be like that too. You pour so much into your kids. You invest so much into your bible study or Sunday school class. You give so much of yourself as a leader in the church. And part of you feels like after all you've done, the results should really be yours. The vineyard should really be yours. The people should be yours, and the ministry should be yours, and the church should be yours.

We no longer see these things as belonging to God ... but belonging to us.

This is the error the Sanhedrin made. And we can make it too. Are there ways that you have done that?

It's worth noting the subtle lies and errors that undergird this sinful way of thinking.

One error is that on its face, it's just not true. The kingdom belongs to God. We ourselves belong to God. And we must not forget that.

A second error is that we give ourselves too much credit. Yes, our labor is real. We plant. We water. It's hard work. But we do not give the growth. Only God can do that. And he deserves the credit for, and the ownership of, that which only he can give.

But third, built into this demand for ownership is the belief that God will not reward us adequately for our efforts. It's a belief that after we've labored and poured ourselves out for him, God will be stingy with us.

But as C.S. Lewis points out, the teachings of Jesus, found in the Gospels, are filled with "unblushing promises" of "staggering" "rewards" that God will give to us, if we are faithful to him. [Lewis, 26]

But we so often fail to really believe that.

God has promised to reward us for our labors, far beyond what we deserve. And when we demand and grasp at ownership of his kingdom in this life, we are failing to believe that he will really give us the incredible rewards that he's already promised us for our labor.

We are like the office worker squabbling with his boss that because he's worked so hard, the pens and the stapler at his desk should really go home with him ... even when the boss has already promised him a \$5 million bonus at the end of the year for his efforts. We are far too petty, but at

root, it's because we doubt God's promises. We doubt that he will do what he's said he will. We doubt that he will see what we've done, and reward us for it generously.

And when we do that – when we doubt God's promises, we are more prone to grasp at ownership of things that really belong to God.

So, God is building his kingdom, and calling us to serve in it. But when we do serve, we can often be tempted to think that God's kingdom is really our kingdom.

When This Happens, God Patiently Calls Them to Repent and Serve Him

The next thing we see here is that when people do this, God patiently calls them to repent and serve him.

God's patience in this is striking.

Hear again from verses four through six. After the tenants rejected and beat the first servant that the owner had sent them, Jesus says: "Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'"

The persistent patience of this owner is actually kind of distressing. That he sent a second servant, rather than calling on the authorities and coming with force is itself remarkable. That he sends not only a second, but a third, and then "many others" is beyond belief.

How on earth is this owner still sending peaceful representatives to these tenants? Any of us would call the cops after the first servant was beaten. If we're extra patient, we might not call on those who would use force until after the second time the tenants responded with violence. But this owner keeps patiently calling them to repent.

And then, shockingly, in verse six he decides to send his own son. We're supposed to be struck by how shocking the owner's actions are here. Because God's patience and mercy towards his sinful people is similarly shocking. [Edwards 357] This is the story that plays out over the course of the Bible. It's how God has related to his people throughout redemptive history.

But it's also how he relates to us personally. God is incredibly patient with us when we sin. But that patience isn't meant to be a license to keep on sinning. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. [Romans 2:4] God's patience is meant to lead us to turn back to him – to remind us that God is a God of mercy, and he will forgive us if we repent.

And if you have sinned like these tenants have, then he calls you to repent in the same way. God is not pleased with your sin. It's a serious thing. But even now, God is being patient with you. Even now, he is being gracious. Even now, he is offering you peace.

He's sent you servants, various people, who have called you to repent. He's sent you his Word, calling you to repentance and promising you mercy and grace if you turn to him in faith. Even

more than all that, he's sent you his Son, who made himself vulnerable, and even accepted death on a cross, all so that you could be forgiven and reconciled to him.

God's summons to repent is real, it is stern ... and it's also filled with mercy.

How is God calling you to repent of this tendency to act like you own God's people, or aspects of God's kingdom? Where is he being patient with you right now?

This parable is a call to see not just your sin, but to also see God's patience with you – to see God's mercy towards you – and then to repent: to receive his grace, and to be restored to a right relationship with him.

When God's people rebel against him, when they try to seize even those things that belong to God, God shows an astounding level of grace, being merciful and patient, as he persistently calls us to repent and to serve him.

But If They Persist in Rebellion, God Will Judge Them and Remove Them from Leadership

But with that, this parable also reminds us that if God's people persist in this kind of rebellion, then God will judge them and remove them from leadership.

This was the warning to the leaders in Jerusalem at the time. [Wright, *Victory*, 328, 330]

In verse 9 Jesus asks: "What will the owner of the vineyard do" if they persist in this rebellion? And he answers: "He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others."

God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. But if we spurn that kindness, if we refuse to repent, then judgment will come. It may happen swiftly, or it may happen gradually over time. It may happen in this life, or it may happen in the next life. But whether sooner or later, whether in this life or the next, God will remove those who persist in such sin. And he will bring destruction down upon them.

The early Christians saw this happen to the Sanhedrin in 70 AD. We may see this happen in this life, when a false leader of God's people is exposed. Or we may see it happen when Jesus separates the goats from among the sheep at the final judgment. But either way, God will judge those who persist in this sin.

And that is a warning to us. If the patience and the kindness of God is not enough to bring us to repentance, then the threat of God should be.

Notice, though, that God doesn't bring destruction on the tenants for the imperfection of their labor. He doesn't bring destruction on them because the harvest they produce is not large enough or not perfect enough. These tenants are not called on to earn a right relationship with God through their works. Rather, all God is demanding is that they acknowledge his lordship in their labors – that they treat him as the owner of the field, and their master. That is what God requires of us: Not perfection, but faithfulness – acknowledging him as Lord, and clinging to him by faith.

If we do that, we will be saved. If we refuse to do that, we will be destroyed.

This is the message of this parable to us as tenants in God's vineyard.

God Will Then Put Faithful Servants in Their Place

But there's also a message for us as the vines in God's vineyard.

Because while we can be the tenants who claim ownership over God's vines, we can also be the vines who bear fruit under flawed or even wicked tenants.

And when the Church finds itself in that situation, this parable was meant to be a parable of hope.

Because when Jesus declares that God will remove the wicked tenants – the wicked leaders over God's people – he also promises that he will put faithful servants in their place.

Remember, when Jesus first spoke this parable, he was also talking to faithful Jews suffering under the leadership of the Sanhedrin. And he was promising them that their unjust religious leaders would one day be cleared away, and new leadership would take their place among God's people. And with the judgment that fell on Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the rise of the Church, Jesus did exactly what he promised.

And he still works in those ways today. It may take a while – as we said, God is patient. And sometimes his patience towards sinful leaders is also a call for us to endure, to join God in his patience with sinners, to share his desire for them to repent rather than be destroyed. But even though it may take longer than we'd expect – even though God's patience may be a call for us to endure – even so we have the assurance that whether soon or later, both in this life and in the next, God's kingdom will not be ruled by the wicked. God will remove them. God will win. And we will be delivered.

As one commentator puts it: “The parable of the vineyard and tenants is permeated with a sense of God's indomitable providence. True, it looks as though the schemes of the rebel tenants will wreck the owner's vineyard, but they do not prevail, nor can they.” [Edwards, 361]

It's the same idea we encounter in one of our hymns:

“This is my Father's world,
O let me ne'er forget,
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet
This is my Father's world:
the battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
and earth and heav'n be one.”

And so, if we find ourselves in situations where we are struggling under flawed and even unjust leaders, we are given the hope of deliverance here.

And if we ourselves have been flawed and unjust – if we ourselves have grasped at ownership rather than service in God's kingdom – we are given the hope of repentance here.

God is good. And he will deliver all who turn to him in faith.

We must not doubt his mercy and care. After all, he gave even his own Son, that we should be saved.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us not grasp at ownership of what belongs to God, and let us not despair when we see others doing it.

Because God is good. He will show us mercy if we trust in him. He will care for his vineyard. He will keep it as his own. And he will reward us if we labor in it faithfully, with rewards that are far beyond what we can imagine, or what we can grasp at in this life.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
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- Lewis, C.S. "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1949 (2001 Edition).
- Witherington, Ben III. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.