

WEEK 10: THE TENANTS

Mark 12:1–12



The Place of the Passage

Jesus has announced his imminent suffering and death. And now the end has drawn near. In Mark 11:1–12:44 Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly, cleanses the temple,¹ and authoritatively teaches both opponents and disciples. In response to such actions and teachings, the opposition of the religious authorities heightens.

The Big Picture

In perhaps his most provocative parable Jesus speaks clearly of his identity, mission, and predicted rejection.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Mark 12:1-12. Then think through and write your own notes on the following questions. (See ESV Study Bible notes on pages 1919-1920; online at www.esv.org.)

The parable of the tenants is one of the few parables told in all of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 12:1-12; Matt. 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-18). Skim through Mark 11:1-33; Matthew 21:1-32; and Luke 19:28-20:8. What is found in the preceding context of Matthew that is not found in Mark or Luke? Whom do you think the character in Matthew 21:30, or the "you" in verse 32, represents?

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What is the reaction to this parable in Mark 12:12-13? From the context, who are the "they" of these two verses (see also Matt. 21:45)?

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In parable interpretation, it is important to understand quotations and possible allusions² from the Old Testament. For example, how does Isaiah 5:1-7 shed light on this parable?

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This parable contains five characters: the owner of the vineyard, his tenants, his servants, his beloved son, and his other (new) tenants. Whom does each of these symbolize?

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List all of the owner's actions in Mark 12:1-6. What do we learn about God from these actions?

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List all of the tenants' actions in Mark 12:2-8. What do we learn from these actions about the people whom the tenants symbolize? How do their actions relate to the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32?

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How do these actions, including their action toward the owner's son, retell the story of salvation history in a very condensed form?

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How does the owner react to the tenants' behavior (Mark 12:9)? See also what Matthew adds in his record (Matt. 21:41, 43-44). What do these actions represent? What do these actions teach us about God?

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Matthew also speaks of the vineyard owner's giving the vineyard "to a people [*ethnos*, a collective singular, often translated "nations"] producing its fruits" (Matt. 21:43). What is the significance of this description?

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Besides bearing fruit, how should we respond to this parable? How does it challenge us to think, feel, and act differently?

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In Mark 12:10-11 Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22-23, verses that originally spoke of the nation of Israel. Jesus appropriately and authoritatively applies it to himself. How does Peter in Acts 4:5-11 explain and apply these verses? How about Paul in Ephesians 2:11-21?

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Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

PATIENT, COSTLY LOVE. One of the lessons taught by Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants is God's patient, costly love for sinners. God, depicted as a vineyard owner, has every right to destroy his people when they reject prophets and other leaders who call them to faithfulness. Instead, he patiently reaches out to his people again and again. While justice demands that all pay the price for their sins, God pays an even greater price—ultimately sending his "beloved son" to die. Surely the response to such love should be repentant, joyful thanksgiving!

THE SENT SON. The word "sent" is used five times in the parable of the tenants. God sent "prophets and wise men" (Matt. 23:34), one after the other, century after century, many of whom were persecuted and some of whom were murdered. Finally, as the greatest act of love in world history, he sent his "beloved son" (Mark 12:6; see also John 17:23), who was beaten and killed. Other New Testament authors employ the word "send" or "sent" (*apostellō*) to summarize aspects of the attributes of God and the nature of Jesus' mission. In "the fullness of time" God "sent forth his Son," who was "born of woman" and "born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" and to adopt them "as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). God "condemned sin in the flesh" by "sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin" (Rom. 8:3). Because God "loved us" he "sent his only Son into the world" as "the propitiation for our sins" and "so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9-10; see also John 17:3). "The Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14).

Whole-Bible Connections

THE REJECTED REDEEMER. As the rejected cornerstone³ (Mark 12:10), Jesus represents the culmination of a larger biblical pattern in which God raises up leaders who are then scorned by his people. Acts 7:1-53 reminds us that two of the Old Testament's greatest heroes were men who had been rejected by their fellow Israelites: Joseph was sold into slavery, yet he later delivered Israel from famine; Moses became an exile from Egypt, yet he returned to free the nation from slavery. This pattern is intensified in Jesus: although Jesus was crucified by "sinful men" (Luke 24:7), God "exalted him . . . as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31).

THE STONE. Jesus' conclusion of the parable of the tenants, as recorded in Matthew and Luke, includes an allusion to Daniel 2:34: "And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him" (Matt. 21:44). In the passage from Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar saw a vision of a stone that "was cut out by no human hand" and "struck the image [from the king's vision] on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces" (Dan. 2:34); the stone "broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold" (v. 45). The irony is that it is idolatrous Israel, not Babylon,⁴ whom God judges in this parable. Soon after Jesus' access-opening death, the temple will be razed to the ground. Yet, out of the rubble, a new and everlasting stone is put in place. That stone is Christ crucified, risen, and exalted—which will indeed be "the Lord's doing" and "marvelous" in the eyes of the apostles and still in our eyes today! The stone that the builders (or "tenants," the Jewish leaders) rejected has become the foundational stone of the new temple. And this stone either saves or crushes. The stone either stays in place as the cornerstone on which we build our fruitful lives or is pushed out of place to become a stumbling stone that rolls over and crushes to dust all who oppose it (see Isa. 8:14-15; Dan. 2:34-35).

Theological Soundings

FRUITFUL. According to the prophets, Israel was called to be a fruitful tree but failed. God spoke through Jeremiah, saying, "When I would gather them, declares the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered" (Jer. 8:13; see also Hos. 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7). And Isaiah, using the metaphor of a vineyard (Isa. 5:1), retells Israel's history from its initial "planting" in Canaan to its continual failure to bear righteous fruit (5:1-7). While Isaiah sees destruction coming in the future (5:5-6), the psalmist later writes from the midst of that judgment and pleads for God to "have regard for this vine" (Ps. 80:14). When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, he sandwiches his cleansing of the temple between the two halves of the cursing of a barren fig tree, an act signifying judgment upon Israel's fruitlessness (Mark 11:12-22). Jesus himself, however, goes to the cross—is judged and treated as "fruitless"—so that fallen people like us can become the fruitful trees we were meant to be (John 15:1-8).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Mark 12:1-12 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the *Personal Implications*

for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) the passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Mark 12:1-12

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Jesus' parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Temple** – A building set aside as holy because God's presence is manifested there in a special way. Solomon built the first temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, to replace the portable tabernacle. This temple was later destroyed by the Babylonians, rebuilt and expanded, and then destroyed again by the Romans. Jesus is the true and final temple (John 2:18–22), and all those united to him through faith become part of this temple (Eph. 2:20–22).

² **Allusion** – A reference, sometimes by means of a quotation, to past history or literature.

³ **Cornerstone** – Either the keystone/capstone of an arch or, more likely, the large stone at the corner of a building's foundation (see Isa. 28:16; Eph. 2:20).

⁴ **Babylon** – The nation that God raised up to fulfill his covenant warnings of destruction on Israel because of her long history of disobedience (Lev. 26:33, 29; Deut. 4:27; 28:64). Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, and executed or exiled the Israelites in 586 BC. Babylon is also used metaphorically in Revelation to represent Rome and thus all evil rule in the world, which Christ will come to judge once and for all time.