

The City and the King: The King's Story

Mark 12:1-12

Why do you believe what you believe and live the way you do? I would say that it's largely a result of the stories that you have heard and that have shaped you as a person. We tend to think that stories are for kids and that we sort of grow out of them as we get older but that couldn't be further from the truth. One author described the importance of stories this way: *"Human life, then, can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another . . . Stories are a basic constituent of human life; they are, in fact, one key element within the total construction of a worldview."*

Many of you have read the Lord of the Rings trilogy or at least watched the movies. If you haven't two of the main characters, Frodo and Sam are on a long and difficult journey and as they are going along they have this interaction:

"Frodo: I can't do this, Sam.

Sam: I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why.

I love how he says, the stories that stayed with you. Today, Jesus is going to tell a story that I think will stick with you. It's a remarkable little story that Jesus uses to summarize what will happen to him and to bring judgment on those who oppose him. So, open your Bibles to Mark 12:1-12 and today we are going to study this amazing little story. As we do we will see **4 Elements of the King's Story that cause us to marvel at his plan of redemption.**

- **The King's Rejection**

Look at the first part of verse 1. Who is the them? Keep in mind where Jesus is here. It's Tuesday of Passover week and he is in the Temple complex having just been confronted by a delegation from the Sanhedrin concerning his authority.

Look back up to verses 27-28. You remember the interaction and how it basically ended with them being embarrassed and Jesus refusing to answer their question directly. Chapter 12 comes right on the heels of that and Jesus speaks this story to the religious leaders while the crowd listens in.

But notice here that this story is a parable. Why is that significant? Well, we talked about this all the way back in Mark 4, but we often misunderstand how Jesus used parables. No doubt you have heard the definition of a parable as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” In other words, most people think Jesus gave parables in order to make truth clear with nifty word pictures and illustrations. Listen to these words from Mark 4:10-12. Parables are for those outside! Jesus uses parables to obscure the truth in order to bring judgment. Of course, if you are inside or a believer, the parables will bring clarity and understanding, but it’s all about the soil of your heart. Good soil means understanding, hard soil means judgment.

So, Jesus tells this parable to further harden the hearts of the religious leaders and to further bring judgment on them. But for those sitting here who trust Him and love Him, this story will bring great delight as we will see later.

This parable is basically a story about rejection. Let’s jump into it. Look at the rest of verse 1 and 2. This sort of business arrangement would have been very common among Jews at this time. Basically what happens is that a landowner will lease his land to tenants who worked it and gave a portion of the profits of the land to the owner. Often the landowner would not even be present, but would have the tenants live and work the land while he lived elsewhere, many times a great distance away.

The normal method of payment in this type of business deal was for the landowner to collect some of the fruit as payment for tending the vines. Of course, a vineyard does not grow grapes in one year, but takes multiple years with much work to develop and produce fruit. So, there would have been lots of time between the events of verse 1 and verse 2. This would have given the tenants the false impression that they were somehow more than just tenants and had some authority over the vineyard.

The setting in this particular parable is reminiscent of another description of a vineyard given back in Isaiah 5 and that is exactly how Jesus intends us to

understand it. Flip with me to Isaiah 5:1-2. Now look down at verse 7. In this passage in Isaiah, **Israel's** is pictured as God's vineyard and in Isaiah, Israel will be judged for her unfaithfulness. Jesus takes the same metaphor here in Mark 12 but places the judgment in a slightly different place. This time judgment is not on the vineyard but is on the **tenants** who are "caring" for the vineyard.

So, the historical background is set. Up to this point everything in the story would have seemed very normal to those listening. But verse 3 is where things go horribly wrong. The slave arrives, expecting to get the portion that is his owners. One commentator described the tenants as "paying their rent in blows." What they are doing is defying the owner's claim to the land and challenging him to come and make them pay up. After they beat the servant, they send him on his way, obviously, he would have gone back to the owner to report what had happened.

The owner decides to send another slave, but he receives a wound to the head, obviously a seriously blow along with the shame. Look at verse 5 here, you can see the repetition of what is happening. The landowner **patiently** and **graciously** sends his men to collect his rightful portion of the profits. Over and over again he sends his men, but this third time they take his worker and kill him. This pattern continues over and over again. They kill some, they beat some, but they always exist in defiance of the landowner and never give him what he is owed.

Now, if you are following the parable based on the fact that Israel is the vineyard and the landowner would be God, you probably have in mind what this repeated course of action from both the landowner and the tenants means. Some would call the actions of both parties naïve. The owner because he keeps sending his men over and over again, the tenants because they keep defying the owner's wishes. Naïve is not the right word for either. The tenants are not naïve but are rebellious. This pictures the **leaders** of the nation of Israel continually refusing to listen to the prophets that Yahweh sent, over and over again.

The landowner is not naïve...He is **patient** beyond words. He continually sends messengers of grace calling the leadership back to faithfulness and these messengers are continually mistreated and rejected. This brings us to the climax of the story in verse 6.

Now, when you read verse 6 you have to ask this question. What farmer in his right mind would send his son to a bunch of tenants who have acted like this over and over again? Why would he do this? Don't skip to quickly over this question because it is the weighty question of the parable. Why?

For us, there is only one answer to that question...the great love of God for humanity in general and His people in particular. The Son is the rightful heir of the land and the vineyard. They MUST listen to Him. He carries the authority and the legal status of the Father.

Look how this Son is described in the parable. He is beloved. Of course, this phrase has been uttered twice already in the book of Mark. At the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1 and the Transfiguration of Jesus in Mark 9. In both instances the Father spoke of Jesus as His beloved Son. Clearly, Jesus wants us to understand that He is the beloved Son in this story.

But look what happens in verses 7-8. They seem to think that if they can dispose of the heir, they can claim the right to the vineyard. The words they utter here are the same words spoken by Joseph's brothers in Genesis 37 before they throw him in a pit. But look what they do in verse 8. They kill the son and then have the audacity to throw his body over the wall of the vineyard. This is the ultimate iniquity. They don't even take the time to bury His body, they throw Him out for the animals to devour. This story has reached outrageous proportions.

Verse 9 comes logically enough. What will the owner do? He will bring swift and terrible judgment down on these corrupt tenants. They have rebelled and rejected Him for too long and they have even looked His beloved Son in the face and killed Him. Their positions of authority will be taken from them and their entire system will come crashing down.

The tenants in this parable think they have triumphed when they reject and kill the Beloved Son. But this parable can't go far enough to match the glory of what will happen to this beloved Son.

This is where Jesus breaks away from the parable and speaks pretty directly about what this rejection will mean. Look at verse 10. The Psalm Jesus quotes here is Psalm 118 and if you remember this is the Psalm the people proclaimed when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. It's a messianic Psalm that speaks of the

entry of a Davidic King into his city. But you can't think about David's entry as conquering King without considering his rejection and the time period where he fled for his life from Saul. The rejection led to exaltation and this is a consistent pattern in the Scriptures and it is certainly true of Jesus. But his rejection also brings amazing benefits to us as well and this is our second element of the King's Story.

- **Our Salvation**

Jesus has made it clear that He will be rejected and killed by men. But the OT pattern and the clear teaching of Jesus in the NT make it obvious that His rejection will lead to salvation. His rejection leads to His preeminence as the chief cornerstone. I think our natural question is, the cornerstone of what?

Listen to 1 Peter 2:4-6. Because of Christ's rejection, we are given His Spirit to dwell inside us. Because of His rejection we are adopted as Sons into the family of God. Because of Christ's rejection we have open and full fellowship with God. This has been God's plan from the beginning and Jesus explains here that this will happen because of His quickly approaching death. That leads to our 3rd element of the King's story.

- **The King's Exaltation**

Of course, Christ's rejection leads to our salvation but also to His exaltation. Notice what it says in verse 10. He has become the cornerstone. He is the preeminent piece of this new temple, this new dwelling place of God. Col. 1:18 says this: "And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent."

He receives the glory for obeying the Father to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2 makes it plain. Because of His willingly being rejected He has been highly exalted and given the name Lord so that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Him as Lord. That brings us to the last piece of God's story, our response.

- **Our Response**

There are two different responses outlined here in verses 11 and 12. What should this story do to those of us who are trusting in Christ? When we think about his rejection, our salvation, and his exaltation, what is our response?

This entire story has been planned and ordained by God. God planned this rejection and planned that this rejection would be the pathway to Christ's preeminence as the chief cornerstone of God's new temple, the church. God's judgment on the religious leaders of Israel is what brings about salvation for all who will cling to this rejected cornerstone. This is God's doing. God is not reactionary. God chose the vineyard, oversaw the history of Israel, sent prophet after prophet, finally, purposefully sent His beloved Son to suffer and die so we would be saved and Christ would be exalted.

Why go to such trouble and why send His beloved Son? The only explanation I can give you is to read Romans 5:8. How can we describe a love like this? Look at the rest of verse 11. The story that God is telling is breathtakingly wonderful. This story should move us deeply. It should cause us to sing with passion and joy. This word **marvelous** speaks of something rich and powerful.

I think C.S. Lewis captured this sense of wonder in the Chronicles of Narnia. If you haven't read the books, 4 children enter a magical land called Narnia where animals talk and a wicked queen rules. Aslan is a bold lion who will save the inhabitants and represents Christ. Listen as Lewis describes the children's reaction to news of Aslan. Of course, not everyone loves the arrival of Aslan. Here's what a talking Beaver says to the children:

"They say Aslan is on the move perhaps has already landed."

And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. Perhaps it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don't understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning---either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in its inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and

adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or beginning of summer.”

For some people in this room it's been a long time since you marveled at God's story. Maybe you've never really had this sense of wonder over what God has done. You come in here week after week and are bored. You don't sing and you can't wait to get it over with so you can beat the crowds to your favorite restaurant. Bible reading is something you do because you feel guilty if you don't. I'm not saying you have to be bouncing off the walls with excitement every single Sunday morning and that your Bible reading has to bring you too tears of joy and wonder every day of the week. I know there are dry spells. But I think Jonathan Edwards is right that the center of Christian faith is found in the affections. Get on your knees this afternoon and beg God to get out the fire hose of His love and turn it on super soaker setting on your dry and dusty heart.

We've seen that we should respond with great wonder, love and amazement, but remember that Jesus wasn't primarily giving this parable to His disciples. Look at verse 12. They hear, but they don't understand. In fact, the religious authorities are beginning to act like the tenants in the story. This is all part of God's marvelous plan that leads Jesus to the cross and brings forgiveness of sins to the nations.

What's the application today for believers here? Know the story, love the story, and worship the one who tells the story.