

## Mark 12:1-17 ~ Scripture Verses

### *The Parable of the Tenants*

<sup>1</sup> He then began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. <sup>2</sup> At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. <sup>3</sup> But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>4</sup> Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. <sup>5</sup> He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

<sup>6</sup> “He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

<sup>7</sup> “But the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ <sup>8</sup> So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

<sup>9</sup> “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. <sup>10</sup> Haven’t you read this scripture:

“ ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; <sup>11</sup> the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

<sup>12</sup> Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

### *Paying Taxes to Caesar*

<sup>13</sup> Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. <sup>14</sup> They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? <sup>15</sup> Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” <sup>16</sup> They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

<sup>17</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

And they were amazed at him.

## Mark 12:1-17 ~ Discussion Questions

1. This is one of the last parables told by Jesus (#38 out of 45) and it is one of only five that appears in all three synoptic Gospels. What does that mean to us?
2. Would this parable have been familiar to Jesus' listeners on some level? Why? (Isaiah 5:1-7)
3. Let's sort out the players in the parable: what is the vineyard? Who does the vineyard owner represent? The servants the owner sent to the vineyard? The tenants? The son of the vineyard owner?
4. Why did the owner of the vineyard send so many servants to the tenants looking after it? (Mark 12:2-5, Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, Nahum 1:3)
5. How do we mistreat the messengers or message that God has sent us?
6. What does the parable tell us about the fate that awaits those who reject Jesus as the son of God? (12:9) Or those who turn away from God after many warnings?
7. What is the meaning of the scripture that Jesus quoted in Mark 12:10-11? (Psalm 118:22-23)
8. How did the people respond to the parable? (Luke 20:16) How did the religious leaders respond? (Mark 12:12)
9. In telling this parable Jesus was clearly talking to the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. How then does it apply to us today?
10. Why do you think the Pharisees flattered Jesus before asking him their trick question? What answer do you think they wanted Jesus to give? (12:13-15)
11. In what ways were the religious leaders guilty of hypocrisy?
12. What values was Jesus communicating with his answer to the Pharisee's question? (12:17)
13. What should we be giving back to God? Is there some thing or area of your life that you have held back from the Lord (ability, possession, block of time)?

## Mark 12:1-17 ~ Leader's Guide

1. This is one of the last parables told by Jesus (#38 out of 45) and it is one of only five that appears in all three synoptic Gospels. What does that mean to us?

Clearly a parable that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is one the Lord wants us to be sure to read and understand. Many of Jesus' parables make one main point, but this parable is rather complex. The details (on the surface) fit the social situation in Jewish Galilee. Large estates owned by absentee landlords were put in the hands of local peasants who cultivated the land as tenant farmers.

2. Would this parable have been familiar to Jesus' listeners on some level? Why? (Isaiah 5:1-7)

Isaiah 5:1-7 – A Song about the Lord's Vineyard

<sup>1</sup> Now I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill. <sup>2</sup> He plowed the land, cleared its stones, and planted it with the best vines. In the middle he built a watchtower and carved a winepress in the nearby rocks. Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes, but the grapes that grew were bitter.

<sup>3</sup> Now, you people of Jerusalem and Judah, you judge between me and my vineyard. <sup>4</sup> What more could I have done for my vineyard that I have not already done? When I expected sweet grapes, why did my vineyard give me bitter grapes?

<sup>5</sup> Now let me tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will tear down its hedges and let it be destroyed. I will break down its walls and let the animals trample it. <sup>6</sup> I will make it a wild place where the vines are not pruned and the ground is not hoed, a place overgrown with briars and thorns. I will command the clouds to drop no rain on it.

<sup>7</sup> The nation of Israel is the vineyard of the Lord of Heaven's Armies. The people of Judah are his pleasant garden. He expected a crop of justice, but instead he found oppression. He expected to find righteousness, but instead he heard cries of violence.

3. Let's sort out the players in the parable: what is the vineyard? Who does the vineyard owner represent? The servants the owner sent to the vineyard? The tenants? The son of the vineyard owner?

With some parables, it is easy to determine the different meanings to Jesus' audience and to us today. But with this parable it is a bit more difficult. The vineyard clearly symbolizes Israel (Isaiah 5:7). The vineyard owner is God. The servants sent to the vineyard and their rejection represent the Jews rejection of the message of the prophets and of John the Baptist. Finally, the owner's son is Jesus.

4. Why did the owner of the vineyard send so many servants to the tenants looking after it? (Mark 12:2-5, Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, Nahum 1:3)

We read so many places in the Bible that God is patient and slow to anger. For example, Psalm 86:15 – But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

The Lord wants us to come to him. He loves us. He wants to forgive us. He doesn't want to have to punish us or worse, turn us away and destroy us as he does when his patience finally is exceeded as we see in the book of Nahum.

5. How do we mistreat the messengers or message that God has sent us?

6. What does the parable tell us about the fate that awaits those who reject Jesus as the son of God? (12:9) Or those who turn away from God after many warnings?

Verse 12:9 is interesting and often overlooked; it represents God's judgement against the Jews after which the Gentiles became the tenants and are welcomed into the kingdom of God.

God gives all of us many chances to ask for his forgiveness, to repent, and to turn back to him. But there is a limit to the Lord's patience as is clearly told in the book of Nahum. This is not a call to repentance; the people of Nineveh had their chance when Jonah went to them and after briefly repenting, 150 years later were more cruel and evil than they were before. This time, the Lord doesn't give them another chance, but totally wipes Nineveh off the face of the earth, never to be rebuilt.

7. What is the meaning of the scripture that Jesus quoted in Mark 12:10-11? (Psalm 118:22-23)

In the psalm, "the stone the builders rejected" most likely refers to the king whose deliverance and victory are being celebrated, who had been looked on with disdain by the kings invading his realm (the builders of worldly empires). The "capstone" can refer either to the stone in the top of an arch over a door or to a large stone used to anchor and align the corner of a wall or building. This stone, disdained by the worldly powers, has become the most important stone in the structure of the new world order that God is bringing about.

These key verses from Psalm 118 about the capstone are quoted six times in the New Testament.

8. How did the people respond to the parable? (Luke 20:16) How did the religious leaders respond? (Mark 12:12)

Luke 20:16 – He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”  
When the people heard this, they said, “May this never be!”

9. In telling this parable Jesus was clearly talking to the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. How then does it apply to us today?

What does this parable mean to us today? First of all, we Gentile Christ followers have become the tenants minding the vineyard. What else?

One commentator asks, what is the fruit of the vineyard and who are the representatives or servants of God who have been sent to collect the fruit? When you think about it for a minute, it's quite clear. In Matthew 25:34-46, Jesus says “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

So what Jesus is saying in this parable is that God expects us to use the gifts he has given us to help the poor. It's a simple as that.

Don Schwager at rc.net says that first, it tells us of God's generosity and trust. The vineyard is well equipped with everything the tenants need. The owner went away and left the vineyard in the hands of the tenants. God, likewise trusts us enough to give us freedom to run life as we choose. This parable also tells us of God's patience and justice. Not once, but many times he forgives the tenants. But there is a limit to the owner's patience, and his judgment and justice prevail in the end. By submitting to Jesus' kingly rule in our lives, he promises that we will bear much fruit (peace, righteousness, and joy, and much more). The Lord also entrusts his gifts to each of us and he gives us work to do in his vineyard.

The Orthodox Church Fathers teach that v. 9 is a reference to the Church: the vineyard is the Church, and the other vine-dressers to whom it is given are the bishops and priests—and, in fact, all Christians—who are called by God to care for His vineyard.

Pastor Lee Hemen says, tenants can forget that they are renters and not the owners. Christians can become just like the Jews of Jesus' day. They had been entrusted with the sacred things of God, but they began to think their personal interpretation was far more important. They actually thought they were the owners! Believers can begin to think that what they feel about their faith or think about Jesus is far more important than what they have been entrusted. Christians can arrogantly begin to think they own the gospel and determine who hears it or not! It is a sign of disrespect. The harvest belongs to God alone. It cannot be prepackaged or commercialized because when it is, it begins to be cheapened and disrespected. Remember, Jesus had just cleansed the temple for a reason. The Jews had begun to disrespect the temple and thereby the message of God. A mere tenant disrespects the rightful owner!

There is within Christianity today those who have rejected the capstone just as the Hebrews had. They reject Jesus through their inaction. They are silent as a world dies in its sin. They refuse to be part of a local church, making weak

excuses as to why. They greedily keep God's tithe to spend on themselves. They disdain their responsibilities; resent his church and its leadership. When asked to serve or give, they leave. I wonder what they will do when the owner of the vineyard suddenly returns and demands payment.

A mere tenant disrespects the rightful owner! A mere tenant resents those who are sent by the owner! Are you just a "tenant"?

10. Why do you think the Pharisees flattered Jesus before asking him their trick question? What answer do you think they wanted Jesus to give? (12:13-15)

The flattered Jesus possibly to put him off guard. Here the Jewish leaders asked Jesus to take sides on a controversy over whether to pay taxes to Rome. Whatever his answer, he would get in trouble with someone.

The poll tax was highly unpopular, and some Jews flatly refused to pay it, believing that payment was an admission of Roman right to rule. Many wanted to establish a theocracy as an ideal Jewish state and for them any Gentile ruler over Israel was an abomination before God. Paying taxes to such a ruler effectively denied God's sovereignty over the nation. Jesus couldn't afford to reject this position.

On the other hand, the Roman leaders were very touchy about anything that looked like resistance to their rule. They could be very tolerant of various religions and cultures, but only so long as they accepted Roman authority. If Jesus denied the validity of paying taxes, then he could be turned over to the Romans as someone encouraging rebellion and the Herodians (12:13) were servants of Rome.

11. In what ways were the religious leaders guilty of hypocrisy?

Remember, hypocrisy is feigning to be what one is not. Or it can be saying one thing while believing or doing another.

The Jewish leaders were hypocritical in several ways. First they praised Jesus as though they respected him, when actually they were looking for an excuse to kill him. Second, they asked the question as though they really wanted an answer, but it was simply designed to be a question that would condemn Jesus no matter which way he answered it.

12. What values was Jesus communicating with his answer to the Pharisee's question? (12:17)

His questioners tried to trap him between the horns of a dangerous either/or question, and he deftly gave an answer that seemed to meet the question head-on but actually avoided taking a position. Jesus avoids the trap by pointing out that the money is part of the Gentile state and as such can lawfully be given over to

them—but this only qualifies for those things which belong to the Gentiles. When something belongs to God, it should be given to God.

This has at times been used to support the idea of separating church and state because Jesus is seen as making a distinction between secular and religious authority. At the same time, though, Jesus gives no indication as to how one should tell the difference between the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's.

The traditional Christian interpretation has it that Jesus' message is for people to be as diligent in fulfilling their obligations to God as they are in fulfilling their secular obligations to the state. People work hard to pay their taxes in full and on time because they know what will happen to them if they don't. Fewer think as hard about the even worse consequences they derive from not doing what God wants, so they need to be reminded that God is every bit as demanding as Caesar and should not be ignored. Do you see how this ties in with verse 12:9 in the parable of the tenants and with the book of Nahum?

13. What should we be giving back to God? Is there some thing or area of your life that you have held back from the Lord (ability, possession, block of time)?