



Central  
Peninsula  
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*Jesus, the Son of God*

Mark 12:1–12

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*series: The Story*

I want to start today by telling you a story about a man named Bill. Bill is a wealthy older man who wanted to get in on some of the action in Silicon Valley. He had an idea and he decided to form a business around it. He hand-picked a team of young guys to run it. They were all broke, but they knew what they were doing. Bill bought a large building where they could run the business. He set it up so they had everything they needed. They had a great new product, a strong support staff, the finest technical equipment, and a great contract that would allow them to share in the profits.

Now Bill was a hands-off kind of guy, so he handed it all to them and said once a quarter his people would check in to see how it was going. After four months he sent his accountant in to look at the books. Strangely, the accountant was met with a rather cold reception. In fact, the team insulted him and refused to show him the books. Bill was a little upset, but figured they were just being territorial. So he waited a few weeks and sent one of his attorneys to touch base, but again they refused to cooperate. They even started talking like it was their business and not Bill's. After all, they were doing all the work. When the lawyer showed them the contract they'd signed they got so upset they called security and had him escorted out!

As you can imagine, Bill was getting very concerned he'd lost control of his own business. During the next few months he filed a lawsuit and sent several attorneys in to meet with the guys. Each time they were met at the door by a hostile security team who were down right abusive! One attorney went home with a black eye. This was getting out of hand!

Finally, Bill had one last card to play. He had a son, his only child, who stood to inherit everything he owned. His son was with him when he set up the team and the guys all knew him. Bill thought maybe his son, being their age, could connect with these guys in a way he couldn't. So he sent his son into the building, and when the guys recognized who it was they got excited. They figured old Bill had finally bit the dust, and now if they could just get rid of his son the whole business would be theirs free and clear. Before Bill's son even got to the conference room, the guys had given the order for the security force to put a bullet through his temple. As Bill's son lay in a pool of blood, the four original members of the team gathered around him, each grabbed a limb, and threw his lifeless body onto the street.

Within hours Bill received news of what they'd done to his son. The question is, What will Bill do now? Besides his grief, it certainly looked like he'd completely lost control of something that was rightfully his. What would he do now?

As you might have guessed, Bill is a fictional person. But I told this story because it captures the essence of another story which Jesus told; a story that gets at the very heart of how God operates. It's a story in which Jesus asked the same question, What would God do if that were to happen to him?

This issue comes up towards the end of Jesus' ministry. We've been taking a bird's eye view of the big story of the Bible and we come today to the final week of his earthly life recorded at the end of Mark 11 and the beginning of Mark 12. Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which we celebrate next week. He toured the Temple, and then retreated to the little town of Bethany. The next day he returned to the Temple and saw how this place of prayer for all people had become a place of profit for a few proud priests and politicians. He flipped over tables and drove out the vendors and shut down the whole business.

You don't do something like that without ruffling a few feathers. Someone said, "This would be like Billy Graham walking up to the pulpit of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, and ripping apart the King James Version of the Bible." The question people would want to know is, "Who gave you the right to do that?" This is what the religious leaders asked him the next day in 11:28a, "***By what authority are you doing these things?***" Instead of answering their question, Jesus countered with a question of his own about John the Baptist and where he got his authority (v. 29). This put them in a quandary. If they said John's authority came from God, they'd have to believe what John said about Jesus being God's Son. But if they said his authority came only from man, they'd lose favor with the people, because they believed John was a prophet. So they copped out and responded, "***We don't know***" (v. 33a). So Jesus said, "***Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things***" (v. 33b). Jesus exposed the fact they didn't care about God's authority; they just cared about their own agenda.

Then Jesus tells this story; a story which reveals how these people had rejected God's authority and what God would do about it. But it's not just about them, it's a story that could be about us.

## God Establishes His People with Care That They Might Bear Fruit

The parable begins in 12:1.

**Jesus 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 moved to another place.**

A man plants a vineyard and takes great care to make sure it has everything it needs to be fruitful. He then hands over his precious vineyard to some farmers and moves away. These kinds of lease agreements were common in Palestine, with the owner usually getting a third of the produce. Jesus begins by picturing how God hand-picked and established his people with great care, and how he entrusted his people into the hands of spiritual leaders; leaders like the ones he was speaking to at that very moment—priests, scribes, and elders (11:27).

Everyone who'd heard these words would have recognized echoes from Isaiah the prophet who said, "*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in*" (Isa 5:7). The vineyard was a national symbol for Israel. The very Temple where Jesus stood displayed a carved grapevine, 70 cubits high, sculpted around the door which led from the porch to the Holy Place. The people understood how God, like the landowner in the story, had taken great pains to make the vineyard healthy and productive. Isaiah said, "*He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well...*" God even says, "*What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?*" (Isa 5:2a, 4a).

Think of the rich history of the nation Israel. How God had called Abraham from Ur and promised to make him into a great nation. How his wife Sarah gave birth at 90 years of age. How God raised up Moses to deliver his descendants from slavery in Egypt and plant them in a land flowing with milk and honey. How God protected them as they conquered the land under the leadership of Joshua. How God raised up a King from the sheep-folds named David to shepherd his people. God established his people as a vineyard.

God has been no less gracious in establishing us! We have a far richer vineyard than even the Jews had. We have God's written word, the Bible. We have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We have the cross and the promise of forgiveness. We have the resurrection and the hope of eternal life. We have the community of God's people, both past and present, to cheer us on. We who live in America have the freedom to worship and share our faith and vote for leaders who share our values and concerns. We have so much—spiritually, intellectually and materially. I think of Jesus' words in Luke 12:48, "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.*" What excuse do we have

for not bearing fruit? God has graciously provided for us, and I can think of none.

## God Patiently Pursues His People Despite Their Rebellion

And God looks for fruit. In this story the owner of the vineyard sends servants to the tenants to receive some of the fruit of his investment. Look at verses 2–5.

**At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.**

This captures what often happened in Palestine then. Ancient records tell of disputes between hostile farmers and absentee landlords. In Jewish law a person who could prove three years of undisputed possession of a property could claim ownership. These tenants were most likely gambling on this possibility.

But Jesus is talking about more than ancient land disputes. The sending of these servants pictures God's patient pursuit of his people despite their rebellion. The violence done to those servants portrays how Israel's leaders had treated God's prophets. Elijah was harassed and hounded by Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel. Jeremiah was put in stocks and laughed at as people strolled to the Temple. Zechariah was stoned to death near the altar of God. John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, was beheaded. Notice in the story how the violence gets worse: the first slave was beaten, the second was wounded in the head, and the third was killed. Many others were sent as well; some beaten and others killed.

All of this was done for one reason: they wanted to possess the vineyard for themselves. They didn't want to answer to a higher authority. They didn't want God butting in on their life and telling them how to live. People will go to incredible lengths to protect their right to run their own lives. In this country we violently defend that right. It's no surprise that when God sends someone into our lives who calls us to surrender to a higher authority, we find ways to shut him out. Behind this is a deep belief that we know best, and we believe we can do life on our own.

The irony of this is our failure to recognize that without God, we'd have nothing. Who gave them the vineyard to begin with? What do we have that we didn't receive? A study was done of senior corporate executives with a very high net worth. 99% credit their current financial status to hard work. 97% to good sense. 83% to having a higher-than-average I.Q. 62% to being the best in every situation. And 32% to luck. God didn't even make the list!

The worst culprits are spiritual leaders. We're the tenants in the story. God entrusts a pastor with people to care for and love and teach and soon he thinks they belong to him. He calls them "my people" and he means it. His vision for impact becomes nothing more than a vehicle by which he pads his own fragile ego. He refuses to share the spotlight or submit to fellow-shepherds. Then the day comes when his own sin has disqualified him from leadership, but he hangs on because it's his ministry.

### **God Shows Irrational Love for His People by Sending His Only Son**

Oh, the patience of God to keep sending prophets into that kind of hornet's nest. But the day came when God sent more than just prophets; he plays his final card. Look at verses 6–8.

**"He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'**

**"But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard."**

For the first time in the story we get to hear the owner think: "They won't listen to my servants, perhaps they'll listen to my beloved son. Maybe they'll relate to him better than they relate to me. They have to respect my son. He's me. He has my authority. When they see his face they'll see mine."

Those of us who listen want to give the man some advice: "If you really love him, don't send your son into that. Don't be stupid." He should have taken our advice. When they saw his son they thought it was their lucky day: "If the son is here then the master must have died. The son is the heir to the vineyard. If we erase him, it's all ours." And so they did. They seized him and killed him and as a last act of indignity they threw him out of the vineyard.

Martin Luther said, "If I were God and the world treated me as it treated him, I'd kick the wretched thing to pieces." But look what God did instead. He sent his beloved Son to people who he knew were trying to erase him out of their lives. Have you ever stopped to think how irrational the love of God is? Someone called this, "the blessed idiocy of God's grace." We want to say, "Don't do it, they killed the prophets and they'll kill him." But he did it anyway. What would compel you to send your only son into a war you knew he'd die in? Only love. Spurgeon wrote, "If you reject him, he answers you with tears; if you wound him, he bleeds out cleansing; if you kill him, he dies to redeem; if you bury him, he rises again to bring resurrection. Jesus is love made manifest."

Are there limits to his patience? What happens to those who keep on pushing his authority out of their lives? How long will God let this go on? In v. 9 Jesus asks that fateful question. It's the same question we asked of our friend Bill, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do?" We might be tempted to think

that this was a tired and anemic old man with no fight left in him. We look at our world today and we see people refusing to submit to God, insisting on running their own lives, spurning his Son, killing his messengers, and nothing happens. It goes on and on and we wonder, Where's God? How long will he allow this to go on?

### **God Forms a New People Built Upon the Vindication of His Son**

Jesus answers that question in the second half of v. 9.

**"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."**

There comes a time when the owner of that vineyard has had enough. There came a time in the history of Israel when God removed his vineyard from those appointed leaders. It was only a few years later that a great national judgment came upon Israel as the Roman General, Titus, destroyed the city, leveling the Temple.

He gave that vineyard to someone else. Who was it? The answer comes in verses 10–11.

**"Haven't you read this passage of Scripture:**

**'The stone the builders rejected**

**has become the cornerstone;**

**the Lord has done this,**

**and it is marvelous in our eyes?'"**

Jesus changes images here from a vineyard to a building. The vine-growers are now builders. These builders are picking choice stones to build a beautiful Temple. Each one is carefully inspected. One is deemed useless and tossed into the dusty rubble. But later, when a choice stone is required, a stone that would hold the whole building together, somehow that rejected stone is picked up from the rubble and is made into the chief cornerstone!

It's no mistake the word used here for "stone" (*eben*) is almost identical to the one used for "son" (*ben*). Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God, was the stone rejected by the builders and cast off into the rubble. They thought that was the end of him. But, the surprise of history is he was raised up from the rubble of death, and he lived to become the chief cornerstone of a spiritual building made up of all who claim him as Lord, whether Jew and Gentile. That's who inherits the vineyard—those who honor and love God's Son!

Imagine a woman named Mary taking a job at a bank. In the first two weeks on the job, she notices some very unprofessional behavior among the team of four people she works with and their supervisor. The supervisor, who's a generation older, is very friendly with the younger staff, taking long coffee breaks with them. College-aged staff sit on her desk to chat and gossip.

The supervisor and her team are so friendly that the group's behavior toward one other new member of the team is a stark contrast. This person, a woman in her 30's who'd just come on staff, is shunned. If she walks up and tries to join the conversation during a coffee break, the conversation ends. The group, including the supervisor, makes jokes about her behind her back and laughs at the way she dresses. They roll their eyes and wink at each other when she's present. It's obvious this middle management worker was perceived as an unnecessary intrusion.

Two weeks into the job, Mary walks into the office on Monday morning and is surprised to find a much different scenario. No gossiping, no kidding around, no long coffee breaks. All the workers have their eyes riveted on their work. The previous supervisor had been replaced. The cliquish team addressed the new supervisor with formal, businesslike respect. She even saw fear in their eyes.

The new supervisor isn't a stranger. It's the 30-something woman who'd been shunned and mocked. It turns out the bank had hired her to be the new supervisor from the first day she came on the job three weeks before, but the bank concealed her true identity so she could observe the work style of the team.

In some ways, this situation resembles the coming of Christ to earth. The stone that was rejected became the chief cornerstone. In his first coming, Jesus came in meekness and humility, only to be rejected by the religious leaders. But then he was raised up from the dead, he ascended to the right hand of God, and he's coming again to the earth to establish his glorious kingdom. At that time there will be no mistaking who is in charge.

Each of us stands at that moment in history between when God sent his Son into the world and when he finally comes to deal with those who reject his authority. You see, after his Son no one else is sent. He's the last one. Everything depends on our response to him. This isn't just a story about ancient priests and scribes who rejected and killed God's Son and lost the right to run God's vineyard. The question is, Will we reject him too? Each of us must answer the question, What will I do with the Son?

Some of you say, "I'm a Christian. I've accepted God's Son. I don't have anything to worry about." But the reality is you're not really living for him. When push comes to shove, you do what you think is best, not what God says is best. This past week the pastor of a prominent evangelical church in San Francisco announced to

his congregation they'd no longer require lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people to practice celibacy to become members of their church. In a letter to the church, their pastor and elders said requiring celibacy from these folks has caused skyrocketing rates of depression, suicide, and addiction among those who identify as LGBT. Therefore they can no longer justify insisting on celibacy. But, since when did we get to write the rules? It's not our vineyard!

Or maybe you think, "I'm a pretty good person. I may not be a follower of Jesus, but I try to live a good life." From this parable, God says, "You may think you're taking good care of your vineyard, but it's not yours, it's mine. I sent my Son into the world! Will you continue to insist on running your own life? Will you continue to believe the things entrusted to you are yours to do what you want with? Will you continue to push me out of your life, whether it be through passive avoidance or active rebellion?"

The funny thing is, this Son whom God sent into the world didn't come to take anything away from us. He came, in love, to save us. This parable is about the relentless love of God. How will we respond to that love? What will we do with his Son? The farmers offend us. The vineyard owner astounds us. The parable rocks us. It scares us to see something of the farmers in us, something that would "off" the Son and claim the vineyard for ourselves. But perfect love, which meets more and more evil with boundless grace, casts out fear.

When I was a young believer, I attended a church where we sang a lot of old hymns. One Sunday morning we were singing one of Charles Wesley's hymns, *And Can it Be?* One of the verses says:

*And can it be that I should gain,  
An interest in the Savior's blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him, to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be,  
That thou my God, should'st die for me?*

I remember so well being stunned by those words, "Died he for me who caused his pain. For me, who Him, to death pursued?" That's the story of this parable. How we respond to that relentless love is the story of our lives.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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