

**The Parable of the Tenants**  
**Mark 12:1-12**

Well friends it seems a bit late in the game for Jesus to pull out another parable doesn't it?

Last week we saw Jesus enter into Jerusalem, publically announcing that He was the messiah by riding in on a donkey.

For us that usually signals the start of celebrating the events leading up to Easter Sunday; the last supper, Jesus' betrayal, his trial, execution and burial.

Once Jesus arrives in Jerusalem we anticipate our Lord's Passion – not his parables.

But the parable of the tenants isn't about Jesus continuing the teaching ministry which He started on the shores of the Sea of Galilee,

Instead Jesus tells this parable to give notice to the religious leaders and indict them for failing to produce the fruit which their leadership was supposed to bear.

It's a pretty straightforward allegory – the vineyard is the nation of Israel, the tenants are the religious leaders, the fruit they owe the owner for rent would be their love and devotion to God.

This would have been shown in how they inspired the people to love and serve God, and how they would have demonstrated love for their neighbors – as some of their leaders, like King David or Nehemiah had in the past.

But time and time again in the gospel of Mark we see that the religious leaders had become more concerned about holding on to their social status and power and that they condemned those who weren't able to be as religious as they were – they were self-righteous.

God had been exceedingly patient with them, sending servants, "prophets" who reminded the leaders of what they were supposed to do but they wouldn't listen to them instead they either beat them or killed them.

Of course this speaks not only to Israel's present situation but to their past as well – how the Kings of Israel and Judah led their nation astray by worshiping foreign gods and how they refused to listen to prophets like Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai warning them to turn back to the One True God.

You can read their stories in the books in the bible named after them you and will discover in greater detail how the “tenants of the vineyard” beat and killed the servants which the owner sent to collect the rent.

And this parable functions as a prophecy when Jesus speaks about how the tenants end up killing the only son of the owner. He is predicting how by the end of the week the religious leaders will end up putting him to death in order to eliminate him as a threat to their power.

And because of their impending actions, this parable also predicts the consequences the leaders will bring on themselves. Killing the owner's son will provoke the owner of the vineyard

to come and bring judgment on them and give the vineyard to others.

Jesus is telling the religious leaders they will lose their spiritual authority and no longer be the God-ordained leaders of God's people, that role will be given over to the disciples.

Now, if we are honest with ourselves when hear Jesus tell this parable we probably identify ourselves with the good guys - the owner, the servants, the son - with Jesus.

And we're silently cheering him on thinking “yeah – you tell them Jesus! Self righteous religious leaders, they're so power hungry and intolerant and judgmental! Let them get what's coming to them!

Because friends there are few things we despise more today than self-righteous hypocrites and there are few things we love more than seeing them get what they deserve.

And it would be easy to draw parallels between the religious leaders of Jesus day and certain religious leaders or religious

institutions of our day and to criticize them for being self-righteous and hypocritical...

Maybe you've seen the U-tube video that's making the rounds right now called "Why I hate religion but love Jesus" Or maybe you have issues with the Catholic Church or just organized religion in general.

But friends, what if the point of the parable is to make us ask "what if we are the tenants in the vineyard?"

You see at first, those religious leaders who heard this parable would have been thinking that Jesus was pronouncing judgment against the Romans –

it was the Romans who were the wicked tenants who had been allowed to take over Israel, "the vineyard" and who didn't worship or believe in the One True God, e.i. "pay rent" and who had beaten and killed anyone who had tried to come and rebel against them, "the servants and the son"...

But now the messiah was here, the owner had come to "kick their butt!" give them what they deserved and give the Promised Land back over to Israel. That's what they would have originally thought.

It's only when Jesus quotes the scripture from Psalm 118 that the religious leaders clue in. And then in verse 12 it says "*the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them.*"

You see we automatically tend to put ourselves on the side of the good guys until someone else points out that it's really about us.

So what was it about the quote from Psalm 118 that caused them to realize that Jesus was talking about them?

Well, Psalm 118 was written by David, who in spite of having done nothing wrong and being a loyal subject of King Saul, was accused and rejected for treason, mainly because Saul was

jealous and threatened by his popularity – reminiscent of Jesus relationship with the religious leaders.

In the end God rejected King Saul because of he didn't love God and he was disobedient and anointed David as King over Israel instead, who was known for his love and obedience of God.

So with this quote Jesus is declaring to the religious leaders that God's favor was no longer with them and that there was a regime change coming. That's what tells them the parable is actually about them.

So before we cheer too enthusiastically as Jesus indicts the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders – we might wonder what Jesus would say to us?

What scripture passage would Jesus quote to us to get us to clue in that we ought to examine ourselves first and not be so concerned about seeing the religious hypocrites of our day get what's coming to them.

Well friends, I'm convicted that Jesus would quote James 1:22 to us *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”*

You see friends the parable of the vineyard and the tenants can be projected back onto God's relationship with this whole world and the people who live in it.

God's creation – this universe.... the world we live – that's the vineyard and we are the “farmers” who “rent” this creation from God.

And if the point of the parable is for the listener to try and identify with the offenders, then this parable might cause us to wonder if we have refused to give God the rent when it is due?

And wondering about that will cause us to ask – how do we know when our rent is due? And what exactly do we owe for rent?

Well in the parable the owner sent his servants and eventually his son to tell them when the rent was due and what constituted the rent.

And this is why I think Jesus would quote James 1:22 to us friends because the words which prophets and the Son of God spoke to the tenants in the past now come to us today through as God's word – through the scriptures, the bible.

So it is through the scriptures that we become aware of what our rent is and when it is due, and this parable challenges us to examine our relationship with the bible as it speaks on behalf the owner of the vineyard.

So...do we just listen to it, or just read it and then put it down and not do anything about it?

That's what the tenants did - they listened to the servants and the son as they told them that the rent was due and how much was owed, but they didn't do what was asked of them – instead they beat and killed the messengers.

And friends it's easy for us to do the same with the bible isn't it? When we hear or read something that challenges us or requires a change in our behavior or thinking or our attitudes, or something that goes against how society thinks and acts...

Well then it's easy to beat up on the scriptures or even try to kill them.

I've heard many things said about the bible by people who are resisting doing what the bible says...

“How do we know the bible is really true? Didn't some guys just make it up?”

“Didn't the Catholic church invent the bible?”

“The bible's been translated so many times, how can we know what it said originally?”

“That's Old Testament hate and anger, Jesus is all about love and peace”

But when its get pointed out that Jesus spoke about being the only way to God then someone says “we can really be sure that it was actually Jesus who said that, it was probably his disciples putting words in his mouth...”

But the most common way of doing this friends, which most of us can relate to... is simply just ignoring those little nudges we get from the Holy Spirit convicting us when we hear or read verses like these...

“honor your father and mother” (Ec 20:12) or “If your brother sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.” (Matt 18:15)

“Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor” (Eph 4:25) and “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other”. (Eph 4:32-33)

These are just some of the hundreds of verses that speak to us like this in scripture about our day to day lives and actions....

And maybe we’re not even aware that the obedience these commands require is part of the rent that is due because we’re simply not reading the scriptures...

Friends, when we treat the scriptures in these ways... then James 1:22 applies to us.

***Do not merely listen to the word...do what it says!*** If we do not... then Jesus says that we are deceiving ourselves. We may think we’re “paying our rent” but we are not... and our account with the vineyard owner will be way past due and it will catch up to us.

So for a takeaway from this week’s message try doing the following in the coming week. When you get home this afternoon sit down and sketch out your schedule for the week... and include everything in it, work, meals, TV, music, driving, sports, video games... just so you get an idea of all the things you’ll be “doing”

Then to discover how much you “do” in your life as a response to hearing God speak to you through his word write down a

bible verse which says to do what it is that you are planning to do.

So where does God speak to you to tell you to go to work?

Where does God speak to you to tell you to eat and drink?

Where does God tell you to play sports or video games?

Don't just say – ya I think it says somewhere in the bible... get your bible out and look it up, go online to [Biblegateway.com](http://Biblegateway.com) and search up the words you're looking for. You can try different translations to NIV, KJV, NRSV... find the verse and write it down.

So I challenge you – find biblical precedent for what you are going to do this coming week and if you can't find it you shouldn't do it. "Don't just read the word- do what it says"

This may seem a bit legalistic, but the point is to reveal to us how much of our lives are spent doing things because we think it's a good idea, or society thinks it's a good idea, as opposed to whether or not its something that God has spoken to us about through his Word.

And that's the point of this parable for us – do we just cooperate with the scriptures when it lines up with what we already think? Or are we willing to listen and be obedient to the bible because it's God's word?

What I hope is that in searching the scriptures to find these verses you will begin to read and hear more and more what God is telling you to do and that you will do those things.

And they might be things you're doing already – but now you'll do it because you've heard God say you should do it. As Presbyterians are famous for saying "scripture is the only rule for faith and life."

And friends, I can't finish this message without telling you that God also tells us – the tenants – in the bible... that if we have gotten so behind on "our rent" – our obedience and love, that it seems impossible to avoid being evicted and thrown out, and we've all been there at some point... there is good news!

Jesus Christ has stepped in on our behalf – he became one of us, a tenant... and He perfectly and completely obeyed and loved God – he was a loyal tenant, he was righteous.

And God says through the Bible that *“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”* (Rom 3:22)

If you believe in Jesus friends, your rent is paid in full – and I don’t know about you, but when someone pays off a debt for me, I’m grateful...and I suspect you are too.

And friends that gratitude should give us even more motivation to search the scriptures this coming week and discover what God is telling us we should do.

So friends – this parable is about us. Are we going simply listen, or read the word and then put it down and walk away...or will we do what it says?

Amen.