

# The Parable of the Vineyard Managers -- Mark 12:1-12

by Travis Dean  
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Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

*Lord, we are about to open Your Word. And as we continue our journey through the book of Mark, help us to enter into this story. Open our eyes to see You like we've never seen You before. And as a result, may we love You like we've never loved You before, so that we might be more committed to You than we ever have been before. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.*

The RMS Titanic is probably one of the most famous ships in all history. Built in Belfast, Ireland in the early 1900's, it was the largest ship in the world. We all know the tragic story of how this ship sank into the ocean that fateful night of April 14, 1912. But before the Titanic collided with the iceberg, the crew on board had received probably at least seven warnings of iceberg activity in its path. At 9:00 AM Cunard Liner, *Caronia*, (based in England) headed eastbound, sent a radio message reporting "bergs, growlers (very small icebergs), and field ice". At 1:40 PM Dutch liner, *Noordam*, reported "much ice". Only two minutes later, at 1:42 PM *Baltic*, a fellow White Star liner, passed on a message from the Greek ship, *Athenia*, which reported seeing "icebergs and large quantities of field ice". In response, Captain Smith ordered a change in course taking them further south. Just three minutes passed before another message was received at 1:45 PM from a German liner, *Amerika*, reporting two large icebergs a little south of the Titanic's path. There is some question, though, as to whether this message was delivered to the captain. Then at 7:30 PM *Californian*, of the Leyland Line, (based in England) reported three large icebergs. Once again it is doubtful that this message was relayed to the captain, due to technical difficulties and a high volume of personal calls to the mainland. Then at 9:40 PM steamer, *Mesaba*, reported "heavy pack ice and many large icebergs". Again it seems that the reporter failed to send this message to those in command. Finally at 10:55 PM another message was received from the *Californian*, stating that it had "stopped amidst ice". This final warning was probably never delivered to Captain Smith. Unfortunately, the Titanic continued full steam ahead (approximately 25 mph) in spite of all these warnings. No conference was called by the officers of the *Titanic* to consider the best plan of action. At 11:40 PM, the two lookouts reported an iceberg dead ahead. And the rest is history.

Our story from the book of Mark reveals a similar scenario of repeated warnings which had little effect.

Let's consider now a summary of this story:

*Jesus told the following parable: A man planted a vineyard, rented it out to some vineyard managers, and then traveled to a foreign country. When the time came for the owner to collect his share of the crop, the vineyard managers became abusive. Numerous attempts by the owner to collect his share of the crop only culminated in the death of his only son. Jesus followed up the parable with a prediction that the owner would surely return, destroy those vineyard managers, and rent the vineyard out to others. The religious leaders who were listening realized that Jesus had illustrated their behavior in that of the vineyard managers. But because of their fear of the crowds, the religious leaders could only walk away.*

This story was told thousands of years ago in an ancient Jewish culture. Therefore it is easy for us to miss the real meaning and significance that Jesus intended. We are going to ask two questions in considering this parable. First, "What did this story mean to the Jews?" And second, "What was Jesus calling attention to in the telling of this story?"

Those who originally listened to this story were very well-acquainted with vineyards. The vineyard had a special significance to the Jewish people, spiritually as well as agriculturally. The man in our story put a wall around the vineyard. This offered protection for the grape vines. He also dug out a place for the grape juice to be stored after harvesting the grapes. And last of all he built a tower. The tower offered protection for those who would be managing the vineyard and also allowed them to keep in view the entire vineyard.

The story Jesus told not only had agricultural meaning to the people who listened, but also cultural and spiritual meaning. There are a couple of Scriptures that likely came to their minds as they listened to Jesus' parable. A possible picture is found in Psalm 80:7-8. (Read) It is very likely that the Jewish audience listening to Jesus recalled the story of their own deliverance from Egypt and their prosperity in Canaan. God had cleared the land for them and planted them as a fruitful vineyard. This was a story they loved to recall and must have brought joy to their hearts. And yet they had to admit that something had gone wrong with the vineyard. The Romans had invaded the vineyard. Israel was no longer the prosperous nation it had once been. And this leads us to our second Scripture that Jesus' original audience very well could have recalled as He told this story in Mark 12. Please turn with me to the book of Isaiah chapter 5. We will read verses 1-7. (Read) The fruitful vineyard that God planted in Canaan became contaminated and sickly. Israel, God's vineyard, strayed away from Him. The fruit of righteousness and justice disappeared. Such was Israel's condition when Jesus told this story in the book of Mark. And so the picture that likely came to the listeners' minds was probably a mix of pleasantness and bitterness.

No let's consider the second question regarding this parable: "What was Jesus using this story to call attention to?" In two words, it was "coming judgment". There are several characters in this story that need identified. First is the owner. The scriptures that we have already clearly reveal that God Himself is the owner of the vineyard. So, what about the vineyard managers? Well, let's see what Mark has to say at the end of his story. Let's read Mark 12:12. (Read) If we go back to Mark 11:27 we will see that the people Mark is talking about here were the priests, scribes, and elders of the people. They were the religious leaders in Israel, the vineyard managers. They taught the people about God and what He expected from them. They were the shepherds of God's flock. God had entrusted them with the responsibility of caring for His people. So Mark records at the end of our story the reaction of the religious leaders. Listening to Jesus that day, they knew that they were the ones being depicted by the vineyard managers.

A third group in the parable consists of the servants. As we consider their identity, turn with me to Amos 3:7. (Read) The context reveals God warning His people of coming punishment. But before the judgment comes, God says He first reveals what He's about to do to "His servants the prophets". In our story the vineyard managers treated the owner's servants with abuse and annihilation. Did the religious leaders of Israel treat the prophets this way? Well, I invite you to turn with me to 1 Kings 19:10. The prophet Elijah has had quite an eventful couple days. It all started out on Mount Carmel with a big showdown between the LORD (Yahweh) and the gods of Baal and Asherah. By the end of that day all the prophets of Baal were dead, and everyone was convinced that the LORD was the one true God. But that evening also saw Elijah running for his life from queen Jezebel. The following day finds Elijah out in the wilderness alone. When God asked him why he was out there in the wilderness, notice how Elijah responded. (Read) It sounds a lot like our story today doesn't it? The leaders of Israel had treated God's prophets in the same way that the vineyard managers had treated the owner's servants.

The final character in Jesus' parable is the owner's son. Jesus identified him as the owner's "one son, his beloved". The identity of this man almost goes without saying. But I believe it would be worth our time to read Hebrews 1:1, 2. (Read) After years of being addressed by the prophets, the leaders of God's people were at

last confronted with His Son. So, were the religious leaders intent on killing Jesus as the vineyard managers were intent on killing the owner's son? Notice what Mark recorded back in chapter three and verse 6. (Read) For years now the religious leaders had been trying to get rid of Jesus, God's Son. And so Jesus told this parable as a final warning of approaching judgment. Should they follow through with putting Jesus to death, they could be sure that God (the owner) would come and destroy them (the vineyard managers). Someone else would be chosen to care for His people (vineyard). What a warning to those of us today who are the leaders of God's people! Not one of us is indispensable.

There is a brief second parable in our story today that we haven't mentioned. It's found in Mark 12:10, 11. (Read) "The stone which the builders rejected" takes us back to the rock quarry. In the days when the temple was built by Solomon, they used large stones as the foundation. And the stones in the corners had to be extra durable. They carried a lot of weight. And it seems that one stone was initially tested for use as a corner stone, but was then laid aside as unfit. Later, though, it was again taken and fitted as the final corner stone. And it was a perfect fit. This became a well-known parable throughout Israel. In fact, Jesus in Mark 12:10, 11 is quoting from Psalm 118:22, 23, which is part of the Hallel. The Hallel consisted of Psalms 113-118 and were sung during the Passover. Notice how Peter picks up this same story in Acts 4:8-12. (Read) Peter quotes from this Psalm and interprets it as a Messianic prophecy, fulfilled by Jesus Christ. The surprising turn of events at the rock quarry were used by God to reveal the experience of the Messiah.

Let's now read one more Scripture written by Peter. Turn with me to 1 Peter 2:4, 5 (Read) This Scripture reveals two groups of people - first, the builders, who rejected the stone and second, those who build on that stone. Jesus told these two parables as a warning of coming judgment on those who were rejecting Him as the Son of God, the chief cornerstone, and the living stone. Peter chose to be in the second group. What about you and me?

Is Jesus of Nazareth a self-proclaimed prophet? Or is He the Son of God? Is He a stone unfit to build upon? Or is He the chief cornerstone, the Rock of Ages, the One who carried the world on His shoulders?

As we close, I invite you to consider with me the words of the owner of the vineyard. As he prepared to send his only son, he said to himself, "They will respect my son." Unfortunately he underestimated the corruption of the vineyard managers. They did not respect his son. Instead, they saw him as an obstacle they needed to get rid of. You and I will ultimately be judged by the degree of respect we showed to God's Son. So, how do we know if we are respecting Jesus, God's Son? I invite you to turn with me to Matthew chapter 25 for our closing Scripture today. We will read verses 41-45. This is another parable told by Jesus. Most of us are very familiar with it. Jesus, is pictured as a shepherd, who has put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left. Everyone who has ever lived on earth will be in one of these two groups on that great Day of Judgment. Jesus first addresses the people, pictured as the sheep on His right. He then addresses the people, pictured as the goats on His left. We all I'm sure would like to think of ourselves as the group on the right, who did all the right things. We probably would all like a pat on the back for all the good things we do. But that's not what our parable from Mark chapter 12 is about today. The message today is a message of warning. And so we are going to read what Jesus says to the goats on His left in Matthew 25:41-45. (Read) What awful words to hear!

So how do we know if we respect God's Son? The degree of respect we show the hungry, the sick, and the prison inmates, is the degree of respect we have for Jesus Christ. Let me repeat that. The degree of respect we show the hungry, the sick, and the prison inmates, is the degree of respect we have for Jesus Christ. If we consider ourselves superior to the "least of these", then we are filled with an attitude that is like that of the

vineyard managers in our story. May we all choose today to say no to our own pride and selfishness. May we truly respect God's Son. May we all in honor prefer one another.