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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

January 14, 2024

Communion Sunday - The Parable of the Vineyard

Mark 12:1-12

Prayer: *Again Father, I thank you, I thank you for the gift that this place is, the gift that this body is, the building, everything, Lord, the fact that we still can gather freely, I just thank you for that. And I thank you for the gift of the cross, Lord, we're celebrating today. I just continue to pray as we open up your book and look further into the mystery of what it is you've done for us, Lord, that you would give us the presence and the power of your Holy Spirit to guide and direct us, and to make this of permanent value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, this is the day that we remember Christ and his cross, it's been postponed a week from last week because of the snow; but we just want to remember Jesus and remember that night before he died when he met with his disciples and for the last time celebrated a Passover supper with them. It's found in *Matthew 26*, which says: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."* And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he

gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

So Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and his blood and then he asked his disciples to do the same thing, to eat the bread and drink the cup so that they might symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. And he asked them to repeat the remembrance of his sacrifice on a regular basis, and it's called "the Lord's table." And so we celebrate the Lord's table by meditating on what it is the Lord Jesus did on the cross, by then examining ourselves and that means asking God's Holy Spirit to point out areas where he's convicting us of sin and then by confessing our sins and participating in the elements. *John 6:53 says: So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

So we've been following the life of Christ, we've been following in the gospel of Mark and where we're at right now, Jesus is on the very final stretch of his public ministry. His crucifixion is just days away, he's had his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, it's now

the day after; a great deal has already taken place.

We saw the last time we looked at the miracle of Jesus cursing the fig tree, and next we'll see a series of events that are all building towards the inevitable crucifixion. And Jesus is clearly the master of these events, and yet somehow he continuously is treated as a victim. And it's always amazing to me to see Jesus Christ painted as the victim of his own crucifixion when Jesus himself along with his Father and the Holy Spirit orchestrated everything in it from the beginning.

And you know it's incredibly dangerous to see the crucifixion as anything other than a collaborative effort on the part of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I mean there's scriptures that point to the Father's role and there's scriptures that point to the Son's role, and each time if you exclusively take them in isolation you can create a very unbalanced picture of just what took place at the cross.

I mean, for instance, if we solely focus on the scriptures that point to God the Father's intent and actions at the cross, such as *John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* or *1 John 4:10* which says: *In this is love, not that we have*

loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins, if we focus solely on that, we can come up with a picture that you actually hear repeated these days and that's Jesus was a victim not only of our sin but also of God the Father's fury and wrath.

In fact when the hymn "In Christ Alone" first came out, there were numerous churches who sought to actually change the lyrics of the song. They thought that the hymn put way too much emphasis on God's wrath. We're all familiar with the lines from that song, you know, it's says: "Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied, for every sin on him was laid." Folks had a problem with that. But you know it's aptly true and it is biblical and it's attested to by John 3:16 and 1 John 4:10 but some Christians responded to it by insisting this is something that paints God the Father as an abuser and God the Son as a victim.

One response included this quote from Bob Terry who was the editor of an Alabama Baptist newspaper. This is what he stated, he said -- quote -- "Sometimes Christians carelessly make God out to be some kind of ogre whose angry wrath overflowed until the innocent Jesus suffered enough to calm him down."

You know, if you focus solely on the Father's role in the

crucifixion, I can honestly see where you could make that mistake. I mean, there's another side of the cross, the side that balances the equation is the many time that scripture insists that it was Christ taking the initiative to offer himself up to ransom and rescue his sheep. Look at *Matthew 20:28*. It says: *"Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* or *Titus 2:13-14*: *Waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*

You see, it's only when you see the cross as something that was planned and executed by God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit that you see it balanced as an expression of love by the entire Godhead, something that was given to rebellious creatures who never deserved it.

We see, if we fast forward we see Peter, he's speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit, he's describing the events of the cross which on a street level understanding it appears to be random, it appears to be unplanned, and he's speaking to a group of people and he's telling them that that was anything but unplanned.

Peter's addressing the very religious leaders responsible for crucifying Christ, and he says in Acts 2:23, he says: *This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.* So Peter's telling the Pharisees that you guys did the killing, you guys did the crucifying but it was according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. And part of that plan was Jesus literally goading the religious leaders into his own crucifixion.

Jesus, after triumphantly entering Jerusalem, he's continually upping the ante as he confronts these religious leaders. And you can look at his actions, you can see it's the equivalent of what we call poking the bear. One of the most dangerous and even foolhardy things a person can do is to poke a sleeping bear. They have a habit of waking up in a full charge and if they get ahold of you, it's not going to be pretty. Well that bear, that bear was the religious community.

Poking the bear according to the urban dictionary is -- quote -- to act in such a way that has a good, but not definite chance, of causing trouble. This wasn't a measure of chance for Jesus, this was an absolute certainty that had been planned since the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. You see, the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to these shouts of Hosanna, that was no doubt, that

was poking the bear. It was so provocative to the religious leaders that at one point: *They shouted at Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples."* He answered, *"I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."* I mean, the leaders' demand that he shut his disciples up and Jesus basically says, nope. In fact he says, if they stay silent, all of creation is going to start shouting. That's how you poke the bear.

And next we had this cleansing of the temple where Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers and he forbids the merchants from traveling through the temple. That's poking the bear. And that caused the religious leaders to approach Jesus demanding to know by what authority are you doing these things? They approach Jesus asking him -- quote -- *"By whose authority are you doing this?"* And Jesus responds to their question by once again poking the bear. He answers with a question of his own.

It says: *And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?"* Jesus said to them, *"I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me."* And they discussed it

with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man'?"—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.

You see, Jesus has effortlessly backed them into a corner from which there really is no escape, and so they actually have to humble themselves to figure out how are we going to answer this question and the result of the huddle is that they decide to punt. It says: *So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."*

Now once again in order to get the full value of what Jesus is saying here, you have to understand a bit of background information. You see, at this time the Jewish leaders, they see Jesus as an absolutely existential threat, and he sees them for exactly who they are, religious frauds who are preying on the very people that they are supposed to be shepherding.

And so we're now looking at this part in the gospel of Mark, we're looking at the start of chapter 12 which begins with a very strange word. If you look at it, it's the conjunction "and." *Mark 12:1* says: *And he began to speak to them in parables.* Now you have to

remember that chapter breaks in the Bible, they're not divinely inspired. They're put there by well-intentioned men because the original chapters had no chapter breaks, but sometimes it appears absolutely mystifying as to why and where they made those decisions, particularly this particular chapter break. Because like I said, the chapter starts with the conjunction "and," and that word "and" means that right after publicly embarrassing the religious leaders for asking them on what authority he's cleansing the temple -- again, an act of poking the bear -- Jesus then immediately launches into this parable, but this is not a normal parable from Jesus.

You know, parables from Jesus, parables were designed by Jesus to use something familiar, something that people knew of to explain a concept that might not be that familiar. Jesus used the parable about losing a coin to show how precious the kingdom of God was. He used the parable about the shepherd going -- leaving the ninety-nine and going after the one, pursuing that wandering sheep to show how precious individual souls are to God.

Well, this particular parable, it's not like that; it's different. It's not really designed to teach people some deeper meaning of the kingdom, it's clearly designed again to peak the bear. He's poking the bear of religious hypocrisy. Actually it was a warning, it was

kind of a shot across the bow from the kingdom of God to the religious leaders pointing out to them just what God thinks of their behavior. And again, you have to sketch in the background to see the full meaning of what Jesus is teaching in this parable we're going to be looking at.

You have to understand, the religious leaders at this point, they're totally fed up with Jesus. They can't believe that he actually marched into town on a donkey and went right into the temple acting as if he owned the place, which he absolutely did. But to their way of thinking, this is this peasant pretender trying to make a name for himself and they're not about to let that happen. Well, the problem is at this point the crowds are clearly with Jesus. They had heard and there were many in the crowds who were attesting to that he had healed the sick, that he had fed the hungry, that he'd even raised the dead. In fact there was a large contingent of the crowd that had been gathering that day that had come from another celebration, a huge celebration of that singular miracle that Jesus had done by raising Lazarus.

So the religious leaders, they're beside themselves that so many in this crowd are celebrating Jesus. They're so upset they decided that not only did Jesus have to die but this guy Lazarus as well. *John 12:9* says: *When the large crowd of the Jews learned that*

Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

So Jesus clearly poked the bear on the Pharisees and they responded exactly how he knew they would respond. But the fact is God's Holy Spirit sometimes -- actually oftentimes -- does some poking in our lives as well. We call that the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It's something that is a gift from God to believers. And what it is, it's God's spirit telling you, telling me, something's not right. And how we respond to that conviction makes all the difference in whether or not we're going to grow in the year 2024.

You know, I often speak about the strange circumstances that believers find themselves in while you were being convicted by God's Holy Spirit. You see, the moment that you enter into the kingdom of God you become aware that you are more loved than you will ever be at any time in your existence. God cannot love you any more than he loved you at first, but because he loves you, he's got to sanctify you; and that process involves pointing out to us areas in which we are sinning, areas in which we are offending a holy God. Now that doesn't diminish his love for us in the

slightest. In fact what it does, it draws us closer to him by enabling us to see that in spite of our sin, in spite of our own personal wickedness, we are still loved.

I've phrased it many times in the past by saying God is telling us constantly, "I love you, but you are full of it." And "it" is exactly what you think it is. I mean, there's no surprise to an omniscient God. God saw every single sin you and I would ever commit before we were even born and still he chose to shower his love on us.

And so the conviction of sin is simply God shaping and molding us more and more to the image of his Son by taking the dross and the junk and the garbage in our lives and convicting us of it so that we might deal with it and grow holier in the process.

One definition of conviction that's simple, to the point is that it says -- quote -- "it's the convicting power of the Holy Spirit that opens our eyes to our sin and opens our hearts to receive his grace." And there's only three ways that you can respond to this convicting power of the Holy Spirit: You can ignore it, as most of those folks in the crowd did with Jesus; you can respond negatively as the Pharisees did; or you can respond positively and use God's convicting spirit to grow. Communion's a time, as I've already

stated, to examine ourselves asking God's Holy Spirit to point out areas where he is convicting us of sin. And so the real question here is how we deal with the discomfort of that process. That's when God starts poking the bear in our lives.

As the elders begin distributing the bread, let me read to you from *1 Corinthians 11:28*, which says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.*

I say this every time, I said communion is extremely serious business. And I warn, I warn every one of us that to enter into communion in an unworthy manner is to literally court disaster. And so I plead with you if you're not absolutely confident, if you're not certain that you're a child of the King, if you haven't trusted in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior or if you first need to be reconciled to your brother and sister before you bring the sacrifice of yourself to this particular altar, then don't take the elements; just pass them by. If you don't feel right about participating, err on the side of caution. Just make certain to

get right with God first.

As I always point out each time, I said you can make the mistake on the other side of thinking you have to be spotless, you have to be perfect in order to receive communion; and that, too, so mistake the enemy loves. I point out that being a child of the King doesn't mean that you don't sin, it doesn't mean that you don't fail, it simply means you recognize what gift you have received in salvation, that as we read this morning, it has nothing to do with works; it has everything to do with God. And so I repeat Dane Ortlund's quote. He says: "In the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do."

I also want to add that as I've said each time when we fail, we understand that we have an advocate now up in heaven itself speaking on our behalf, we have the Lord Jesus Christ. God says: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* That means that we agree with God.

See, being a child of the King doesn't mean that you're sinless, it means that we understand that someone is in heaven right now at this very moment pleading our case with him. *1 John 2:1* says: *My*

dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And that's the key right there.

I've often said, and you know, they use the strange word "alien righteousness." The righteousness that we possess is alien in that it doesn't -- didn't belong to us, it belonged to him at first. It was his righteousness. He offers it up to us. God himself became a man, lived a perfect life and then took that perfect life to the cross so that we can by faith in him appropriate that righteousness as our own, so that we can stand before God pointing to his righteousness and not our sin because we now know that we're now worthy of heaven. So if you love your Lord, just don't deny yourself the privilege that he purchased for you at the cost of his life. We often say he lived the life we were supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die in our place so that we could have this particular privilege. And as we're about to participate, just ask God to give you a clean heart, to be willing to hear his heart when his spirit convicts you of sin.

1 Corinthians 11:23 says: For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of

me." So take and eat.

Well, we've been looking at Jesus poking the bear. We looked at him poking the bear when he comes into Jerusalem, we looked at him poking the bear when he's cleansing the temple, when he's confronting the pharisees. And as this parable so aptly begins "and," this parable that he's about to tell because this one's clearly poking the bear. You see, Jesus isn't speaking in a vacuum here. He chooses to speak in this parable about a vineyard. And his choice of a vineyard at the heart of this parable, it's a direct reference to a story that the prophet Isaiah once told many, many years previously, and he knew it was a story the Pharisees knew by heart.

This is the story that Isaiah told centuries before. This is *Isaiah 5:1-7*. He says: *Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And*

now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

Now, wild grapes, wild grapes are the equivalent of tares. You remember the story Jesus told about sowing tares in a wheat field because tares are this useless wheat that looks exactly like wheat as it's growing up but it yields absolutely nothing. Wild grapes do essentially the same thing. They look just like real grapes but they're bitter and they're sour, they're absolutely useless.

And so in this story that Isaiah is telling, God is lamenting that he has planted his choice vines and his choice vines were the chosen people, the people of Israel, and he planted it looking to raise a crop of justice and righteousness and instead he gets a crop of bloodshed and outcries of violence. And so what Jesus is telling the Pharisees, it's starting off just as a recapitulation of Isaiah's complaint. As God's spokesman, he's lamenting the fact that God had dug, cleared and planted a vineyard with choice vines

and that vineyard everyone knew was Israel and the vines were the people who were supposed to produce fruit just like we are supposed to produce fruit. Isaiah complained that in spite of the fertile soil and the digging and clearing and protecting, the only grapes the vineyard ever produced were wild. And with that mind, Jesus again starts poking the bear by recapitulating the story.

We pick up on the very beginning of *Mark 12:1*. It says: *And he began -- and -- he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country.*

Sound familiar? Again, that parable has a little twist in it. It starts telling a story that the uses something known as familiar to illustrate something less known as less familiar. And the familiar part of the parable is this idea of tenant farming because that was a common practice in the day, I mean, there were plenty of wealthy landowners and what they would do is they would just do what Jesus described, they would buy a plot of land and they would fill it with tenants who would run the farm and then give a set percentage of the profits to the landlords. And that was just a natural practice. And there's usually always between these kind of circumstances a natural tension between tenant and landlord, just

as Jesus is touching on.

He says: *"When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard."* And again it's something that was understood by everyone who heard it as standard operating procedure. What was not standard is what Jesus describes as happening next. He says: *And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.*

Of course Jesus is here referring to the many prophets that God sent to Israel and how poorly they were treated. Some were just ignored, some were disgraced, others were beaten, others were killed, all for the crime of calling Israel to the righteousness and justice that God expected from them. If you remember, after Jesus had resurrected and gone into heaven his church was founded and we have this -- I just want to bring you to that scene where Stephen, the first deacon, is speaking to the Sanhedrin. We all know he was the first Christian martyr and he was stoned by an enraged crowd of the very same people because he pointed out to them the exact thing that Jesus was pointing out.

This is what Stephen said to them in Acts 7. He said: *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."*

Well, they killed Stephen for prophetically uttering this absolute truth. And you know, Israel had this long history of abusing the very prophets that God sent to them, and Jesus at this point is the only one who knows exactly how this is going to turn out. He knows these are the very people that are going to insist on and receive his crucifixion. And so he's literally confronting them ahead of time with exactly what they're planning to do, and he does it by saying in verse 6: *"He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do?"*

Now this is classic Jesus. He has so brilliantly maneuvered his enemies by stating in parabolic form exactly what their intent has

been all along, but he states it from God's perspective as the owner dealing with wicked tenants. He says: *"What will the owner of this vineyard do?"* And so he forces them in effect to answer how they think any reasonable person would think that God should respond. He says: *"He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others."* We all know that's exactly what happened. I mean, in A.D. 70 Rome completely destroyed the tenants and in so doing they completed the task of giving the vineyard to others. And the others, that's us. It's the gentile world who is still basking in the gift of the gospel.

You know, we've been seeing in our study of Revelation there's going to come a time when Israel's going to come back to that very same gospel that she has rejected. The nation itself is going to have its eyes opened. But what Jesus is saying in this parable to these religious leaders is exactly what took place. God had sent his Son and they were going to kill even him. And you talk about poking the bear, Jesus is doing it with the very facts that would unfold within that same week.

And then he adds one final poke. In verse 10 he says: *"Have you not read this Scripture: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"* Once again, Jesus is quoting scripture,

this time he's quoting Psalm 1:18. It's a Psalm that celebrates God's sovereignty over the affairs of men.

As the elders begin distributing the cup, let me read to you what *Psalm 11:8* is getting at. It starts out by saying this: *The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.* And then further down it gets to the heart of the matter. It says: *I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

Well, what Jesus is doing, he's using the very same scripture that they claim to revere against them. You know, Israel had been the stone that the builders rejected only to become the cornerstone in the kingdom of God, and now Jesus is using the exact same analogy to describe his own ministry. They're the builders who are actively rejecting the cornerstone and he's God's own Son marvelously asserting that this no-name peasant from Nazareth, worthy of nothing but scorn is in fact the cornerstone of God's kingdom on earth. He's telling them ahead of time exactly what

Peter repeated after Jesus had risen from the dead.

This is what Peter said in Acts 4. He says: *"This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."*

So one last time Jesus is poking the bear. I mean, he did it with his entry into Jerusalem, with his cleansing of the temple, with his confrontation with the Pharisees when he quizzes them about John the Baptist, to the parable that he's telling them and everyone else that's within earshot that they are in fact the ones who have always resisted the Spirit of God, the ones who have always rejected the prophets, the ones who have always mistreated, beaten and sometimes executed the very ones that God has sent to bring truth and righteousness.

Jesus didn't miss a beat. He didn't lose one word in his response. So the religious leaders, they know they have been had. They've been had in the worst possible way. They know they're up against someone who is vastly superior, that they've met their match and there's nothing they can do. And so they respond as they did in verse 12. It says: *And they were seeking to arrest him but feared*

the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

So the question is what is God telling us through this parable? Well, like I said, I think he's saying there's three different ways that we can respond to the convicting power of God's Holy Spirit. We can ignore it like most of the crowd did with Jesus, I think there's a lot of times when we do just that; we can respond negatively like the Pharisees did; or we can respond positively and use God's convicting spirit to grow.

So as you take the cup at the start of this new year, what I would like us to do is ask God to give us a willing heart and that is a heart that's willing to hear the convicting power of his Holy Spirit. Take a moment and ask God for that.

1 Corinthians 11:25 says: In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." So take, and drink.

This is the part that we call head, hands and feet. It's actually just an attempt to find something practical to remember Christ by. It raises one very practical question, and the question is: How do

I know if God is actively convicting me through his Holy Spirit or if it's not the world, the flesh and the devil simply trying to overwhelm me with guilt?

Well, by and large the biggest difference between the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the accusations of the enemy, I think, is how the conviction is delivered. You've got to remember Satan is not a name, Satan is a title. It's a title that means "accuser" because that's exactly what Satan's M-O is, I mean, he accuses us night and day to ourselves and to God.

So how do I know if it's the Holy Spirit that's convicting me or if it's the devil that is trying to harass me? Well, I think a big, a big clue is specificity. You see, when God convicts you, he's usually quite specific. And I've used this example before. He'll tell you flat out last Tuesday night that argument that you had with your wife, you were way out of line. You were actually saying things that were hurtful and you need to apologize. I mean, it's not going to be audible but you're going to sense it in your spirit. I think that's how the Holy Spirit convicts. It's not generic; it's extremely specific. And whether or not we accept that conviction depends on whether or not we are willing to -- and I've used this term many times before -- same speak with God.

Again, just to explain. Each month we repeat the scripture *1 John 1:9* which says: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* And that word "confess" in the Greek is actually two words, *homologeo*, and it means "same speak." And what it means is confession means, "I agree with you, God." It means that you're on the same page with his Holy Spirit, that you're speaking the same language, that the spirit is speaking because the biggest problem that we have with being convicted by the Holy Spirit is not that we don't respond to sin, it's that we don't acknowledge our sin as sin. We make excuses. Oh, we did this, we did that, we did this, we did that, and the Spirit is telling us, no, what you did was sin. You need to admit it, you need to accept it, you need to stop the excuses, and say, "Lord, that was sin," and then I'll give you the grace to deal with it.

So what God is saying is if we agree with him, if we same speak with him, if we say you're right when he's specifically convicting us of sin, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins. And again, it's usually quite specific. You see the devil, he revels in guilt and so he doesn't get into specifics. He'll simply insist that you are a miserable spouse, you're a lousy person, you're a no-good whatever, fill in the blank, because he doesn't want you to have the opportunity to make it right. So an important question to

ask yourself about the Holy Spirit's conviction is how specific is it; and if you sense in your spirit that it is specific, pay attention to it and do it. Let's pray.

Father, I think that this is a time that we set apart to allow your Holy Spirit that we -- not that we need to give you permission at all but to acknowledge your Holy Spirit poking us, that you're poking us, convicting us of things that need to be changed, things that need to be dealt with, excuses that we've made that need to be tossed out, places that we need to go where we say, "Yes, Lord, what you've said is true. I need to deal with this."

It's the very start of a brand new year, Lord, and I suspect that you are convicting us in many, many different ways; and that conviction is the result of the love that you have for us. And again, I acknowledge that doesn't change at all. God just says, I want to shape you into something wonderful, I want to shape you into something beautiful, I want to shape you into the image of my Son, and so I'm going to speak to you about things that need to go. And so I pray that we would have that same sense in our own spirit, a willingness to toss out the excuses and to simply acknowledge sin where sin is and to see God at work in transforming our lives. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.