

When the Church Forgets Her Owner

Mark 12:1-12

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Introduction:

Today we have come to chapter 12 in Mark's Gospel.

- As you will recall, with chapter 11, Jesus arrived at Jerusalem for the last time.
 - He has made it clear to His disciples that on this visit to the holy city, He will be betrayed, arrested, accused, and crucified.
 - We have seen a change, in that He has become much more direct now in presenting Himself at Jerusalem as the Messiah, the Son of David.
 - Just before entering Jerusalem, He allowed blind Bartimaeus to call Him the Son of David and did not tell him keep quiet about it.
 - And in entering Jerusalem—we saw that, at His initiative, He obtained a donkey that He might ride in as a Israel's king, and we saw how He did not stop the people when they showed Him royal honours and praised Him as the one who came in the name of the Lord to save them.
 - And then we saw how, on the very next day, He went into the temple and drove out the moneychangers and those selling animals for sacrifice, declaring that His Father's house was to be a house of prayer.
 - When challenged about the source of His authority for doing such things the following day, He exposed the hypocrisy of those who led the inquisition by asking them about the authority of John the Baptist, who was His herald.
 - They professed ignorance and He told them He would therefore not tell them of His authority.
 - By not acknowledging the authority of God's prophet (John) they rejected God's authority.
 - Until they were willing to admit what they thought of John's authority, there was no purpose in telling them of His own authority.

What we have in chapter 12 is Jesus' follow-up to this inquisition about His authority with a parable.

- In this parable, He compares the church's wicked leaders who are rejecting Him with wicked vinedressers who acted as if they owned the vineyard and refused all the servants and at last the son of the owner when they came looking for the fruit that should have been produced.
 - The leaders who were opposing Jesus understood that this parable was about them, but instead of repenting, they only sought all the more to destroy Jesus the Son of God.
- Please listen carefully as I read this passage to you. This is God's word.

Mark 12:1-12: Then He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a *place for the wine vat and built a tower.* And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. ² Now at vintage-time he

sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. ³ And they took *him* and beat him and sent *him* away empty-handed. ⁴ Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded *him* in the head, and sent *him* away shamefully treated. ⁵ And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. ⁶ Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷ But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸ So they took

him and killed *him* and cast *him* out of the vineyard. ⁹ Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not even read this Scripture: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. ¹¹ This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes?'" ¹² And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading and preaching of His holy Word.

The delegation from the Sanhedrin who had come to question Jesus' authority saw clearly that Jesus was on to them.

- He knew that just as their forefathers had killed the prophets that God had sent to them, now they were seeking to kill Jesus, God's only Son, whom He had sent.
- God had made these priests and elders overseers of His people, but instead of leading them for God, they had acted as if they owned the church.

This continues to be a huge problem in the church today—that her leaders act as if they own the church and as if its fruits are all for them.

- In looking at this passage, we will consider especially how it teaches us and reminds us that God is the owner of the church.
- My prayer is that all who hear my voice will come to more fully recognise that and more fully live in the light of this truth.

Let's begin with this very simple fact that:

I. God is the owner of the church.

A. Just as the vineyard in the parable has an owner, so the church has an owner!

- You can see how the parable begins by referring to the owner: "**A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower.**"
- 1. This man is the rightful owner because he is the one who did all the work to establish it.
 - He obtained the land, he planted the vineyard, put a hedge around it, and made a wine press and a tower for storage as well as to keep watch over the vineyard.
 - It took about five years before a vineyard would begin to produce fruit, so this man had a significant investment in this vineyard.
- 2. God, of course, is the rightful owner of all things.

- As it says in Psalm 24:1-2: **The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein. ² For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters.**
 - The whole world belongs to Him because He made it.
 - It is here for His purposes first of all.
 - The Bible teaches us that the whole human race fell in Adam.
 - In our rebellion, we act as if the world belongs to us instead of God.
 - He did make the world for us, but we are to use it for Him—we are to live for Him and not as if we have no Maker.
- God owns everything, but we need to see that:
3. God especially owns the church.
- In our parable, the vineyard represents the church.
 - a. This imagery was already familiar to the Jews from the Old Testament.
 - Isaiah speaks of Israel as God's vineyard in chapter 5.
 - He speaks of them as a vineyard that was going to be nearly destroyed because it was not bringing forth the fruit that God expected of it.
 - Israel, of course, is the church of the Old Testament... the people that God had chosen and blessed to bring forth fruit for Him.
 - He is the one who made them into a people for Himself, called out of the world, to serve Him.
 - It was He who had formed them.
 - He had redeemed them and provided for them to be His people, delivering them out of Egypt and preserving them as a people for Himself.
 - This shows us that the church is His special possession.
 - Like the owner of the vineyard, He has planted us, tended us, put up a hedge around us, made a vat for our fruit, built a tower...
 - b. This means that the church belongs to Him all the more.
 - Not only were we created by God as all other people are, but we were recreated, bought back by Him—redeemed—to be His own special people. We have been bought with a price.
 - We, who are called and chosen, and meant to be faithful.
 - We, of all people, are to bring forth the fruit that God delights in as those who are renewed in His image.
 - We are to be His faithful servants, His true worshippers, those who are filled with love to Him and to each other and who obey His commandments.
 - c. Our high calling presses upon us all the more when we consider all that God has done to establish us as His people...
 - That He has been so gracious as to choose us to belong to Him when we are no better than others... He tells us so...

- That He has rescued us from bondage to Satan and the world and even from our own flesh that we might live for Him.
 - That He has secured the forgiveness of our sins at great cost to Himself by giving His only Son to die in our place—to bear our sins. Think of it!
 - What love the Father has bestowed on us!
 - How great our obligations are to Him!
 - How His love constrains us to bring forth fruit for Him.
- B. Note that verse 1 also tells us that the owner of the vineyard has appointed overseers to look after what is his own.
- At the end of verse 1 it says: **And he leased it [his vineyard] to vinedressers and went into a far country.**
1. We don't have to press the details about the far country and such...
 - In fact, all it actually says is that he went abroad.
 - The important point is that he left these tenant farmers in charge of his vineyard.
 - We see from the history of the times that there were many absentee owners in Israel at this time who would lease their farms out and take a portion of the produce for their rent.
 - So at harvest time (or vintage time as the case may be), these absentee landlords would send to collect their portion of the produce.
 2. These vinedressers represent the standing officers in the church—
 - In the Old Testament it was the priests and elders and the scribes.
 - In the New Testament it is the ministers and the elders and the teachers.
 - Of course the Levites in the Old Testament and the deacons in the New Testament assisted these other officers.
 - But the ones who were responsible for oversight were the priests, elders, and scribes and the ministers, elders, and teachers.
 - Like the vinedressers, they were to so manage things that the owner's vineyard brought forth much fruit.
 - They had a great task entrusted to them. It was important for them to be faithful in looking after the owner's possession and to do what was required to bring forth much fruit for Him.
 - These officers in the church are to see that the people are taught, fed, admonished, corrected, encouraged, nurtured, and so forth that they might bring forth much fruit for God.
- And while the leaders are especially in view here...
3. We would do well to extend the scope and recognise that to a certain extent fathers and every individual is an overseer in God's vineyard.
 - Each man has responsibility for his household—to see that his wife and children bring forth fruit for God.

- You men are commanded to wash your wives with the word of God and you are commanded to bring your children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, your wives helping you.
- It is a solemn, yet delightful task that can only be done with prayer and the help of the Holy Spirit.
- And every individual in the church—you are charged with the responsibility of caring for your own soul as well as for ministering to others in the church.
 - You are all both vinedressers and the vineyard in that sense.
 - You are the only one who has access to your own soul, and you are to earnestly seek by God’s grace to cultivate much fruit for your master.

TRANS> But there is a serious problem that our LORD illustrates in this parable.

- That is the second thing I want to look at.

II. Again and again, the church’s leaders forget that God owns the church.

A. In the parable, the owner sent his servants to the vinedressers to look for his fruit. His servants were abused and some were even killed.

1. It is a horrendous picture that is painted.
 - Let me read it to you with comments... Mark 12:2-5: **Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers.**
 - He was the owner. The fruit was to be brought forth for him.
 - Look at how the vinedressers treated the owner’s servant... verse 3: **And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed.**
 - What wickedness is this! Think of it. They had the privilege of working at this vineyard, but they refuse to acknowledge the owner and pay their rent!
 - But it gets progressively worse—the abuse increases, verse 4-5: **Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. 5 And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some.”**
2. This, of course, is a picture of what Israel’s leaders did to the prophets that God sent to her.
 - God’s servants the prophets came looking for fruit for God, but they did not have any fruit for God.
 - They brought forth fruits of corruption for themselves and their idols—they were blasphemers and fornicators—they produced fruits of the flesh and not fruits of the Spirit for God.
 - Like the vinedressers, they had no fruit for the owner.
 - So these prophets graciously called the whole church to repent and turn back to God that they might bear fruit.
 - They brought precious promises to all who would come to Him.
 - Promises that are true for us—that in coming to God by word and prayer, He will bless us with much fruit.
 - The Lord tells us in Jeremiah how badly His servants the prophets were treated:

- **Jeremiah 35:15:** “I have also sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending *them*, saying, ‘Turn now everyone from his evil way, amend your doings, and do not go after other gods to serve them; then you will dwell in the land which I have given you and your fathers.’ But you have not inclined your ear, nor obeyed Me.”
 - Jesus Himself once said to them (Matt 23:37): “**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!**”
- That the owner of the vineyard kept sending his servants seems unrealistic—it is meant to seem unrealistic because that God kept sending more prophets is unfathomable.
- But what the owner of the vineyard does next is even more beyond belief:
- B. At last he sends his only son to these scoundrels and they even reject him!
1. Look at what happens in verse 6-8:
 - The expectation is that surely they will receive the owner’s son (verse 6): **Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, “They will respect my son.”**
 - Look at what do they do instead (ver. 7-8): **But those vinedressers said among themselves, “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.”** ⁸**So they took him and killed *him* and cast *him* out of the vineyard.**
 - Note well, it is not that they do not realise that he is the owner’s son.
 - They kill him *because* they recognise him as the son
 - They kill him knowing that he is the rightful heir in hopes that they can take over the vineyard. Perhaps they suppose the father to be dead.
 2. This obviously illustrates what the leaders of the church did to God’s Son when He came that they might bear fruit for God.
 - It is remarkable that God should ever have sent Him after what they did to His servants the prophets.
 - But this is what the leaders of the church are driven to when they begin to suppose that the church belongs to them—
 - They become more and more hardened, more and more unreasonable, until at last there is no place for Christ.
 - Has this not become rampant in our day? It surely has!
- C. Corrupt church leaders (including parents and individuals) want the church to be their church instead of God’s church.
1. They decide what the fruit should be instead of God deciding.
 - The church will be a champion of the latest social cause.
 2. They decide how God should be worshipped instead of God deciding.
 - The church will approach God the way they want—preaching will be replaced with dialogue, praise will be replaced with sentimental songs, the sacraments will be multiplied and embellished with all sorts of trappings.

- The simple means of grace that God has given us become so cluttered and displaced that they become ineffectual to lead us to the true God.
 - They lead us to the performers.
3. They set themselves up and their own message up as the way of salvation in place of God's Son.
 - The message of salvation by Jesus crucified is replaced by something that will be better received—something less offensive.
 - Like Rob Bell—where everyone ends up in heaven.
 - Or Joel Osteen where everyone is happy and wealthy in this world.
 4. They decide who should be disciplined and who should be received instead of following what Christ has said in His word.
 - They embrace those who practice immorality—even fornication and sodomy—and reject those who speak against it.

TRANS> In all of this you see the hardness and wickedness of men.

- They enter into God's church, but then instead of bringing forth fruit for Him that He delights in, they pursue whatever they want and ignore God Himself.
 - They look for their own honour and their own interests instead of God's honour and God's will—they actually exploit the church which is God's redemptive agency and make it about themselves.
 - The leaders do this at every level—ministers, teachers, elders, fathers, and individuals looking after their own souls.
- But I have some very good news:

III. The owner will set things right.

- If this were not so, there would be no hope at all for the salvation of anyone.
 - All we would have is false religion that cannot save anyone.
 - So what will God do to make things right?
- A. He will judge the wicked vinedressers (the false leaders in the church).
 - Look at verse 9. Jesus asked the question: **“Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do?”**
 - Then He answers it Himself, saying: **“He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.”**
 - He tells us two things that He will do.
 1. First, that He will destroy the vinedressers.
 - Of course He will—they killed some of his servants and they killed His Son, all because they wanted to take over His vineyard.
 - They deserve to die for sure!
 - They were so bent on taking over that vineyard—their antagonism against God who graciously put them over His vineyard is so great that they are willing to kill His Son...

- They are willing to take the very agency that God established to save sinners—to restore what was lost in mercy—and make it about themselves.
 - We know that in 66 AD, God sent the Romans against the leaders of the Jewish church and they destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.
 - God would no longer let them stay in His vineyard.
 - They had driven those who did follow Christ out and these are the ones that were with God.
2. You see that besides destroying the wicked vinedressers, Jesus says that He will give the vineyard to others.
- a. This would have infuriated the Jewish leaders more than anything—to be told that the vineyard they were trying to hold onto would be given to others!
 - They claimed it as their own, but it was not theirs.
 - It belonged to Jesus, the Son, and those who follow Him.
 - b. Giving the vineyard to others is very important!
 - God has done this over and over in the history of the church and that is how the church has continued.
 - In this way, there are leaders in the church that do preach the gospel and that do look to Christ that they might bring forth fruit for God—
 - They actually do want to be His people and to be saved from their sin.
 - If the Lord did not give His church to such people, there would be no one on earth to preach the gospel and to shepherd God’s people.
 - No ministers, no elders, no teachers, no fathers, no individuals.
 - c. Think about this in the history of the church.
 - First, the Lord gave His church to those who professed Christ and took it away from those who rejected Him.
 - But soon there were those who professed Christ who began to teach that you must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, so God took His vineyard from them and gave it those preaching salvation by grace.
 - Then there arose those who denied that Jesus came in the flesh—the church was taken from them and given to those who believed that Jesus did come in the flesh.
 - Then there arose those who said that He was not truly God and the kingdom was given to those who confessed that He was God.
 - We could go on and on—we have the reformation... where men arose who set up their own worship, who set up priests to offer sacrifices, who made salvation depend on penance and rituals...
 - And the Lord gave His church to those who preached justification by faith.
 - In our own history, the protestant church began to set aside the authority of God and deny God’s judgement, teaching universalism...

- In the 1900's we saw the OPC and the PCA formed and our own ARP was purged of those who were preaching their own gospel.
- Now it seems that we are going through the same thing again as the OPC and the PCA especially are experiencing similar divisions all over again.

B. But how can you know who to go with when there is division?

1. Go with the ones who go with the heir—the Son that the vinedressers rejected.
 - a. Jesus changes the figure from a vineyard to a building because the parable of the vinedressers leaves the son dead.
 - Jesus wants to direct us to a text that speaks of how although He was rejected by the leaders of the church, God raised Him up again.
 - It is a text from Psalm 118:22-23.
 - In verse 10-11 He quotes it, saying: **Have you not even read this Scripture: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes”?**
 - b. This is a passage that infuriated the leaders of the Jewish church because it described them as the builders who rejected the One on whom the whole church was to be built.
 - They knew that they were rejecting Christ so that they could have the vineyard (the church) instead of Him.
 - And with this verse He is exposing them as the ones who would do this (the designated builders of the church). Jesus is claiming that He, the rejected stone, will become the foundation of the whole church—
 - He is the only foundation on which the church will stand.
 - No other foundation can anyone lay than that which laid, which is Jesus Christ.
 - c. Jesus is the One that the official builders rejected but that God raised up.
 - They thought they had done away with the heir.
 - But—such a marvellous thing in our eyes—God raised Him up, showing everyone clearly that He was the Messiah on whom the church was to be built—He was God’s chosen vessel—He was the cornerstone.
 - Go with those who go with Him and you will not go wrong.
2. But how can know who is going with Him?
 - They are the ones who go with the word of God.
 - Often the false teachers claim that they are, but look at the word and look at the great Confessions of the church and see if they really are.
 - Jesus told us in John 15 that the ones who bring forth fruit for God (instead of for themselves) are not the ones who abide with the established church, but those who abide in Him AND in His Word.

- God has given us His word of truth so we can discern who is following Him and who is not.
- We must abide in Jesus as He is revealed in God's Word...
 - not as He is revealed by those who reject God's word and claim to have authority in themselves or by the Spirit apart from the word.
- It is clearly the Lord who raised Jesus from the dead.
 - It is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes!

C. What a wretched thing it is to the apostate leaders that Christ was raised up.

1. Verse 12 tells us how the Jewish leaders responded just hearing that Jesus, the one they were rejecting, would be raised up to be the foundation of the whole church.
 - It made them want to kill Him all the more—to do what Psalm 118 and Jesus said they would do:
 - **Verse 12: And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.**
 - Poor desperate men!
 - What do they possibly hope to gain by striving against God and against His Son?
2. Be sure that you do not join their cause.
 - There is no other name but the name of Jesus by which we must be saved.
 - Not any Jesus that someone makes up... but the one and only Jesus who is God's Son—
 - the One who died, not only because the builders rejected Him, but because God appointed Him to die that He might atone for our sins.
 - It is because of this that there is no other Saviour, no other church but the one that is established on Him... the stone that the builders rejected.
 - He is the heir of God's kingdom because He alone is righteous.
 - You cannot inherit God's kingdom unless you come to Him.