

Danger for Debt-Collectors

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Date: 05 March 2006

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[0 : 00] Well, issues of authority are always near the surface in our day-to-day lives. I mean, it might be as simple as the parking inspector. You've just found, finally, a place on Chapel Street.

I mean, you choose to ignore the loading zone sign. And you return to the car, it's probably only 10 minutes since you left it. And the parking ticket is just being placed on the windscreen.

I mean, but do me a favour, buddy. I mean, I've only been gone a few minutes. I'm broke. Not even eye contact.

Not a sound from the lips under that official hat. Nothing. Nothing except the sound of the windscreen wiper snapping back onto the parking ticket.

Authority. You know very clearly who has the parking authority. The abuse or perhaps the authority or perhaps the abuse of authority by state troopers in the southern states of the US is legendary.

[1 : 12] I mean, it's legendary at least if you watch old films. And the story is told of two men. Two men who were driving through Texas and they were pulled over by a state trooper. You'll have to excuse.

I'm not going to even pretend to do the accent. The trooper walks up, taps on the window with his nightstick. And the driver winds down the window and whack!

The trooper smacks him across the head with his stick. I mean, what did you do that for? Splatters the driver. You're in Texas, son.

When we pull you over, you'd better have your license ready when we get to your car. Well, I'm sorry, officer. I'm not really from around here.

Well, the man's license was checked. It was clean. And the trooper then walks around the car and goes around to the passenger side. And you guess that he taps on the window.

[2 : 06] The passenger rolls down the window and whack! The old nightstick is twirling again. And the passenger gets it right across the head. But holding his head, he pretends to be brave and he whimpers.

He says, but what did you do that for? Just making your wish come true, said the trooper. Huh?

Well, the trooper said, I know that about two miles down the road you're going to turn to your mate and say, I wish that tough cop had tried that routine on me.

Well, right back at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, the issue of Jesus' authority is right to the fore. Jesus was in Capernaum.

And we read that when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes.

And tonight we pick up our series again from Mark's Gospel. And as we pick up the series, Jesus has entered Jerusalem. And the people have met his arrival in the city with great praise.

[3 : 13] And in fact, they have praised him taking words from Psalm 118. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. As Jesus came to the temple, in fact, his authority was on public display.

It was on public display, you recall, as he drove out the money changers. The power brokers, the religious leaders, couldn't ignore this claim of authority.

After all, these were the ones who called all the shots in Jerusalem. And so they asked, if you've got your Bibles open there, if you just look back to chapter 11 of Mark's Gospel.

They asked Jesus in verse 28, By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?

And as chapter 11 progresses, we see the hostility building by the Jewish leadership.

[4 : 19] This built up of hostility to this man, Jesus of Nazareth. I mean, if you look at verse 18, and the chief priests and the scribes, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him,

because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

That's important context, because the confrontation, in fact, continues in our passage tonight, at the beginning of chapter 12. It's the parable of the wicked tenants.

And the confrontation is at Jesus' initiative. It's probably a bit hard, isn't it, 2001, 2006, living in Doncaster, to put ourselves back into that scene.

But try if you can. Imagine that you're just standing around. You're watching. You're listening.

You're observing the confrontation between these religious authorities and this man, Jesus.

Well, Mark records that Jesus began to speak to them in parables. Now, of course, parables were the most characteristic method of Jesus' teaching.

[5 : 33] That's about 35% of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels. That's Matthew, Mark and Luke. About 35% of it, in fact, is in parabolic form, in the form of parables.

And the parables were the teaching method that Jesus went back to time and again to explain the kingdom of God. It was the teaching method that he used to show the character of God.

It was the teaching method that he used to show the expectations that God has for people. And we might just simply think of a parable as a comparison drawn from either nature or from daily life that's designed to illuminate some spiritual truth.

So, Jesus begins with a parable. And the parable is the picture of a vineyard. These listeners, imagine you're there as a Jew standing around.

You would have straightway picked up the symbolism. You see, the vine or the vineyard is used throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and in the prophets, to refer to Israel and its relation to the Lord, to Yahweh.

[6 : 46] But if you look at verse 1, it's even more specific. A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press and built a watchtower.

See, this verse, if we were to look back at Isaiah 5, it echoes, in fact, the first two verses of the song of the vineyard in Isaiah chapter 5 in the Old Testament.

Well, Jesus takes this imagery and he develops it with a bit of a different emphasis. You see, in Isaiah, the focus is on the nation of Israel. Here, the focus is the tenants or the farmers.

So, who do these tenants, who do these farmers stand for? Well, as someone living in first century Palestine, disputes between landowners and tenants, they were not at all uncommon.

You see, much of the land at this stage in the nation's history was actually held in large estates, rather than, as previously, by owner-occupiers. So, Jesus continues.

[7 : 53] Then the landowner leased it to tenants and he went to another country. Well, if you were a tenant, the normal method that you would have of payment for the use of the land was an agreed proportion of the crop, an agreed proportion of the fruit.

And if it was a new vineyard, then it was probably about four years before a crop was ready for harvest. Well, the time of harvest approaches and the vineyard owner wants his payment.

So, look with me at verse 2. The owner sends a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him.

They beat him. And they sent him away empty-handed. I mean, perhaps the religious leaders right at the beginning of hearing this parable equate the tenants, tenants acting as thugs, with the Romans, the Romans maintaining control over Israel by violence.

But read on. Again, the vineyard owner sent another slave to them and this one they beat over the head and they insulted. And then he sent another and that one they killed. And so it was with many others.

[9 : 09] Some they beat and others they killed. The imagery is convicting for these religious leaders. The word that we have translated there, slave, could also be translated as servant.

And in fact, it's the word that's often used in the Old Testament to designate the prophets that God sent to his people. There are many references to that, but if you're taking notes, you might at some stage just want to look up Jeremiah 7, where it's quite explicit of the prophets being described in this manner.

Jeremiah 7, verse 25. And these prophets that God sent to the nation were often persecuted by the nation's leaders. Tradition holds that, in fact, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Amos were all killed.

This was just not in the distant past. Most recently, John the Baptist had just lost his head. John the Baptist, a prophet, whose divine mission Jesus has just upheld at the end of chapter 11, he's just upheld it, in fact, to these religious leaders.

So, Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard at the beginning of chapter 5 of the book of Isaiah is in relation to the nation of Israel and Yahweh.

[10:39] And in this parable, Jesus takes that imagery and he develops it. He develops it in a somewhat different way and the emphasis is on the tenants or the farmers.

And the tenants or farmers, they just simply stand for the spiritual leaders of God's people. If you like, those to whom God has entrusted his nation.

Well, what do these leaders do? They persecute God's servants. They behave in a manner as if God is dead or at least he's a weakling who doesn't care.

Well, what's the owner going to do? I want you to notice particularly the patience of the vineyard owner.

You see, he gives the tenants every opportunity to repent and pay their rent. The owner has one other whom he can send.

[11:39] It's the owner's beloved son. Because, particularly for the readers of Mark's gospel, they would have caught this language of the beloved son immediately.

Because it just relates back to that voice that was heard from heaven as recorded in chapter 1 and in chapter 9. But that's for the readers of Mark's gospel.

I mean, what about the religious leaders who were standing around listening to this parable? Would these religious leaders have understood that the reference to the son in the parable was in fact speaking of Jesus?

I wonder. We can't be definite. Likely, yes. Given the question that they'd posed as to the source of Jesus' authority at the end of chapter 11.

Well, what do the tenants do? Look with me at verse 8. They seized him. We're speaking of the beloved son. They killed him and they threw him out of the vineyard.

[12:51] Kill the heir. Take the inheritance for ourselves. The tenants obviously assume that the owner of the vineyard is dead and by killing the son.

It'll be theirs. Faulty logic. Blatant wickedness. Blind stupidity.

As I was thinking much about this passage this week, it struck me that the visible church has regular examples, frequent examples of such blind stupidity.

leaders of God's people who deny the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Deny his once-for-all sacrifice. Deny his resurrection.

Claim that he's just one of many incarnations. But in addition to these gross sins of some church leaders in the wider world as we've seen through the 20th century and now into this century, there has been a massive escalation in the persecution of Christians throughout the world.

[14:04] Tortured and killed. Why? Because of their testimony that Jesus Christ is Lord. Blatant wickedness.

Let's go back to the parable. You see, the owner of the vineyard isn't dead. The tenant's logic is fatally flawed.

The owner, in fact, has been so patient with these willful and wicked tenants. So, it does beg the question, isn't it?

Is this owner impotent? Is he? Does the owner care about the treatment meted out to his servants? Does this owner care about the treatment to his beloved son? Well, Jesus asked the religious leaders, what then will the owner of the vineyard do?

[15:10] It's a climactic question. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? Jesus just goes straight on.

He'll come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. This owner who appeared to be so impotent is clearly seen as the one who can exact revenge.

He'll destroy the tenants who killed his servants and killed his son. But more than that, more than that, the owner will give the vineyard to others.

still sort of leaves the question hanging though, but what about the son? I mean, the owner's beloved son rejected, discarded, killed, will the owner's beloved son be vindicated?

Well, Jesus has finished telling the parable, but he hasn't finished because he quotes from Psalm 118.

[16:20] This psalm, if we were to read it, you'd see that it has strong links with the Exodus event when the Lord saved Israel. The psalm's language, in fact, could include the whole history of the Lord's preservation of the nation, in the midst of other nations, especially the exile and return of the

nation.

But the Jews also interpreted Psalm 118 as looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. You see, remember, as Jesus had entered Jerusalem, the crowds had identified Jesus as the Messianic figure in Psalm 118 when they publicly proclaimed.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. And now Jesus quotes from the same psalm, Psalm 118. And if you like, it's an interpretive allegory of his destiny.

Look at verse 10, quoting from Psalm 118 verses 22 and 23. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

I mean, consider the imagery in your mind just for a moment. Take a stone, it's been chucked out by the builders, it's laying on the ground, it's walked over, it's stumbled over, it's kicked, most of the time ignored.

[17 : 48] But in fact, this stone, this stone is the large stone. It's the large stone at the corner of the top course, which is fit at last to complete the building.

And it's the stone which often would be decorated and the stone that would catch your attention. The great reversal.

The gospel of paradox. The rejected stone becomes the most important of all. Well, as I reflected this week again on this parable, I remember that there are particular times in my life when the Lord seems to show me the transformation that has already happened in my life, notwithstanding my sinful frailty, which I'll know best apart from the Lord and then Cheryl second to that.

And one of these times when the Lord really showed me that and spoke to me about that transformation was on our recent holiday in January. We were staying in a London hotel that I knew well.

In fact, this hotel had been my home in the past when I used to travel somewhat regularly to London on business. And I was surprised how busy this hotel was for January.

[19 : 09] It was full of businessmen and businesswomen. There were conferences going on, there were deals being done in the bar, lots of cigar smoke, which was a bit of a problem. There was deals being done in the lobby.

And as I spent a number of nights in this hotel, I was reminded of a time in my life when in fact doing corporate deals was my God.

Christ wasn't part of my life. I mean, for all intents and purposes, at that time in life I had rejected Christ. Christ. And yet, in God's grace, in his unfathomable patience, he turned me upside down. What had been in fact so important to me was then seen for its shallowness. It's in fact very limited shelf life. So the one that I had so steadfastly rejected became the Lord of my life.

See, a great reversal. So do you know that reality in your life as we meet together this evening?

[20 : 28] Because my prayer is that each person who's here tonight knows the reality of an intimate relationship with the living God through faith in the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus, God's beloved son. Well, Jesus uses this scripture from Psalm 118 to disclose what was happening in the way he was being treated by the religious leaders.

You see, the judgment that the leaders exercised in rejecting Jesus invoked God's judgment. Why?

Because the stone they rejected, was the one chosen, chosen to become the chief cornerstone.

It's an amazing conclusion, isn't it? Indeed, Jesus continues to quote from Psalm 118 in verse 11 when we read, this was the Lord's doing and it's amazing in our eyes.

God's God. So, I trust as we head into 2006, we're now a number of weeks into it and most of us are back into normal daily routines, that as we head into this year, we're captured by the amazing God whom we worship and serve.

[21 : 45] An amazing God who does amazing things all of the time throughout a very rebellious world. an amazing God who'd condescend to use using that metaphor elsewhere in scripture broken clay jars, broken clay jars like me broken clay jars like you he'd condescend to use us to take his message of reconciliation to a world that in fact acts like the tenants in the vineyard let me encourage you then to praise the Lord for his grace to allow us such an enormous privilege the tragedy of course is that some reject and they continue to reject God's grace they're not prepared to lose the power that they think they have but in fact the power is an illusion or when the religious leaders realised that Jesus had told this parable against them they wanted to arrest him but they feared the crowd so they left him for the moment and they went away the parable of the wicked tenants how can we apply such a passage in our own lives well perhaps it's useful to look at the

main points that are associated with the main characters in the parable so I want to draw your attention firstly to the owner's forbearance you see the parable paints this graphic picture of God's patience

God's patience with sinful rebellious humanity men and women patience of course is a divine attribute of God you might recall the words of God to Moses on the mountain in Exodus 34 he said the Lord the Lord a God merciful and gracious slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness this parable this parable of the wicked tenants reveals God's continuous pursuit of humans continuous pursuit in the face of repeated rebellion and rejection God's a God who waits I mean of course he could accomplish his will instantly he can bring final judgment on the wicked immediately but God chooses not to do so God postpones his judgment in order to give people an opportunity to repent you see

Paul writes in Romans 2 and he says do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience it's a good question he says do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance it's a great question I wonder if that verse then applies to anyone here tonight I mean are you despising the riches of God's grace his kindness shown to you in Jesus Christ if you are let me plead with you don't presume on God's patience see his call to every person in the world is to repent let me also say as we think of God's patience that God's patience is meant to be a model of our own patience patient in our dealings with one another patient in waiting on the Lord patient in awaiting

God's timing that's a main point coming out of the main character the owner secondly the tenants the tenants foolishness Israel of course was to be a light to the nations but the religious leaders of the nation they didn't want to be accountable to God over a long period of time they sought to be just accountable to themselves but God loves his vineyard and he raises up new leaders when existing leaders abandon him and if you look back through church history you'll see that time and time again and you'll see it as you read the pages of the Old Testament so it's a tremendous privilege to shepherd God's flock and the greater the privilege the greater responsibility it's an enormous responsibility to be a leader of God's people you see

Jesus Christ is the one who has all authority and yet it just amazes me that so often the institutional church seeks to push the Lord Jesus just some violently off to the side but many just a little bit off centre stage and again boring you with holiday illustrations as we were travelling around we were reminded again and again more than I can ever recall in the past of the implicit rejection of Christ the implicit rejection of Christ in fact by the visible church the institutional church the church that the world observes Rome one of our favourite cities of course is full of churches I mean many of these churches you walk down a little street they're just unbelievably plain on the outside and you walk through a little wooden door and just these most magnificent paintings and sculptures hit you in the face literally as you walk into them the tragedy is the massive amount of idolatry

[27 : 37] I think I've ever seen it quite so clearly black madonnas centre stage white madonnas sort of statues of so called saints everywhere through these places and people praying before them I have to say again more than I'd ever really realised in the past as I went through so many of these churches there was very very little evidence of a focus on the Father's beloved son well if you're a Roman Catholic and you're here tonight please don't feel too awkward I encourage all of us to be prayerful for Pope Benedict some of the things I've read from Pope Benedict are very encouraging we should pray that he will continue the reforms that started coming out of Vatican 2 we ought to pray that his papacy will be looked back and remembered as one that was characterised by the exaltation of Jesus

Christ that his papacy will be remembered as the Pope who put great concentration on Christ as the unique and the only mediator useful prayer I'm certainly challenged to pray more regularly for that but this tenant like treatment of Christ unfortunately is much closer to home because in our own denomination there's much that needs to be repented of again towards the end of the trip we were in central London and we visited quite a famous Church of England church and we went there on a Sunday afternoon for even song this church has a worldwide reputation for its glorious singing service words were provided in a booklet and the words were taken out of the book of common prayer and hallelujah there's much in the book of common prayer that's straight out of scripture and that was good stuff but it was interesting to help us meditate these extremely thoughtful leaders of this church had included readings from other so-called holy scriptures at the back of the booklet and included in these readings was one from the

Quran I mean the fact that the Bible and the Quran say quite different things about the person of Jesus Christ appears to be of no consequence you see this parable has great application in the world in which we live the parable of the wicked tenants speaks strongly to leaders who shepherd God's people I mean whether we're an ordained leader or whether we're a lay leader if we are it's essential that we stay in close communion with the Lord seeking his will not seeking our own popularity or our prestige not succumbing to the spirit and that's very small s to the spirit of the age but of course outside of the visible church in the world there are just myriads of examples of individuals and nations seeking to push God out of the picture when you think about that it sort of raises the question in my mind do people actually believe

I mean is there some thought that by erasing God from their lives or seeking to that they can somehow control their eternal destiny the tenants foolishness or what about the owner's wrath you see God's graciousness is exemplified in his care for the vineyard his patience is so clearly evidenced in repeatedly sending servants even though they were brutally treated but there will come a time when God's patience will run out and judgment will fall that is a reality and one day all the wrongs are going to be righted God's going to punish all sin he'll either punish the offender or place the person sin on Jesus it's that basic so if

I'm speaking to anyone tonight and you're continuing in whatever way to resist Jesus Christ as the Lord of your life then again don't test the patience of God he sent his beloved son to die for you to rescue you from the peril of sin and you see and that's the fourth main point that comes out of this early part of Mark 12 the son has in fact been vindicated psalm 18 was a key passage of scripture for the apostles in the early church as they proclaimed the gospel so as we close tonight hear these words of God not my words words of God as recorded in Acts 4 Peter Peter filled with the Holy Spirit said to them rulers of the people and elders if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man was healed let it be known to all of you and all the people of

[33 : 18] Israel that this man standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified whom God raised from the dead this Jesus and what does Peter quote the stone that was rejected by you the builders it has become the cornerstone and then there is no salvation in or there is salvation in no one else for there's no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved Acts 4 friends we live in a world that's hostile often hostile to the followers of Jesus Christ we need to ask God to empower us by his Holy Spirit to declare with the same boldness the testimony of Peter you see Jesus is the one with all authority he is the only saviour so for the great majority of people here tonight who are followers of the

Lord Jesus let me encourage you to praise him praise him for his grace in your life honour the Lord Jesus in every aspect of your life don't push him to the side and if you're here as a leader in any capacity of God's people don't succumb to the spirit of the age and find ways just to move the Lord off to the side he must remain centre stage and maybe there is someone here tonight and you've come and you're not a follower of the Lord Jesus well let me say it's great that you're here we're delighted that you're here with us but God calls on you to repent you see the call of repentance in fact is a call of love God sent his son into a sinful world and that question still hangs doesn't it do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance a death and I do and I do and when I say a death and I believe I say