

Building Out of Debt

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[0 : 00] I think you'll find it helpful if you open the Bible back to Mark chapter 12 on page 848, the Bible in the seat in front. As Jordan said, today's Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode donkey into Jerusalem and celebrated all over the world in various ways.

Most churches I've been in give out palm crosses, but there are different ways to celebrate Palm Sunday. In Germany, they give out brown eggs. I'm not sure why. In Holland, they give out bread made into stick figures, which sounds a bit more nourishing. And in India, I understand they give out marigolds.

But it's only in Sydney, Australia, where a group of men gather at the Sydney Opera House with a large size herd of donkeys.

Donkeys come in herds. A group of donkeys. And ride them. And I'm thinking of doing the same here next year, so you're all warmly invited.

[1 : 06] I also think that the majority of the crowd on the original Palm Sunday were probably Anglicans. They sang fantastic words, but I'm not sure they really understood, but they were singing.

And here is the King of God coming up to the house of God to replace the temple. And this little reading, 12, 1 to 12, we're in the temple again two days.

And this, I think, is the most astonishing parable in all the gospel. And if you're here as a guest, if you've come today as a guest, or if you're just wondering what Christianity is all about, there's a great day to come.

Because this little, in less than 11 verses, Jesus takes all of the Bible and squeezes it in. You get the whole picture right here.

And it's quite remarkable, I think. All the good news of Christianity, in a way, is summarized in less than 11 verses. And there are three...

[2 : 12] The parable is about three different people. It's about a loving landlord, a surprising son, and terrible tenants.

And I just want to say a word about them, and then we'll have a look at the parable, and then see what implications it has for us today. Firstly, the loving landlord. This is the most obvious parable Jesus tells in the gospel.

Some of these parables are very mysterious, and commentators have a field day writing about what they think they're all about. This is much closer to an allegory. And the owner, the landlord, the owner of the vineyard, is most obviously and clearly God.

If you look down at verse 6, halfway down the parable, this landlord has one beloved son. Precisely the words we've heard from one other person in the gospel, God himself speaking audibly twice. Remember? Once at the baptism, once at the transfiguration. And then in verse 9, it doesn't come across so well. Jesus says, what will the owner of the vineyard do when the word is the word for Lord?

[3 : 19] And if there's any doubt, in verse 11, he quotes the Old Testament and says, Jesus specifically identifies the owner as the Old Testament God himself. So here is the privilege we have in reading this parable today.

We are able to be taken up into the mind of God, taken up into heaven, and to see how God sees things. Okay?

So this is the loving landlord. Secondly, the surprising son. Jesus is in deep hot water again. The very day before, the day after he rode in Jerusalem, he closed the entire temple down.

Massive complex. 34 acres. A massive building site. Herod building this temple. It wasn't completed for another 30 years.

And when it was completed, they sacrificed a quarter of a million sheep. Massive. And Jesus went in. He overturned the money changes, the tables, and refused to allow the bazaar to continue.

[4 : 21] And we dealt with this last week. For those of you who are here, and if you weren't here last week and like to get an in-depth view of this, you can go on our website somehow, magically, and find the sermon somehow.

We saw that Jesus is not cleansing the temple. He's closing it. He's not reforming it or improving it. He's laying the axe to the root. Because after he turns over the tables, much more important, he stands there and he actively prevents anything from coming through the temple for all the day. And he fills the temple with his preaching. And you see, all the trading and money changing and animal selling that was going on was for the sake of keeping the sacrifices going. And Jesus stands in the way of all that happening by his teaching.

And you remember last week we saw that the Son of God is replacing the house of God. And so you can understand why when he turns up the next day, the authorities are hopping mad.

And at the end of chapter 11, as Deb read for us, they do a sort of an intervention. They confront him and they say, who gave you this authority to act like this? It's not a real question, of course.

[5 : 33] We know they've already decided to kill him. And I've never been in a group of people that have seriously planned to kill someone. I've been in groups of people where they've joked about it.

But I've never been in a group that does this. These are the senior religious leaders of Israel.

There's no evidence they did it before or after. And I imagine planning to kill someone who's very popular is a very tricky thing.

And so they need to lay out their strategy secretly and carefully. And the first step of their strategy is to demand from Jesus where his authority comes from.

They are saying, in effect, how dare you come into our temple without our permission, in our jurisdiction. We represent the Sanhedrin, the chief priests, scribes, the elders.

There is no higher panel in all of Israel. There is no single person on earth who could give you the authority to try and close down the temple. And it's very interesting as Deb read it, I don't know if you noticed or not, but instead of de-escalating, Jesus raises the stakes.

[6 : 46] He doesn't appeal to the Sanhedrin. He doesn't appeal to Herod or to the Roman governor. He doesn't appeal to Caesar himself. He goes to the highest authority possible, to God himself.

And he draws a line, he says, authority in heaven or from man. And then he immediately goes into this parable. And the wonderful thing about the parable is that it's told from God's point of view.

In other words, it takes us into the heart of God. This landlord has one beloved son who's at great risk. And what Jesus is doing in this parable is he's opening the door for those original hearers.

And he's opening the door for us this morning to feel what God feels. So loving landlord, surprising son. And let me make a comment thirdly about the terrible tenants.

Now, it's so easy, particularly if you've been a Christian for a year or two, it's so easy to be smug as you read this. We're familiar with these stories. It's so easy to think, oh, these nasty authorities, they're treating Jesus very badly.

[7 : 51] We would never do that. But Jesus tells this story at a much deeper level and has a bigger application than just Israel.

The parable is about a vineyard. And it's true in the Old Testament. God calls Israel his vineyard. And usually because he's disappointed that they haven't produced anything. Here's the thing.

The vineyard was never meant just for Israel. The reason God had made Israel his vineyard was for the sake of the whole world. It goes back to his purposes right at creation.

God never lost sight of those original purposes. The vineyard was the way in which God would bring his people back into Eden, back into paradise. Again, did I mention I talked about this last week?

Did I? I talked about this last week. And if you want to get a hold of the... I won't go. Let me just make this comment.

[8 : 56] The Bible begins and ends in paradise. It begins in the garden of beauty and delight, the place of joy and blessings in the presence of God. And it ends in the garden city where God himself now dwells with his people in face-to-face friendship.

I am your God. You are my people. And throughout the Bible, the story of the Bible is how God continually struggles, often against us, to bring us back into his paradise.

And that's the purpose of the temple. He gave the temple as a place where he would dwell amongst his people and restore them to a new and better Eden. And that's why Jesus is on such dangerous ground.

He's saying to these people, the temple is not it. That's not the way to the kingdom. That's not the way to paradise. It's through entering the kingdom. And he says, most dangerously, God's taking the vineyard out of your hands and putting in the hands of others.

And that's where we come in, you see. The parable has immediate relevance to the crowd who are listening then. But Jesus tells it with us in mind, because you are a tenant, just as I am a tenant.

[10:13] So bearing those three things in mind, let's have a look at this little parable with a very big punch. Verse 1, Jesus says there's a man who owned a vineyard.

And the first thing we notice about the man is that he's incredibly active and generous. He plants the vineyard. He puts a fence around the vineyard. He digs a wine pit, a wine press.

He builds a tower. He then leases it to tenants and he leaves the area. He did not have to do all that for the tenants. He could have just planted the vineyard. We didn't even need to plant the vineyard and lease it out to tenants.

He doesn't need to provide protection, a wine press, towers for safety and comfort. So there's something very attractive and very generous about this landlord, this owner.

At his own expense, he makes this vineyard beautiful and secure, perfect for any tenant who might want to move in and live there. A huge capital investment.

[11:13] And whoever comes and is the tenants there should count themselves very fortunate indeed. Verse 2, after a time, the owner does exactly what he would normally expect. He sends a servant to receive some fruit.

Not all the fruit, even though all the fruit is his. He's being generous again. But he sends a servant, someone who represents him, his agent, to get some of the fruit. And then in verse 3, we get to know the tenants.

And you may think they would be very grateful and more than willing to pay. But in a vicious turn, they take the servant, they beat him, and they send him away with nothing but his injuries.

And the word for beating is the word for skinning someone. Now, it's at this point, I think, we would expect the owner to intervene. If he had any money sense whatsoever, he'd either have these guys arrested or he'd send around a bigger group of his own servants to give them a dose of their own medicine.

That is what I would do, at the very least, get them evicted. No, there's something very unusual about this owner. In verse 4, instead of demanding his rights or taking revenge, he shows remarkable patience toward the tenants.

[12:33] It's all completely unnecessary. And I think those of you who own properties should be shaking your heads at this owner by now. He sends another servant, completely unprotected, to repeat the same message.

And the obvious question we have for the owner is, what's to stop the tenants to do exactly the same thing they did last time or worse? This is no way to run a business at a profit. He's gone way beyond giving the tenants their rights.

He's been over-generous. Now you're handing them a golden opportunity to do it again. Is the owner a bit dim? What's the plan? Sure enough, in verse 4, if you look down at it, they take the servant and their violence and brutality now increases.

They bash him around the head and they abuse him shamefully. And the word for what they do to the head comes from the word to decapitate. And it may be a reference to John the Baptist.

It's a parable anyway. And as their boldness grows, you imagine them after they've bashed this guy and abused him somehow. They sit around the wine press, drinking the owner's wine, living in his tower and having a great old laugh about it.

[13:48] Now surely the owner is going to make some swift and decisive decision. No, in verse 5, he sends another. And the third servant, they murder.

And we read at the end of that verse, so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. It's almost unbelievable. It's brazen, shameless, unrelieved, defiance and violence against the owner.

These are nightmare tenants. They are terrible tenants. And I think at this stage in the story, our feelings are drawn to the owner. These tenants are award-winningly bad.

The landlord's property and his servants and his rights are being brutalised by these bullies. And his strategy is just not working. And we want to say to the owner, look, there's a time to be kind. There's a time to be patient. This is not it. Send in the police. Send in whoever. Lock them up. They're just going to keep doing it. And as when we come to verse 6, we come to the heart of the story and everything slows down.

[15:01] In the original, the verb changes stop. They change. We've been wondering, what is this owner thinking? And now we're allowed into his heart and mind.

Verse 6 is very personal. He had still one other, a beloved son. Literally, it says, still one he had, he always had with him, a son beloved.

It's a lovely and tender expression about the one who the owner treasures most. And of course, it's come up twice in the gospel, as I said earlier. And finally, verse 6, he sends the son and he reasons with himself, they will respect my son.

And I think everything in it says, no, no, no, don't do it. This is absolutely madness. Your son is much more precious to you than a thousand vineyards. The character of the tenants has shown no sign other than vicious violence, hostile brutality.

Please don't send him. But as a last resort, he does. Because in his heart, he hopes with himself, the tenants couldn't possibly do this to my son.

[16:18] My son is the only one who has a legal right to the vineyard. I made it for him in the first place. They must treat him with my authority. And in an act of impossible love, he sends his only beloved son.

Then in verse 7, we hear the tenants plan plotting with each other. They recognize the son for who he is, all right. They recognize him instantly. He's the heir. And because they call him the heir, they recognize that they have no right to this property and what they have been doing is completely wrong.

And that they now owe a massive debt that they cannot repay. And in some form of ludicrous calculation, they say, well, if we kill him, we'll get the whole shebang for ourselves without any reason to think that.

Because they mistake the kindness of the landlord for weakness. They misunderstand the grace of the landlord for his unwillingness to act in judgment.

So they take the son, they murder the beloved son, and they toss his body out of the vineyard like a lump of sewage. Because they don't want the evidence contaminating their vineyard.

[17:29] And Jesus turns to the temple authorities in verse 9 and he says, what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come. He will destroy those tenants.

And he will give the vineyard to others. See what he's doing? He's saying, put yourself in the place of God. Stand in the shoes of God for just a moment. He has done more than could possibly be asked of him.

And he will now take the vineyard away from you and give it to others. And while the clergy are reeling, Jesus shifts his metaphor from viticulture to building.

And he says, have you not read the Old Testament? There they are standing in this massive building site. Massive and completely futile. God is not going to come back to it.

And he quotes the Old Testament. He says, the very stone that you builders rejected, God will raise up and make the cornerstone. And you can build all the temples and all the castles you like.

[18:31] God is building one thing and one thing alone. And it is on me. It is around me. He's not building a building of bricks and stones. But a building of people who believe in me as the beloved son.

You ask me where my authority comes from, Jesus is saying, it comes from God. And you will toss me away and you will kill me. But God will work a stunning reversal.

He will raise me from the dead and he will put me in the prime place. And he will continue to build the vineyard around me because he created the vineyard for me. Because the most important thing to the Father is not the vineyard.

And it's me. Now, there it is. Small parable. And it has massive implications. And I just have time to point out three for your own meditation.

I want us to think for just a moment about being terrible tenants. Because if what Jesus is saying is true, then the fundamental human reality is that we are God's tenants.

[19 : 41] We own nothing. Everything we have, everything we are, is God's. We didn't make it. It's not really ours.

And before God, we are entitled to nothing, but have been entrusted with everything. Sometimes when we take the offertory collection, we pray the prayer which comes from the Old Testament, all in heaven and earth is thine.

All things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee. That is quite literally true. I own nothing. You own nothing. You and I, we are God's tenants.

On Friday, Bron and I signed our first ever British Columbia residential tenancy agreement. And we haven't met the owner.

We deal with the agent. And the agent had to show us her contract to demonstrate that she could act as a representative for the owner. And any dealings we have with the owner is through this agent.

[20 : 45] We have to go through her. And you'll be most pleased to find out that when she discovered I was a church minister, she was pleased. Which is not the reaction I usually get.

The really strange thing about us as tenants is that when it comes to God, we really dislike the fact that God has a rightful claim on us. And we spend our lives trying to make the vineyard more comfortable, more happy and livable without him.

And we enjoy the fruit he provides and the wine presses he provides and the towers he builds. We live very well off his generosity, but we don't like being reminded of his total claim on us that God owns our families and our finances and our future.

I think that's why so many people are not Christian. We want to enjoy what God has given us, but refuse to recognise his complete claim on us and that we're massively in debt to him.

And he sends us his messengers, the prophets and Jesus, and we ignore them, or worse, and we invest our lives in building the towers in the vineyard, finding the nicest spot in the vineyard for ourselves and for our children.

[22 : 01] We are tenants. That's the first point. And we owe him everything. Secondly, the loving landlord. I think this is where the parable is so powerful because we enter into the heart of God here.

I think it's odd. It's quite shocking that this landlord would continue to want a relationship with these wretched tenants. He just keeps sending his messengers to them despite their flagrant disregard for his ownership.

He treats them. He does not treat them as they deserve. He treats them as they do not deserve, which for the owner is incredibly personally expensive and costly.

I think his love and his kindness as it's presented by Jesus here is outrageous. And this week I have been reading the British Columbia Residential Tenancy Act.

Makes great reading. And as tenants we have all sorts of rights. Do you know what? The owner does as well. We can do nothing to, quote, jeopardise the lawful right or interest of the landlord.

[23 : 13] And if our rent is late, quote, the landlord may issue a notice to end tenancy which takes effect in 10 days. And I've read lots of websites on this.

And the main advice to landlords is be strict and carry a big stick. I think God's treatment of us is extraordinary.

I mean, just think back this week over how patient he has been with you. He owes you nothing. You owe him absolutely everything. But he continues to be kind to you.

And he continues to lay his claim before you. And I find even after you've been a Christian for 10, 20 or 50 years, we resist him and we act as though we pretend to ourselves that I own myself and that I own everything around me.

But still how he pours out his love and compassion, his kindness and his patience are meant to lead us to repentance. And so I need to warn us all this morning.

[24 : 10] It would be fatal to continue to live as these tenants do. It would be fatal to mistake his patience for weakness or his grace for his unwillingness to act.

For in the end, God will judge all those who reject him and continue to refuse his love. It's very interesting. In the parable, God doesn't judge the vineyard.

He judges the tenants. Because the vineyard continues. It still belongs to him. He will bring paradise to his people. And in the end, his son will inherit everything.

Terrible tenants, loving landlord, and finally, a surprising son. And I think this is the most shocking part of the parable.

It's at that point where the father, the landlord, decides to send his son, his only son, his only beloved son. Ever thought about what a painful thing that was for God?

[25 : 13] This is the measure of God's love. He's willing to take what is infinitely most precious to him and give him to us, knowing he'd be rejected and murdered, so that we might come back into the vineyard, into the kingdom.

This is Jesus' answer toward the temple leadership. These are the very men who hate him, who are plotting to kill him. And he opens his hand to them and he reveals himself to them. He says, I am the son, the only son, the only beloved son.

God is making the vineyard for me. And everyone who wishes to deal with God from now on must deal with God through me. If you want to approach God, you approach me. If you want to worship God, you worship me.

And here we are. This is Easter week, which is the annual reminder of the measure of God's love for us. Jesus tells this parable just days before the crucifixion.

And the shadow of the cross shines back and the light of God's patience and love and goodness also shines back. And I invite you this week to be really honest. We have been nightmare tenants for God.

[26 : 27] Our most loving landlord. Our debt to him is beyond massive. It's beyond our ability to pay. And as we move through this week and Jesus is betrayed and rejected and tortured and executed, we need to remember it is for us.

Because the Son of God came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life to repay our debt. And he dies there for you and he dies there for me. And in a way, he's thrown out of the vineyard so that we might enter in.

And of course, God is not finished. The stone the builders reject. God raises the stone up. He lifts it up, brings Jesus back from the dead and puts him in the place of all authority and power in charge of the vineyard and makes him the cornerstone.

So here are three things we must do this week. If you're a terrible tenant and you've treated God as irrelevant, have the truth and humility to recognize it and go to him and say, sorry, ask him to forgive you.

And since God's love is steadfast and eternal and unimaginably good, we've got very good reason to know that he will welcome us. He will delight in your repentance.

[27 : 44] And thirdly, since God's son is so surprising, this week as we come to him, as we watch him as the Lord of the vineyard and we enter into what he is doing, pray for yourself and pray for others that we might see this as marvelous in our eyes because it's nothing short of marvelous.

Thank you.