

# The Parable of the Tenants

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[ 0 : 00 ] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

All the reality hangs on the discussion we're about to see unfold between Jesus and these religious leaders. How does Jesus answer the question, who do you think you are?

So let's lean in and listen to the conversation unfold in Mark 11, 27. 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 me?

[ 1 : 14 ] And shall we say from man? They were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. 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. Chapter 12, verse 1. 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 wine press, and built a tower, and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.

And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again, he sent 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, he had still one other, a beloved son.

[ 2 : 22 ] 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? He will come, and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others.

Have you not read the scripture? The stones that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

And they were seeking to arrest him, but feared the people, for they perceived that he told the parable against them. So they left him, and went away.

Who do you think you are? The answer to this question is not only vital to understanding our text, but life itself.

[ 3 : 32 ] Perhaps there's really no greater question for us in our day as we try to figure out what voices do we listen to, and which ones do we ignore? Does anyone have a claim on your life?

Does anyone have authority over you? Who is in charge here, and why? This confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders lays the answers all out on the table.

So the way we're going to look at the text this morning will be something kind of like an orchestra concert. The piece in front of us centers around the question, who do you think you are? But we'll look at this question in three movements.

The first, the authority of Jesus is questioned. Chapter 11, 27 through 33. Then the authority of the religious leaders is questioned. The parable of 12, 1 through 12.

And then the authority of our lives is questioned. Movement one, the authority of Jesus is questioned. Verse 27 says, they came again to Jerusalem.

[ 4 : 38 ] So what's already happened so far? They came again. Well, this is Jesus' third day in Jerusalem. That's Tuesday of Holy Week. And if you scan up to the beginning of chapter 11, you'll see Jesus' triumphal entry on day number one.

He rides in on that donkey, and the people cry out, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! And it's in fulfillment of their expectation that he's the Messiah.

Only he doesn't go to overthrow the throne in Jerusalem and bring the smack down on Rome. No, that's not what he does. Instead, he goes and he has a look around the temple and calls it a night. Day number two.

He goes back to the temple, and he demonstrates his anger against the temple and what it's become. He flips the money changers' tables over. He purges the area from becoming a flea market.

And he teaches those who are standing around him by saying, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you've made it a den of robbers. Now we're at the start of day number three.

[ 5 : 43 ] Jesus and his disciples are going back to the same temple. Now can you imagine the tension in the atmosphere whenever these boys come rolling into the temple again?

It'd be like if you were shopping at Walmart, and you see someone running down the aisles and just throwing stuff on the ground. What if the same person showed up the next day at Walmart?

After making a massive commotion the day before, people were sure to be whispering to one another and looking around and wondering what the religious leaders are going to do. Well, it's acceptable behavior here.

This was a confrontation just ready to ignite. Who sets the standards in this place? So verse 27 says, As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders, they all come to him.

So these guys, the chief priests, scribes, and elders, these were three types of religious leaders that made up what's called this group of leaders, the Sanhedrin. They were basically this like buffer organization between Rome and the Jewish nation.

[ 6 : 49 ] They have power and religious and to some degree, even political matters. So these were basically the custodians of the temple and trusted with power to manage the affairs of the temple.

So what do these guys do whenever they get in the conversation? They confront Jesus. Verse 28, By what authority are you doing these things?

Or who gave you this authority to do them? And here it is. Right here. Here it is. This is the big question. Who do you think you are? That's it. So undoubtedly, these religious leaders had the table flipping episode in the forefront of their minds, but this wasn't the only incident.

It wasn't a one-time thing at Walmart with a crazy guy. No, it wasn't just a random act that could be excused. This was just the most recent installment in a series of calculated actions that all pointed to Jesus' claim to have authority.

Already up to this point, Jesus had presumed to forgive sins. He accepted sinners and the unclean. He called tax collectors into fellowship.

[ 7 : 59 ] He redefined the Sabbath. He challenged the oral traditions and the law. He cleared the temple and he challenged the institution. All of these things escalate up to this present moment.

He's face-to-face with these religious leaders and they demand to know, who do you think you are? Not only that, they want to know, who gave you authority to do this?

This question shows that no one has authority on his own to do what Jesus has done. In their eyes, this authority had to be given and it could only come from God himself.

So Jesus is being placed in the crosshairs here. It would be blasphemy for a man to claim the authority of God unless, of course, he's something more.

So how does Jesus answer? He doesn't turn and run out the door. Instead, he does something I think is kind of weird. Look at what he does.

[ 9 : 06 ] He returns their question with another question in verse 30. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.

So what's he doing here? Is this some weird diversionary tactic that he's saying squirrel and hoping the dog will look? Is that what he's doing here? Was he just throwing some oddball question out to try to distract them a little bit and buy some time?

What does John's baptism have to do with Jesus's authority? Jesus is pushing these leaders to wrestle with a hotly disputed issue at this point.

Who was John? Was he just this crazy dude in the wilderness dunking people, these ignorant fools, out in a river? Is that who John was? Or was he fulfilling prophecy as the divinely appointed forerunner to the Messiah?

Well, Mark, he doesn't hold back what he thinks, his interpretation of the significance of John the Baptist in his ministry. By the second verse in the Gospel of Mark, he's connecting John the Baptist with Isaiah's prophecy, his prediction.

[10:14] It says this, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was preparing the way, the people for the Messiah.

And if you're looking at the beginning of Mark, just a few short verses later in that chapter one, Jesus connects himself with John by being publicly baptized. Look at Mark 1, 10 through 11.

It says this, and when he came up, Jesus came up out of the water immediately. He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, you are my beloved son.

With you, I am well pleased. So John's baptism of Jesus was the launching point for all the works he would do to reveal his identity.

[11:22] So when Jesus asked the leaders this question, he completely bypasses all the rabbinic schools, the temple traditions, the Roman authorities. Instead, he takes it to a whole nother level.

He holds the baptism of John up in front of their faces and essentially asks, from God or from man? Ultimately, a decision about John is a decision about Jesus.

If John was a crazy man eating grasshoppers and leading a cult, then Jesus' authority is just as crazy. But, if John was the God-ordained forerunner to the Messiah, well then, in the words of Ricky Ricardo, these religious leaders would have some explaining to do.

Right? So what do they do? Verse 31, they get in the huddle and they go over their options here.

Okay? If they say from heaven, they'll be cornered and then they'll have to give an answer for why they did not believe.

But, the alternative would be to say that it was for man. And if they go this route, they discredit themselves in the eyes of the people who could turn against them in anger. So in both cases, they were motivated by the fear of people.

[12:38] So what's their answer? Verse 33, we do not know. What a tragic response.

As commentator James Edwards put it, they certainly have some suspicions about who Jesus is and they might learn more if they enter into honest dialogue with him.

In reality, they are unwilling to know. Those who cannot be honest with themselves cannot be honest about Jesus. Maybe you're here this morning and you've had some suspicions about who Jesus is, but you've maintained a comfortable distance from him for fear of how the truth might change your life and your plans.

let me plead with you. Don't go the way of these religious leaders. Don't let fear keep you from leaning into truth this morning.

Just who does Jesus think he is? Well, the religious leaders have temporarily been stunned into silence, but now Jesus is going to do the talking.

[13:58] this time he uses a parable to reframe their understanding of life and to bring clarity to who they are in the grand story.

So in a sense, the parable is intended to put the pressure on the religious leaders to answer the question themselves, who do you think you are? Movement number two, the authority of the religious leaders is questioned.

The use of a parable here in chapter 12 is significant because of the time, the place, and the audience. Jesus is in Jerusalem. Before entering the temple, Jesus had generally avoided confrontation, kind of stayed out in the rural areas, but now he's initiating confrontation.

He looks these leaders directly in the eye and he speaks to them. Jesus used a familiar situation to tell this story. The practice of absentee landlords entrusting their property to tenant farmers who take care of it, that was widely practiced during this time, so it made sense.

Not only was that situation familiar, Jesus also laced the story with familiar images. These religious leaders, they would have been deeply aware of the stories connected with images such as the vineyard owner, the vineyard, the hedge, and the tower.

[ 15 : 24 ] It'd be kind of like Romeo and Juliet for us. So culturally, we've all had some kind of exposure to that story and we can pull up a basic storyline just by hearing those words.

In a similar way, when these guys heard Jesus start setting up this story, this parable, the first thing they would have thought was Isaiah's famous metaphor of the vineyard of Yahweh in Isaiah 5. That's what it would have triggered. So look with me at how many similarities there are in the characters and the images from Isaiah. This is Isaiah 5, verse 2, verses. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

My beloved, God, had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones. He planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it.

And he hewed out a wine vat, a wine press in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. So in the Isaiah passage that we just saw, God was the vineyard owner and Israel was the vineyard.

[ 16 : 31 ] In that story, the vineyard was not producing appropriate fruit, so God was going to bring judgment against Israel. That's what's happening there. So these religious leaders listening to the parable would have connected the characters and the images to this familiar storyline.

However, Jesus adapts the story. Notice that in Jesus' parable, the hedge, the wine vat, the tower, they basically have no significance in the development of the parable.

If you look through the rest of the parable, they don't come up again. They have no point at all for the rest of the story. So why does Jesus bring that up? Well, it grabs the attention of his listeners in a whole new way.

It's a provocative recasting of a familiar story. So I remember when I was in high school, we read through, probably like many of you, Romeo and Juliet.

We read it in class and then a little bit later, we watched the 1996 version with Leo DiCaprio. How many of you have seen that? Yeah, okay. So you know what I'm talking about. They kept all their original language from the play, but they recast the storyline in a contemporary setting.

[ 17 : 41 ] And it was weird. And captivating in a whole new way because of my familiarity with the storyline. Well, even more recently, the remake of The West Side Story just came out, which is also a recasting of Romeo and Juliet.

I thought you didn't know that. Romeo and Juliet is a familiar storyline, but it's recasting as The West Side Story allowed the story to speak into current issues of race and class.

So you see, the recasting is meant to be provocative. It pushes the listener to a whole new level to search for points of contrast with the original.

So as you're watching those types of things, it makes you say things like, huh, that's kind of different from the original, right? It activates the search for meaning and a desire to understand who's who here.

Well, Jesus is doing something similar here. Like Isaiah, the parable features a vineyard owner who cares for and plants a vineyard. For sure, Jesus is connecting this parable to the original here with God being the vineyard owner and God's people being the vineyard.

[ 18 : 54 ] He wants to lock their attention on that. That's the same, but then he goes on into a recasting of the story as the vineyard is entrusted to tenant farmers.

In time, the owner sends messengers and one after the other, they're met with violence by the tenants. And ultimately, the vineyard owner sends his beloved son and the tenants kill him in an effort to steal his inheritance.

The story concludes with two rhetorical questions meant to drive home the point to the listener. So, even though the religious leaders' mouths are still, their minds are scrambling to make sense of Jesus' story.

They know the original, but what's different here? Who's who in this recasting? Who do they think they are? So, even though, so, in Jesus' parable, the vineyard owner does not judge the vineyard. This is different. He doesn't judge them, but he judges the tenant farmers, those entrusted with the vineyard. So, God's judgment isn't coming against God's people just generally.

[ 20 : 05 ] This wasn't about Rome having dominion over Israel. No, the judgment was coming against those entrusted to care for God's people.

And what's more, the heroic party of the story was not the tenant farmers, but the vineyard owner himself. So, this could not be interpreted as the tenant farmers kind of banding together and rising up and sticking it to the man.

No, in other words, this parable could not support the popular idea that the people of Israel should rise up against their cultural oppressors, their political oppressors. No.

The tenant farmers are the ones who are the defiant rebels in this parable against the rightful owner. Y'all tracking? Y'all tracking? So, the religious leaders listening are putting the pieces together.

who's who in the parable? The vineyard owner is God. The vineyard was the people of God.

[ 21 : 07 ] The messengers sent by the vineyard owner were the prophets sent as representatives of God. The son was Jesus himself. And the tenant farmers, the ones causing all the trouble, the ones who ignored and mistreated the prophets and the ones who were planning to do away with the son and the religious, they were the religious leaders themselves.

So, in the parable, Jesus tells the entire storyline is reshaped to give these religious leaders an accurate understanding of life itself.

They want to know who Jesus thinks he is. They want to know what right he has to do what he's done. They want to know who's in charge and why. Well, Jesus paints the picture vividly in this parable.

In the story, God is depicted as the creator and the sustainer. He created a people for himself. Not only did God create them, he lovingly cared for them, protected them, and cultivated them.

And then he entrusted his people to spiritual leaders. And these leaders were expected to lead as God himself to care for them, protect them, and cultivate them so that they would bear fruit, like Walt talked about last week.

[ 22 : 25 ] Over the course of history, God sent his prophets to address his people, but it was the very ones who had been entrusted to care for his people who turned on the prophets and exploited the people for their own selfish gain.

Elijah, the prophet, was driven into the wilderness by the monarchy, the leaders. Isaiah, according to his tradition, was sawn in two. Zechariah was stoned to death near the altar.

After sending all these prophets, God sent his own son. In the parable, it is massively important to understand the significance of the owner sending his son.

So how was the son different from the messengers who came before him? Well, for one, there were many messengers, but there was only one son. Also, the messengers, they were all forerunners, but the son is the last and final word of the father.

The messengers were all hired hands, but the son is the heir. The son was the only other person who possessed legal claim over the vineyard.

[ 23 : 32 ] This is why the owner says, they will respect my son. Commentator James Edwards helpfully summarized the significance of the son in this way when he says, the son goes as the father's representative with the father's authority to the father's property to claim the father's due.

And this very son is the one who the tenants are guilty of murdering. Even though this is a parable, Jesus is staring into the eyes of the religious leaders who have heard Jesus' claims to be the son of God.

In the first verse of Mark's gospel, it says this, the very first verse, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the son of God. He is the son in the parable and he is again predicting that he will be killed but this time he's speaking to the very ones who will carry out the storyline of the parable.

Jesus has already demonstrated his opposition to the temple but now he's bringing the heat on to these spiritual leaders. They want to know who he thinks he is? He's the son who speaks and acts with the authority of the God, the father who sent him.

So now the real question is who do the religious leaders think they are? They have delegated authority. They've abused authority in order to get their own selfish desires.

[ 24 : 56 ] They've been living in an absurd delusion thinking that what is not theirs could be theirs if only they destroyed the air. So, Jesus concludes with two rhetorical questions intended to amplify the point of the parable and the trajectory of life itself.

The first question he asks is what will the owner do? He will come. He will come and execute justice.

The evil tenants will be obliterated but the vineyard will remain. Although the true heir is rejected and killed, the inheritance still belongs to him and his community. He will give the vineyard to others which by the time of Mark's readers we know to be the Gentiles. In other words, the undercover boss will be revealed, bad managers will be fired, and new management will be established.

Does that make sense? The final question Jesus asks is have you not read this scripture? I mean, this question would have been icing on the cake.

[ 26 : 12 ] Or maybe for these religious leaders it's more like salt in the wound. These guys, their whole lives revolved around reading and supposedly stewarding the scriptures.

So this question would have been like Jesus saying you read your Bible all day, every day and you miss this? Then he quotes from the well-known Psalm 118. This is the third time that we've heard a reference to Psalm 118.

It says this, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.

The reference is to one of the building stones gathered for Solomon's temple that was rejected in the construction of the temple. But then it became the main stone at the entrance.

So the cornerstone was what held. It literally held all the pieces together. It functioned as the entry point to the sanctuary where man could commune with God.

[ 27 : 16 ] So at the tail end of this parable Jesus is linking the rejected son to the rejected cornerstone. The son sent by the father was rejected by the tenants but the father is coming to execute justice.

The stone was rejected by the builders but the Lord has made it the cornerstone. Oh, it's so marvelous. Can you see it? Who does Jesus think he is?

He is the son of God sent with the authority of God to reclaim the people of God. He is the rejected stone who the Lord has made the cornerstone.

Jesus is claiming to be the cornerstone and the eternal spiritual temple of God. He will go from rejection to highest exaltation and those who oppose him will only find themselves opposing God himself.

It's likely that Peter was standing with Jesus during this whole confrontation so it's no surprise that later Peter finds himself in a similar conflict with religious leaders after healing a crippled man in the name of Jesus.

[ 28 : 21 ] Jesus. These religious leaders corner Peter and essentially ask him the question who do you think you are? Listen to how Peter responds.

Acts 4 says and then Peter filled with the Holy Spirit said to them rulers of the people and elders religious leaders if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man by what means this man has been healed let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified whom God raised from the dead by him this man is standing before you well 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.

What? Here the resurrected Jesus is clearly connected to the cornerstone and the religious leaders are clearly connected to the builders who rejected him well most of Jesus' parables were designed to present a truth about the kingdom in a subtle way so that those who were open would understand and those who were hard hearted would not but this parable however is the exception because we find out in verse 12 that the religious leaders clearly perceived the point of this parable and in a sad overflow of irony the telling of the parable provokes the fulfilling of the parable they fear the people instead of God and continue to look for a way to send the son to his death well even though this parable was spoken primarily to leaders it has relevance to all of us as well you see this this book that you're looking at here is not a history book filled with trivia and it is not a book of fairy tales with a moral at the end this is the authoritative story that shows us how we can be made right with God through Jesus

Christ well we've asked a number of questions about this text but now the text is going to extend the question to us who do you think you are and we must pause and take a look at our own lives movement three the authority of our lives is questioned the supreme tragedy of the story is that the religious leaders refuse to recognize and submit to God's authority over their lives we must remember that this was not only their problem but it's our problem as well I remember when I was in

high school I had recently moved to Tennessee and I was really struggling with the transition and that after about a two year downward spiral I found myself wrestling with questions about why am I even alive and if I were to try to summarize to you the state of my soul I'd probably say three words jaded arrogant and confused

I grew up in church I thought that I knew all of the answers and I thought I had given God a try and he just felt like an absentee landlord to me I was jaded and the more I thought I knew about God the more arrogant I became I didn't quite know what should take its place but I felt like more and more there was no place in my life for a God like that I didn't realize it at the time but I was emptying out and just being refilled with confusion once God's authority over my life was extracted and wasn't even on the table anymore I was just filling up with whatever thing came along one of my favorite songs at the time was a song called make yourself and the chorus sums up where I was at the time and it says you should only make amends with you if only for better health but if you really want to live why not try and make yourself see I was under the impression that to be truly free

[ 33 : 05 ] I needed to be my own authority I needed to just do me but the more that I ran down that road the more isolated confused and broken not only I became but everyone that came into contact with me became I was trying to live for myself I wanted to take what belonged to God and I wanted to be God let me plead with you this morning to see what I could not see as a high schooler and what the religious leaders refused to see God is the main character creator he is the creator and sustainer of all things and you are his creation he made you he has authority over you we're not created to live independently from God as some kind of sub-God in our own little self-made worlds no the parable it rightly reorients us to see that God's activity is the centerpiece of all of history he has a good design for the world and he has a good purpose for you but it can only only be rightly understood with

God at the center of this story so for my non-Christian friends that are here this morning maybe you believe the lie that God is far away or that he's uncaring or that life is better off without him interfering this text provides both a reminder of God's love and a warning of God's judgment for you he is not far away your creator has been patient with you don't confuse his patience for his absence the only reason you're still alive is because of God's mercy on you the breath that you just drew into your lungs that was created by God is another gift from him that he created in order to keep you alive for another moment another opportunity to turn from yourself and to trust in the one who made you so I invite you this morning to receive him as king don't reject him like the tenants did I must warn you I can't soften this I must warn you that if you do you will be met with the just wrath of God against sin while he is extending mercy confess your rebellion against him and place your trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sin join his purpose for your life oh and for the Christians I believe that this text reveals and reminds us of the love of God the father and the love of God the son for you look at verse six he had still one other a beloved son finally he sent him what kind of God is this did he not know what was happening to all of his other messengers did he not understand what he was doing is he aloof did the son not know what he was getting himself into when he came was this a surprise to the father and the son no

Jesus did not come into this world ignorant of the cost he knew he was going to the cross Jesus lived in submission to the authority of the father and he came to this world it's crazy it sounds crazy it's like one one guy called it the idiocy of grace what you're seeing right here he told this parable knowing it would provoke his death the father sent his beloved son so that he could be rejected so that he could go to the cross and take on the wrath of God against your sin he sent his beloved son to die in the place of sinners like you and me so that we could be brought back into relationship with God and with others it is the same theme of sacrificial love that animates this whole story for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that we we who believe it's not just out there somewhere abstractly we who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life so who do we think we are what is the authority of our lives this text calls us to see the love of the father and to submit our lives to the son the stone that was rejected has become our cornerstone our salvation has come and it is marvelous in our eyes praise God how marvelous it is praise God he did this for you let's pray Lord Jesus we thank you that you came knowing full and well exactly what was going to happen we sit here amazed at your grace at your mercy at your patience with us so Lord help us to marvel appropriately this is not a thing that we have to get up and try to do more and work harder and claw our way back to God and try to make you happy no you came for us you sent the son so Lord we are grateful people this morning and we just want to say how marvelous we love you in Jesus name

amen you've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity  
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