

Mark 12:1-17
February 11, 2024

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: Can you think of a time that you experienced rejection? Perhaps a memory from your childhood comes to mind. Or perhaps you're recalling a relationship in your past where you experienced rejection. Or maybe the rejection was more passive, like being overlooked in a situation when you wanted to be acknowledged. As that comes to mind...what does rejection feel like? [Let people engage]

Transition: Rejection may be one of the most painful things we have to face in life. We all have been rejected. We all have experienced the pain and embarrassment and humiliation of being cast aside, turned down, or overlooked. It brings us to tears, leaves us with that empty feeling in our gut, and sends our minds into a tailspin of doubt, despair, and discouragement. The pain of rejection alerts us to a truth that's hard-wired into us, which is that we were created to be accepted by God and others. *We all need and want to be accepted.*

The passage of Scripture we're going to study this morning says that Jesus also experienced rejection, but God is going to use it to accomplish His purposes. Let's read the text.

BOOK:

The Parable of the Tenants

12 He then began to speak to them in parables: "A man (God, the owner) planted a vineyard (Israel). He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. ² At harvest time he sent a servant (prophets) to the tenants (the religious authorities from the Sanhedrin) to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

⁶ "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved (Jesus). He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

⁷ "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

⁹ "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Haven't you read this scripture:

" 'The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone (Or *cornerstone*);

¹¹ the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes' (Psalm 118:22, 23)?"

¹² Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

Paying Taxes to Caesar

¹³ Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴ They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

The Jewish leadership recognized Jesus’ qualifications as a Teacher/Judge of Israel. They saw Him as one who had integrity, who was not swayed by people (11:32; 12:12), and who was truly teaching God’s way. By using Roman coinage, Jesus’ adversaries witnessed their dependence on that government. Christians should fulfill legitimate responsibilities to their government (Rom. 13:6–7). We bear God’s image (Gen. 1:27) and must fulfill our responsibilities to God.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 151-152). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

A question of authority (12:1–12:12). Before they (Pharisees and teachers of the law) had opportunity to escape, He told them a parable that revealed *where their sins were leading them*. They had already permitted John the Baptist to be killed, but soon they would ask for the crucifixion of God's Son!

The vineyard was a familiar image of Israel (Ps. 80:8–16; Isa. 5:1–7). According to Leviticus 19:23–25, a farmer would not use the fruit until the fifth year, though we are not sure the Jews were obeying this regulation at that time. In order to retain his legal rights to the property, the owner had to receive produce from the tenants, even if it was only some of the vegetables that grew between the rows of trees or vines. This explains why the tenants refused to give him anything: they wanted to claim the vineyard for themselves. It also explains why the owner continued to send agents to them; it was purely a question of authority and ownership.

If Mark 12:2–5 covers the three years when the fruit was not used, then it was in the fourth year that the beloved Son was sent. *This is the year when the fruit was devoted to the Lord* (Lev. 19:24), and it makes the sending of the Son even more meaningful. If the tenants could do away with the heir, they would have a clear claim to the property; so they cast him out (see Heb. 13:12–13) and killed him. They wanted to preserve their own position and were willing even to kill to accomplish their evil purpose (John 11:47–53).

Jesus then asked, “What shall, therefore, the lord of the vineyard do?” The leaders answered the question first and thereby condemned themselves (Matt. 21:41), and then Jesus repeated their answer as a solemn verdict from the Judge. But before they could appeal the case, He quoted what they knew was a messianic prophecy, Psalm 118:22–23. We met this same psalm at His triumphal entry (Mark 11:9–10). “The Stone” was a well-known symbol for the Messiah (Ex. 17:6; Dan. 2:34; Zech. 4:7; Rom. 9:32–33; 1 Cor. 10:4; and 1 Peter 2:6–8). The Servant-Judge announced a double verdict: they had not only rejected the Son, but they had also refused the Stone! There could be only one consequence—judgment (Matt. 22:1–14).

A question of responsibility (vv. 13–17). A common threat forced two enemies to unite, the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Herodians supported the family of Herod as well as the Romans who gave them the authority to rule. The Pharisees, however, considered the Herod clan to be the evil usurpers of the throne of David; for, after all, Herod was an Edomite and not a Jew. The Pharisees also opposed the poll tax that the Romans had inflicted on Judea, and they resented the very presence of Rome in their land.

Their temporary alliance was a subtle trap, for no matter how Jesus replied to their question, He was in trouble with either Rome or Herod! But Jesus moved the discussion from politics to principle and caught the hypocrites in their own trap. We might state our Lord's reply something like this:

“Caesar's image is on his coins, so they must be minted by his authority. The fact that you possess these coins and use them indicates that you think they are worth something. Therefore, you are already accepting Caesar's authority, or you would not use his money! But don't forget that you were created in the image of God and therefore must live under God's authority as well.”

I once carried on a brief correspondence with a man who objected to my interpretation of Romans 13. He said that all government was of the devil and that Christians must not bow to the

authority of “the powers that be.” I pointed out to him that even his use of the United States mail service was an acceptance of governmental authority. The money he spent buying the paper and stamps also came from the “powers that be.” For that matter, the very freedom he had to express himself was a right guaranteed by—the government!

The word translated “render” in Mark 12:17 means “to pay a debt, to pay back.” Jesus looked on taxes as the citizens’ debt to the government in return for the services performed. Today those services would include, among other things, fire and police protection, national defense, the salaries of the officials who manage the affairs of state, special programs for the poor and underprivileged, etc. The individual Christian citizen might not agree with the way all of his tax money is used, and he can express himself with his voice and his vote, but he must accept the fact that God has established human government for our good (Rom. 13; 1 Tim. 2:1–6; 1 Peter 2:13–17). Even if we cannot respect the people in office, we must respect the office.

Grassmick, J. D. (1985). *Mark*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 160-162) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

b. Jesus’ Parable of the Vineyard Owner’s Son (12:1–12) (Matt. 21:33–46; Luke 20:9–19)

This parable reflects the social situation of first-century Palestine, especially Galilee. Wealthy foreign landlords owned large land estates which they leased to tenant farmers. The tenants agreed to cultivate the land and care for the vineyards when the landlords were away. A contract between them designated that a portion of the crop was to be paid as rent. At harvesttime the owners sent agents to collect the rent. Inevitably tension arose between the absentee owners and the tenants.

12:1a. This brief summary statement (cf. introduction to 2:1–2) introduces the single parable (cf. introduction to 4:1–2) Mark recorded here. Jesus addressed it **to them**, the Sanhedrin interrogators who were plotting against Him (cf. 11:27; 12:12). It exposed their hostile intentions and warned them of the consequences.

12:1b. The details of the vineyard’s construction are derived from Isaiah 5:1–2 (part of a prophecy of God’s judgment on Israel), as the vineyard is a familiar symbol for the nation of Israel (cf. Ps. 80:8–19).

A man, a landlord (cf. Mark 12:9), **planted a vineyard**, analogous to God’s relationship to Israel. The **wall** for protection, **a pit** beneath **the winepress** to gather the juice of the pressed grapes, and **a watchtower** for shelter, storage, and security, show the owner’s desire to make this a choice vineyard. **Then he** leased it **to tenant farmers**, vinegrowers, representing Israel’s religious leaders, **and went away on a journey** probably to live abroad. He was an absentee owner.

12:2–5. The owner sent three servants—agents representing God’s servants (the prophets) to Israel—to **the** tenant farmers to receive a share **of the fruit** as rent **at harvesttime** (lit., “at the right time,” i.e., the vintage season of the fifth year; cf. Lev. 19:23–25). **But** the tenant farmers behaved violently. **They seized** the first **servant ... beat him, and sent him away empty-handed**. **They** seriously wounded the second **servant** and insulted him. **They killed** the third **servant**.

The long-suffering owner also **sent many others, some of** whom were beaten and **others ... killed**. Time and again God had sent prophets to Israel to gather fruits of repentance and

righteousness (cf. Luke 3:8) but His prophets were abused, wounded, and killed (cf. Jer. 7:25–26; 25:4–7; Matt. 23:33–39).

12:6–8. The owner still **had one messenger to send, a son, whom he loved** (lit., “a beloved son”—a designation representing God’s Son, Jesus; cf. 1:11; 9:7). **Last of all**, a phrase unique to Mark, **he sent his son**, expecting the tenant farmers to give *him* the honor denied his servants.

The son’s arrival may have caused **the tenants** to assume that the owner had died and **this son** was his only **heir**. In Palestine at the time, a piece of land could be possessed lawfully by whoever claimed it first if it was “ownerless property,” unclaimed by an heir within a certain time period (cf. Mishnah *Baba Bathra* 3. 3). The tenant farmers assumed that if they killed the son they could acquire the vineyard.

So they conspired together and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. Some say this predicts what would happen to Jesus: He would be crucified outside of Jerusalem, expelled from Israel in a climactic expression of the leaders’ rejection of Him. But this presses the parable’s details too far here. It is better to see the throwing of the son’s dead body over the wall without burial as a climax to their wicked indignities. Mark’s emphasis of their rejection and murder of the son took place *within* the vineyard, that is, within Israel.

12:9. Jesus’ rhetorical question invited His audience to share in deciding what action **the owner** should take. He affirmed his listeners’ answer (cf. Matt. 21:41) by alluding to Isaiah 5:1–7 again. This was a strong appeal for those plotting His death to consider the serious consequences of their actions. He saw Himself as the “only Son” sent by God (John 3:16).

The rejection of the owner’s son was really a rejection of the owner who would **come** with governmental authority **and kill the murderous tenants and give the vineyard to others.** Likewise the Jewish leaders’ rejection of John the Baptist and of Jesus, God’s final Messenger, was a rejection of God Himself. This would inevitably bring His judgment on Israel and would transfer their privileges to others temporarily (cf. Rom. 11:25, 31).

12:10–11. Jesus sharpened the application of the parable to Himself as the Son and extended its teaching by quoting verbatim Psalm 118:22–23, a familiar text recognized as messianic elsewhere (Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:4–8). The figure changed from the son/ tenants of the parable to the stone/ builders of the psalm, making possible a parabolic allusion to Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation. A slain son cannot be revived but a rejected stone can be retrieved and used.

The quotation begins where the parable ended. **The stone** (Jesus, like the son), which **the builders** (the Jewish religious leaders, like the tenant farmers) **rejected has become the capstone** (“cornerstone”). This was considered the most important stone of a building. This dramatic reversal of the builders’ decision and exaltation of the rejected stone was God’s sovereign doing, a remarkable thing. God overrules in amazing ways rebellious human attempts to block His purposes.

12:12. **They**, the Sanhedrin representatives (11:27), were seeking (cf. 11:18) **to arrest Him because they realized Jesus had addressed the parable against them** (“with reference to” or directed “toward” them). **But** fearing **the** excitable Passover **crowd, they left Him alone and departed.**

The fact that Jesus’ adversaries understood this parable is a new development (cf. 4:11–12), suggesting that at Jesus’ initiative the “secret” of His true identity would soon be openly declared (cf. comments on 1:43–45; 14:62).

2. THE QUESTION CONCERNING THE POLL TAX (12:13–17) (Matt. 22:15–22; Luke 20:20–26).

12:13. Despite Jesus' warning to His Sanhedrin adversaries in the preceding parable, **they** continued their campaign against Him by sending **some ... Pharisees** (cf. 2:16) **and Herodians** (cf. 3:6) **to catch Him in His words** (lit., "by means of a word," i.e., an unguarded statement they could use against Him; cf. 10:2). The word translated "catch" (*argeusōsin*, found only here in the NT) was used to describe catching wild animals with a trap. **Later** (NIV), though implied, is not in the Greek text; no time reference is given.

12:14–15a. Addressing Jesus as **Teacher** (cf. 4:38; 9:5), they used carefully chosen remarks designed to hide their true motives and to prevent Jesus from evading their difficult question. They acknowledged He was honest and impartial, courting no one's favor, **because He paid no attention to who they are** (lit., "You do not look at the face of men," a Heb. expression; cf. 1 Sam. 16:7). Then they asked, **Is it right**, legally permitted by God's Law (cf. Deut. 17:14–15), **to pay taxes to Caesar**, the Roman emperor, **or not? Should we pay** (*dōmen*, "Shall we give") **or shouldn't we?**

"Taxes" (*kēnson*) was a Latin loanword meaning "census." It referred to the annual poll tax (head tax) demanded by the Roman emperor from all Jews since A.D. 6, when Judea became a Roman province (Josephus *The Antiquities of the Jews* 5. 1. 21). The money went directly into the emperor's treasury. This tax was unpopular because it typified the Jews' subjugation to Rome (cf. Acts 5:37).

The Pharisees objected to the tax, but expediently justified its payment. They were concerned about the *religious* implications of their question. The Herodians supported foreign rule through the Herods and favored the tax. They were concerned about the *political* implications of their question. Obviously the question was designed to place Jesus in a religious and political dilemma. A yes answer would antagonize the people and discredit Him as God's Spokesman. No messianic claimant could sanction willing submission to pagan rulers. A no answer would invite retaliation from Rome.

12:15b–16. **Jesus** immediately detected **their hypocrisy**, the malicious intent beneath their pretense of an honest inquiry. He exposed it with a rhetorical question about **why** they were **trying to trap** (*peirazete*, "test"; cf. 10:2) Him. Then **He asked** them to **bring Him a denarius** (cf. 6:37) so He might **look at it**, to use it as a visual aid. **The** common Roman denarius, a small silver **coin**, was the only coin acceptable for imperial tax payments.

When Jesus **asked them** to tell Him **whose portrait** and **inscription** were on it, they replied, **Caesar's**. The portrait (*eikōn*, "image") was probably that of Tiberius Caesar (reigned A.D. 14–37; see the list of Roman emperors at Luke 3:1) and the inscription read in Latin: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus" and on the reverse side: "Chief Priest." This inscription originated in the imperial cult of emperor worship and was a claim to divinity, which was particularly repulsive to Jews.

12:17. But to use Caesar's coinage was to acknowledge his authority and the benefits of the civil government it represented and consequently the obligation to pay taxes. So **Jesus** declared, **Give** (*apodote*, "give back"; cf. v. 14) **to Caesar what is Caesar's** (lit., "the things belonging to Caesar"). This tax was a debt they owed to Caesar for use of his money and the other benefits of his rule.

Jesus had made His point but significantly He added, **and give back to God what is God's** (lit., "the things belonging to God"). This could refer to "paying" God the temple tax due Him (cf. Matt. 17:24–27), but Jesus probably meant it as a protest against the emperor's claim to deity. Indeed the emperor must receive his due, but not more than that; he must not receive the divine honor and worship he claimed. Those are due only to God. People are "God's coinage"

because they bear His image (cf. Gen. 1:27) and they owe Him what belongs to Him, their allegiance. This, not the poll tax, was the crucial issue to Jesus. His questioners continued to be greatly **amazed at Him**. This incident was especially relevant to Mark's Roman readers for it indicated that Christianity did not foster disloyalty to the state.

Church, C.L. (1998). *Mark In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (pp. 439-440). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.*

THE VINEYARD? (12:1–17)

The Jewish leadership took the parable of the wicked tenants as a direct attack on them. The parable builds on several common Old Testament images: the vineyard representing God's possession Israel (Isa. 5:1–7); the harvest as judgment time (Jer. 51:33; Hos. 6:11a; Joel 3:13); and the servants as spiritual leaders (Exod. 14:31; Judg. 2:8; 1 Sam. 3:9; 2 Sam. 3:18). Jesus stood in continuity with the ministry of John and the prophets, yet as “beloved Son” He represented more. His special relation to God was deserving of special respect, and through Him God made His ultimate appeal to Israel (see Heb. 1:1–14). This parable—like the passion predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32)—witnesses Jesus' awareness of a special role in God's plan that would end with His death. Mark's Gentile readers likely saw the Gentile mission reflected in the giving of the vineyard to others.

Ironically, the Jewish leadership recognized Jesus' qualifications as a Teacher/Judge of Israel. They saw Him as one who had integrity, who was not swayed by people (11:32; 12:12), and who was truly teaching God's way. By using Roman coinage, Jesus' adversaries witnessed their dependence on that government. Christians should fulfill legitimate responsibilities to their government (Rom. 13:6–7). We bear God's image (Gen. 1:27) and must fulfill our responsibilities to God.

CONTROVERSY STORIES IN MARK

Controversy	Reference in Mark
Over Jesus' right to forgive sins	2:1–12
Over Jesus' fellowship with tax collectors and “sinners”	2:13–17
Over the disciples' freedom from fasting	2:18–22
Over the disciples' picking grain on the Sabbath	2:23–27
Over Jesus' right to do good on the Sabbath	3:1–6
Over the nature of Jesus' family	3:20–21, 31–35
Over the source of Jesus' power to exorcise	3:22–30

Over the disciples' eating with unwashed hands 7:1–5, 14–23

Over the Pharisees' and teachers of the law's
setting aside the commands of God in order to
observe their tradition

Over the legality of divorce and God's intention
for marriage 10:1–12

Over Jesus' authority to cleanse the temple and
John's authority to baptize 11:27–33

Over paying taxes to Caesar and giving God His
due 12:13–17

Over marriage at the resurrection, the power of
God, and the witness of Scripture 12:18–27

Over the most important commandment 12:28–34

Over the nature of the Messiah—son of David
or David's Lord 12:35–37

Leavell, L.P. (1972). Mark. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible Commentary (pp. 627-628). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

Opposed by Leaders (Mark 11:27–12:44)

The passage—In 11:27–33 Jesus both confounded the religious leaders and clarified his authority. As he frequently did, Jesus asked a question in response to a question. He wanted them to state their attitude toward the ministry of John the Baptist. This put them in an indefensible position. If they had stated John's ministry was of God, they would have stood condemned for not listening to and obeying John. Had they denied the divine authority of John, they would have incurred the wrath of the people who universally believed John to be a prophet sent from God. Jesus made no attempt to further identify his authority. Since they would not be honest in regard to John, he felt no need to pursue the matter with them.

The parable found in 12:1–12 appears in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is a direct attack upon the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. The parable applies to the entire nation Israel. God is pictured as the owner and has provided everything necessary for the harvest. The treatment afforded the servants is comparable to the reaction of the Jews toward the prophets and others whom God sent. When the tenants, who were the Jews, killed the son of the owner, they rejected both the heir and the owner. In rejecting Jesus, they rejected God also. This dastardly deed was not done in ignorance, for 12:7 points out their recognition of the heir. According to verse 12 the point of the parable was not lost. They wanted to kill him then, but were more afraid of the crowd than they were of God.

After the Sadducees were soundly rebuked, other groups came to try their hand at intimidating Jesus. The Pharisees and Herodians came next in 12:13–17. After Herod the Great's death, in about 4 B.C., his rule over all Palestine was ended and the province divided. The Herodians wanted a descendent of Herod returned to authority.

The Pharisees, bitter enemies of Jesus, were opposed to all taxation by a foreign nation. They put the question, believing that any answer would condemn Jesus. If he said taxes should be paid, the Jews would despise him for taking the side of the Romans. If he said they should not pay taxes, this would make him guilty of sedition. The Romans would not tolerate that.

With divine insight Jesus answered the question in 12:17. He underscored a principal as operative today as it was then. Christians belong to two kingdoms and owe allegiance to both.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). Mark 12:1-17. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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