

**“When the Cat’s Away...”**  
**The Gospel According to Mark 12:1-12**  
September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018

America was once plagued with pigeons. Billions of pigeons blackened the sky, and blighted the forest. At one time, there were as many as 9 billion pigeons in the US alone, some 40% of all American birds!

By the 1860’s, news of a nesting of pigeons flashed to bounty hunters by telegram. Earning thousands of dollars a week at a penny a bird, pigeon harvesters swarmed to the nesting site. Hunters worked day and night until the woods were stripped clean of pigeons. Feathers were used for mattress stuffing, innards used for medicine, and the meat of the pigeons was eaten.

Moving 50 years ahead in time, to September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914, to the Cincinnati Zoo where Martha, the pigeon is dying. Martha received the best veterinarian care available. She was 29 years old, but couldn’t hang on any longer.

For 15 years, since the turn of the century, there had been a standing offer of \$1,000 to anyone who could provide a mate for Martha. But, no mate could be found. You see, Martha was a Passenger Pigeon, whose numbers were so vast that we could not get rid of them fast enough. But now, there remained a single, solitary bird.

On that first day of September in 194, at 1 PM, Martha died. And, neither she nor her family would pass this way again.

Martha was the end of an era; the last representative of a now extinct species of bird. Similarly, our Lord Jesus Christ, in today’s passage of sacred Scripture, prophesies the end of an era for the Jewish Church that rejected Him as God’s Messiah. The failure of the Old Testament church through the centuries came despite God’s covenant promises to them, possessing the Word of God, and God’s special favor to them.

We come this morning to the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark’s account of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus is in Jerusalem, during the final week of His earthly ministry before He would be arrested, tried, sentenced, and executed. The parable He teaches here is known variously as the “Parable of the Tenants,” the “Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” and the “Parable of the Trustees.”

As we read these divine words, let us consider whether we are aligned with the vinedressers who took care of the vineyard. And if we conclude that we are not (Praise God!), how we should amend our beliefs and lives to better reflect what God expects in sending His Son to collect on our debt.

**The Gospel According to Mark 12:1-12:**

“Then He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around *it*, dug a *place* for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. <sup>2</sup> Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. <sup>3</sup> And they took *him* and beat him and sent *him* away empty-handed. <sup>4</sup> Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded *him* in the head, and sent *him* away shamefully treated. <sup>5</sup> And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. <sup>6</sup> Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ <sup>7</sup> But those vinedressers said among themselves, ‘This is

the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’<sup>8</sup> So they took him and killed *him* and cast *him* out of the vineyard.

<sup>9</sup>“Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others. <sup>10</sup>Have you not even read this Scripture:

‘The stone which the builders rejected  
Has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>11</sup>This was the LORD’s doing,  
And it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

<sup>12</sup>And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.”

Help me finish this saying: “When the cat’s away...the mice will play.” I’m not sure this parable is the basis for that saying, but it could be. The absentee landlord exhibited trust and confidence in the people he left in charge of his vineyard. And, he also displayed remarkable patience with each successive maltreatment of his messengers, ultimately His beloved Son.

Mark is not the only gospel writer to record this parable. We also find this parable covered in Matthew’s gospel account (**Matthew 21:33-46**) and in Luke’s gospel account (**Luke 20:9-19**). Studying their take on this parable is helpful in interpreting what Jesus was teaching.

It’s helpful to remind ourselves **what a parable is**. After all, it’s been several months since we studied the last parable in Mark, back in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter. (*Do you remember what parable that was?* “The Parable of the Soils (Sower)” in **Mark 4:1-20** (back in January!) A parable is a story from a real-life situation from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. “Parables serve as mirrors of our own lives. They show us our own hearts in the light of God’s word.” (Ferguson, 52) Parables typically have one point to make.

And, it’s also helpful to understand to whom Jesus speaks this parable. His audience is mentioned back in chapter 11 (**Mark 11:27**) – “the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.” The leaders of the Jewish church were the recipients of this parable of judgment, and, unless they turn from their sinful ways and embrace Jesus as Master and Lord, they would perish in their sins.

Jesus spins a parable about a landowner who plants a vineyard. The landowner placed a hedge around the vineyard to protect it from wild animals such as foxes and boars. The man also dug a place for the wine vat (winepress), and he also placed a tower within the vineyard. The tower would be used during the grape harvest as a lookout against thieves. It could also serve as a living place for the tenant.

The landowner leases the vineyard to vinedressers (farmhands) and then goes on a lengthy trip (“to a far country”). When the grapes ripened for harvest, the landowner sends a servant to retrieve some of the fruit of the vine. “(The farmhands) grabbed (the servant), beat him up, and sent him off empty-handed. So (the landlord) sent another servant. That one was tarred and feathered. The landlord sent another and that one was killed. And on and on, many others. Some the vinedressers beat up, (and) some they killed.” (*The Message*)

The parable continues with the landowner introducing his beloved son. “Finally there was only one left: a beloved son. In a last-ditch effort, he sent him, thinking, ‘Surely they will respect my son.’<sup>7-8</sup> “But those farmhands saw their chance. They rubbed their hands together in greed and said, ‘This is the heir! Let’s kill him and have it all for ourselves.’ They grabbed him, killed him, and threw him over the fence.”

The passage that Jeff read earlier in this service, **Isaiah 5:1-7**, allows us to interpret with confidence the imagery Jesus uses here in **Mark 12**. “The Father (landowner) is God; his son (“heir”) is Jesus; and the servants are the prophets.” (Boice, 190) “Israel” was the vine of God. (**Isaiah 5:7**). And, **Mark 12:12** teaches us that the chief priests, scribes, and elders realized that they were the farmhands who brutalized the prophets...and Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews provides a summary of the mistreatment the Old Testament prophets received at the hands of God’s so-called chosen people. This is **Hebrews 11:35-38** – “Others (of the prophets) were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in dens and caves of the earth.*”

And, even more troubling, the priests, scribes, and elders were plotting the death of the Father’s beloved Son (Jesus, the One spinning the tale!). We’ll learn more of that as we continue in our study of Mark.

**With verses 9-11, Jesus paints the picture with different colors. Where the vineyard was the arena for the first 8 verses of this chapter, a new thing illustrates His teaching in the next three verses.**

First, a new people inherits the promises of God and the privileges of Sonship to Him. Look again at verse 9, “Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.” God the Father would come to the vineyard, destroy those caring for it, and then give it to, as Matthew describes it, “a nation bearing the fruits of it.” (**Matthew 21:43**)

*Who is that nation?* The New Testament Church, which Paul describes in **Galatians 6:16** as the “Israel of God.” This refers not merely to Jews, “but to all true children of Abraham, whether Jews or Gentiles. It is a way of saying that the church is the new Israel. There is continuity between the old covenant and the new, between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament church. The promises that God made to Israel are fulfilled in the true spiritual Israel, which is the church of Jesus Christ. God has one people in Christ, and what unites us is the cross. We share a common boast in the cross, and in the cross alone.” (Ryken, 279)

**Finally, as Jesus is the vine of the Israel of God, He is also the chief cornerstone in the kingdom of God.** Jesus quotes from **Psalms 118** when He says in **Mark 12:10**, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.’ This cornerstone, as Isaiah puts it (**Isaiah 28:16**) is “A tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation;”

Matthew teaches something convicting about Jesus, the chief cornerstone. This is **Matthew 21:44**, “And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.”

Dear one, if you cast yourself on Jesus for life and salvation, you will be broken (meaning brought to submission), but if you remain apart from Him, trusting only in yourself, then He will crush you; grind you to powder. God means business – “He commands all men everywhere to repent.” (**Acts 17:30**)

### **Applications:**

1 - **Sin is irrational.** It doesn't make sense! *Why would the farmhands in the parable rough up, abuse, and eventually kill the landowner's representatives?* They were trying to harm them! Sometimes the most pious people among us fall to sin's irresistible call. None of us is exempt from sinning against someone close to us, and sinning big-time! Life only makes sense when looked at through the grid of the Bible; fellow Christians, we must live our lives like Christ lived His!

2 – **We must be careful not to harden our hearts against those who expose our sin.** All who profess Christ as Savior have the responsibility to go to those who've sinned against us, and gently, lovingly rebuke them for that sin. And, just as true, when we are the person being rebuked, we must humbly acknowledge our sin, seek forgiveness from the one we've hurt, and then think, speak, and act differently as God's Word instructs us. It's not reasonable to be rebuked, then to ask for forgiveness, without changing our sinful behavior.

3 – If you are not a Christian, or you think you are, but you live in sin, then you must hear this. **God will judge you.** You must get right with Him! “The judgment of God is not to be taken lightly, because God is not to be taken lightly. The God who offers salvation now is the God who will judge in righteousness hereafter. If you will not have (Jesus) now as Savior, in the day of His grace, you will have Him as your Judge when you stand before His throne at the final judgment. Now is the day of grace. Come to Him. Come *now*.” (Boice, 197)

The story is told of a man who sold his house for an incredible bargain with just one stipulation: he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding over the door.

After several years, he wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell it. So the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from the single nail he still owned. Soon the house became unlivable and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail.

If we leave even one small sin in our life Satan will hang his rotting garbage on it.