

Mark 11:27-12:12
Luke 20:09-19
Matthew 21:33-46

A LOADED PARABLE

First of all, I want and need you to be aware – far more aware than any normal Christians think they have to be. You have noticed that by now, I would imagine. I think you are my colleagues. I expect you to help carry the Message of the WAY. I think it is badly mangled and mis-explained in a lot of places today. I trust you to help put it in a clearer light. Nothing fancy and no grandstanding – just when you can ... with whom you are with ... when there is a legitimate opportunity. Secondly, there are some booby traps around every important area of life. We do not want to get fixated on them, but sometimes we need to tell folk about them.

There has been a movement in our time to discredit Jesus – to reduce Him from His identity as Messiah or Son of God, down to a mere homespun sage, a bit of a cynic, a peasant who got Himself crucified for having more compassion and daring than brains – a good heart, but not too bright. It is next suggested, or insisted, that the entire dynamism, belief system, and transforming fellowship that became a world religion in His name was actually made up after Jesus was already dead – made up by the followers, chiefly Paul. It is claimed that Paul was the real designer and genius behind the movement that came to be known as the Christian Gospel. But of course, folk who talk and teach this way do not have much regard for Paul either. He was not inspired by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ to bring the Gospel to light among the Gentiles. They suggest, rather subtly at times, that it was all “made up” – and of course the implication is that there never has been a Savior, or God of personal love; there is no real destiny for individuals or groups; and the only hope left is to try the best we can to solve the problems of justice and inequality on our own – like we always should have been doing in the first place.

People who want to read history this way or put such a spin on the entire Christian Message and heritage have a perfect right to do so. And in fact, none of it is new, however new they try to make it sound. Christianity has always had such detractors, and Jesus was confronted with this same kind of opposition from the very day His mission began to be too popular. Only, today the media picks it up because it sounds different, and therefore newsworthy. People who make such outlandish

claims are quoted often, news magazines do articles, and television programs do interviews, especially around Christmas or Easter time. I certainly do not believe that the whole world will be fooled in the long run, but I know a lot of individuals who get caught in the tangle for a while because the proponents for such views, in our time, are professional Christians. They are university professors, authors of religious books, and preachers, and they make their living from Christian institutions and have academic credentials that make them seem believable. Others with equal or greater credentials do speak with reasoned and powerful rebuttal, but the media does not often pick them up or make their names famous. It is not newsworthy to defend or explain the Faith. To make news, you have to say things outlandish. To get your books published and read, you have to say things unusual, or critical, or shocking.

So what difference does it make if Jesus is not the Savior and did not rise from the dead? And so what if Paul invented Christianity because he had a bad relationship with his father? Well, it makes a lot of difference to those of us who have encountered the Risen Christ, and who have bet our lives on the truth He died to bring us. If the champions of a severely cut-down and watered-down version of Jesus' story had a strong case and were really giving us new information which they had discovered and which the world could not have known before – as they always pretend to be doing – that would at least make their stance understandable. But it is mostly smoke and mirrors. And I would not mind, except I do not want the smoke and mirrors to cheat people out of finding the Way and the Truth and the Light of Christ.

In any case, a strong component of this detraction approach always pictures the Apostle Paul as the architect of “Christian Theology.” The detractors claim that it was Paul who invented the importance of the Cross, redemption, salvation, justification by faith. That it was Paul who dreamed up the Gospel, and grace, and the outlandish claim about a God who loves us, who wants to save us, who will be with us into all eternity. They claim that Jesus never imagined the Gospel, never thought about grace – that He only taught a strict Jewish ethic. Why would a man teaching strict Jewish ethics get in trouble in the midst of a Jewish culture and Pharisee movement that taught strict Jewish ethics? Would that catapult a carpenter into national fame and get Him murdered? Sometimes a prophet dies, to be sure, for a political message too hot to handle. Only, Jesus was far less – or far more – than a prophet. His

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Message was dimensions beyond what any prophet had ever tried to say before.

Today I bring to your attention only one of Jesus' parables. But for today, it will have to remind us of all the other parables and teachings and events. And it will show that Jesus was indeed "preaching" and living for the Gospel of grace. Paul got it from Jesus. Paul did not make it up – his source was Jesus. No human other than Jesus could or would have come up with this Message – not in this way, and not this clearly and uncompromisingly.

There are some parables that only Matthew tells, and others that only Luke tells. Clearly they are delighted to present "new" material which Mark has not mentioned – teachings they think are outstanding. I trust them, but for today's purpose I choose one of the parables told in all three Gospels. In short, it is as early and well-founded as any parable we know. I read from Mark. I call it "The Loaded Parable" – loaded like a weapon, like a bomb about to go off. It goes off the moment we start to comprehend what the parable is really saying.

SCRIPTURE READING from Mark 11:27-12:12

They came again to Jerusalem. And as Jesus 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 – who gave you authority to say and do these things?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? Answer me." And they argued with one another. "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But what if we say, 'From men?'" – they were afraid of the people, for all held that John was a true prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Then neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Translated, that means: "If you are too full of yourselves – too full of pride – to realize that God is at work in the world or to notice when God gives authority and commissions a human like John the Baptist, then it will not be possible to explain anything important to you. You are not even worth talking to." Then He told this parable. Are you ready? It comes fast.

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A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a pit for the wine press, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took the servant and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. Finally he sent another, and him they killed; and so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. [Jesus is talking about all the leaders and prophets God sent to guide, teach, and protect Israel. You get that, right? Then He sinks it.]

The owner of the vineyard had still one other, a beloved son; 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 cast 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 this scripture: "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes"?

And they tried to arrest Jesus, but feared the multitude, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them; so they left him and went away.

If we were to caricature and contrast the difference between a so-called "liberal" and a so-called "fundamentalist" approach to the Christian Faith, we would come up with a strange and puzzling picture. Of course, no living Christian would admit to belonging in either camp as described, yet the descriptions are familiar and recognizable.

In the fundamentalist picture, there is no doubt about the need for salvation. Sin is taken with utmost seriousness. Jesus is imperative; conversion is essential; giving your life, your talents, and your treasure to Jesus and His Kingdom is both necessary and opportunistic. The delights of life in Christ Jesus are wondrous, and the reward of eternal life will be joy and love and truth and light forever. The picture is beautiful – until we come to the problem of resistance.

What happens to the opposition? What happens if you do not quickly go along and get in step with this happy picture? To keep it brief: After a few short years, the punishment is dire. Jesus turns ugly, and it does not take long to realize that the system is rigid, punitive, and coercive. Hellfire and damnation await those who do not say the right formulas and claim the right beliefs – whether they comprehend them or live them or not. God ends up looking more like Satan than like a God of mercy, compassion, understanding, and forgiveness – at least to anyone who does not get in line, toe the mark, and believe what they are told without question or doubt.

The contrasting “liberal” picture is equally troublesome. Salvation is not really necessary. Humans are essentially good and will always respond (at least eventually) to education, kindness, goodness, and understanding. Evil is really just ignorance and the residue of hard experiences we have come through. God is endlessly and inevitably loving in a general sort of way; therefore, forgiveness and mercy should be the primary message of the church – though in liberalism, they are seldom directly connected with repentance or change. God will love us all until we all get enough education and experience to realize we want to be good. After all, anybody can be good if they just want to be. So inevitably, we will all mature and evolve our way into eternal life. (I don’t know, actually, why liberal Christians have such an aversion to mixing theory with experience.)

In any case, in this scenario, those who are enlightened must devote their lives to making this world a better place, where more people experience love and kindness and get a good education sooner. The true mark of faith is not creed or belief, it is not worship or devotion, it is not surrender, praise, gratitude, or conversion. The mark of faith is what you do to help the world be a better place – what you do to help the world overcome its problems.

What happens to the opposition? Well, it just takes some people longer to catch on than others, but eventually everyone will discover the truth and start helping instead of hindering. “Salvation” is just an old term for waking up. Jesus and many others are examples of being truly alive and awake. But when you get right down to it, Jesus is not really necessary in any direct or essential way. Jesus is not in any Savior role, strictly speaking. All religions are simply evidence and relics of humanity’s evolving toward spiritual life. Even God is not necessary

in any specific or personal way – though it is good to have some emblem of the principle of love and truth toward which we are all evolving. Naturally, the ranks of liberalism shrink, since it teaches that none of what it stands for is really necessary. I mean, the only reason people stay in a liberal church is if they happen to like a group of friends who come there. Naturally, that will not sustain very much for very long. People will not tithe, pray every day, study the Scriptures diligently, or walk a pilgrim’s Way ... just to keep a group of friends they could just as well have on any other basis. And if you think liberal Christians are really as loving and understanding and accepting and inclusive as their theories are, you have never made one angry.

What about this parable? Is it part of your Scripture? It says “Holy Bible” on the outside, but I have been reading and studying it diligently all my life and only about a third of it has ever made it into the canon of Holy Scripture on the inside. I want more of it to be “Bible” on the inside, where it is the Word of God and not just words on a page. But there is no rushing it – there is no way to cheat. It has to sink in until it gets down inside for real. How about this parable – is it Scripture in your personal canon?

“*A man planted a vineyard.*” We suspect this man stands for God, and the vineyard is the earth. Some say the vineyard is Israel, or the church. We could apply the parable on almost any level – a family, a company, etc. That works too, but ultimately this vineyard is the whole world. We have a one-sentence creation story which leaves the earth a self-contained realm. Humans are put in charge and God withdraws – that is, God allows the humans free will and a chance to see what they can do with the vineyard. Only, the vineyard still belongs to God.

Naturally, the humans take over and decide to run the vineyard their own way and for their own purposes. They ignore or hotly dispute any claims God makes on them. They deeply resent interference or any instructions or claims on the part of God. And they refuse to give God any profit, any fruit, any acknowledgment or appreciation whatsoever. They have taken over and they keep everything they produce for themselves. With a few simple strokes of a story, Jesus lifts up the drama of what is going on here on earth for the most part – in most places, most of the time, with most people.

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The vineyard owner (God) sends messenger after emissary after prophet after teacher requesting that humans acknowledge God's ownership – God's authority – and prove it by dedicating some of the profits to the True Owner. In some clear and specific way, the profit is supposed to go to God's purposes. God is the Creator/Owner; we are stewards. It is the simple truth – and simple justice. We are supposed to tend, take care of, and increase the bounty of the vineyard. But we do not own it – ever. Not any of it. It belongs to God. We take a reasonable living for our labors, and the rest goes into building the Kingdom of the Owner/Author. Those with any dawning wisdom realize that the more we serve the Kingdom of God, the more all humans will benefit – including us.

Finally God sends the Son. Now, how could any tenants imagine that killing the Son would guarantee their getting the full inheritance? It is madness! The expectation seems hopelessly ludicrous. And yet, we see this very madness, this very insanity, going on all around the world, down through all human history. In fact, it is what we call “normal.” That is why the parable explodes in our faces. Suddenly it is clear just how alienated and separated this realm is from God – how far away we are from peace and reconciliation with God. The tenants kill the Son, thinking this will assure them of total ownership and control of the vineyard/earth. And of course the story is about to be acted out in real life. The story is tragically and uncompromisingly true. The assumption is that God cannot or will not come from Heaven to personally set matters right. The parable scathingly mocks this assumption – that we can do anything we like here and get away with it; that we can do anything we like here and God will not really care or do anything about it.

The parable is made more dramatic, of course, by the fact that Jesus is telling it in the days between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Those who heard this parable would be stunned by its force and implications as they lived through the days of Crucifixion and Resurrection. *“So they seized him and killed him, and flung his body out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do?”*

In some ways, that has been the crucial question ever since. *“What will the owner of the vineyard do?”* Some say: “The owner of the vineyard didn't do anything, therefore there is no owner. The tenants were right. Keep it for yourselves – the church is a fake, there is no God.” Well, isn't that what some people say and believe? Hundreds of thousands

of them! Get it and keep it for yourself. Some of them are very generous, too – as long as they get to *play* God, instead of serving him.

Others say: “The owner of the vineyard didn’t do anything, therefore Jesus was not the Messiah. Jesus was not the Son. Jesus may have been one of the prophets sent to make just claims for God, but clearly the hour is not imminent. Let the wise awaken and return the profit to God before the story really does come true.” Islam, Judaism, many Unitarians, and New Age groups speak in this manner.

Others have said that Jesus told this parable to His own nation and that indeed it did come true: God destroyed Israel in A.D. 70 and handed the vineyard mandate (the mandate to be a Chosen People, a Holy Nation, a light to the nations) to the Christians. That is the scariest interpretation of all, since clearly it means that God is now tearing the vineyard away from the Christians, who also have not given the produce to God, and that God is now in the process of handing it on to other tenants who will honor God’s rights and ownership. Or at least God is handing it on to third-world Christians, since the United States has so obviously lost or thrown away its spiritual mandate. Is it too late for us? Surely there is plenty of evidence to support this very interpretation.

The vast majority of Christians have believed, over the ages, that the parable is imminent just as described. That is: Jesus, the Son, has been killed, and the owner of the vineyard will shortly come and kill off his enemies and lease the vineyard to those who will be faithful servants. In short, they expect what is frequently called “The Second Coming.” The vineyard will be the “New Jerusalem,” and the new tenants will be the righteous who have been saved. What will the owner do? God will close down life here as we know it, kill off all the opposition, and set up a righteous Kingdom according to the design always proclaimed and intended.

And finally, there are a few folk like us, scattered here and there, who believe that God *did* do something already – something dramatic and powerful – only not to the ordinary eyes of the world. We think Easter was quite a lot to do. We think the Resurrection was an incredible answer. We think Pentecost is still carrying the real Message.

We even suspect that Jesus may have actually ended the parable with the question, “*What will the owner of the vineyard do?*” That would certainly match His style. And then some scribe named Thumper could

not keep from adding on the last part all by himself. In any case, lots of people think that the parables make statements, teach religious truths, and actually answer some of our questions. If Jesus were an ordinary man, or even a great seer, that would doubtless be true. But Jesus' parables never give answers – they ask questions. People who think Jesus' parables answer questions are into judgment, not grace. To comprehend one of Jesus' parables is to hear the Numinous, Nameless, Omnipotent One asking us questions. And we know it will take the rest of our lives to give even a partial answer.

Will I sell all that I have to buy the great pearl? Will I forgive my prodigal brother, and be reconciled with my father? Will I put on the wedding garment in time? When the seed falls on me, will I strangle it, or nurture it unto the harvest? If I work hard all my life – expending money, energy, and resources for the Kingdom – and some self-centered SOB who lived seventy years thinking only of himself suddenly gets converted at the end, will I rejoice because he has found Christ's love and entered the Kingdom at last? If not, am I any kind of disciple or apostle?

Oh no indeed, Jesus' parables are not giving answers. They are insisting that *we* give answers. The parables show me that I am giving answers all the time to the greatest questions in life – and that, without meaning it or realizing it, most of my answers are wrong.

“What will the owner of the vineyard do?” So far, at least, the fact is that God has not responded in angry retribution. The contrast – between what all of our natural instincts and impulses would dictate and expect, and what actually happened – is stunning. *“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* What Jesus does, what Jesus enacts, what Jesus promises us about the nature of God come as enormous contrast and shock and surprise. If Jesus put the last sentences on this parable, it must have been to heighten this very contrast – to help us see how different God is from what we expect. In any case, the last sentences of this parable do not match the actual story. The parable says the owner will come and put the tenants to death and give the vineyard to others. History says God wants to forgive us, and goes on wanting to forgive us. At least so far. Only, in the meantime, we often put ourselves and each other to death, because we will not awaken or believe.

Nevertheless, the Cross and the Resurrection outrank all old truth and all our former expectations. This means that the present reality goes into that same dimensional leap which so continually annoys and

delights us. The Kingdom is here present, and we get to serve the vineyard owner right now, if we want to. Right now, even as other tenants go on running the vineyard as if *they* own it – keeping all the profits to themselves, and killing off any influence God tries to have in their lives. *Right now* we can shift our own allegiance and start living in and for the Kingdom – listening to the prophets, believing in the Son, being part of the New WAY and the New Life. Easter – Jesus alive and back with us – makes it possible for us to go on in faith, while Jesus goes on loving and saving and suffering for those who still oppose the vineyard owner. The world goes more and more to Hell because the tenants do not acknowledge God’s rights or God’s ownership and will not give God obedience or profit. But God does not turn into an angry human, or into a cruel Satan. God goes on offering and saving and loving and redeeming. And many of us are witnesses of this very thing.

Here endeth the sermon. But I have some comments for the liberal Christians among us. I happen to believe that God loves them – in case you wonder. But liberal Christians reduce what I am going to talk about now to general and generic, so they think they already believe it because they use the word “love” a lot already. But that still misses it all. Jesus was a lot of things, but never general or generic. Like Father, like Son. And it cuts both ways.

Anyway, here goes:

If there is salvation, there is also judgment. We cannot have one without the other. If there is no possibility of defeat, there is no chance for victory. If we do not *need* Jesus, then His whole life, ministry, death, and resurrection is a lie. We cannot have it both ways. We must make up our minds: Are we running our lives ourselves, or are we stewards and servants of God? If we are not stewards and servants of God, then we are under judgment and we need a Savior. Not *want*, not *like*, not *admire*, not “maybe we should be *interested in*” – NEED! We desperately and totally NEED a Savior.

If there is no judgment, there is no salvation. Christ’s very coming is judgment. Christ’s presence is judgment. He does not have to get angry to create judgment; just the quality of His life and love over-against ours is more judgment than we can survive. That is why any time we get near enough to notice Him, it changes us – or we find some way to kill Him, to delete Him from our consciousness. Are we, or are we not, living and working for the Kingdom – God’s Vineyard? If not, we kill the Son of

God. Maybe we do not set out with that in mind, but it always comes to that. He gets in the way. Palm Sunday is more than a pretty tale. To paraphrase an old quotation: It is a tale told by a great seer, signifying everything.

If the ending of the parable as it stands is wrong – if the owner does not kill the tenants but goes on forgiving and saving them – that does not get us off any hooks does it? We still end up being the enemy – we still see and know ourselves to be the enemies of God – unless we have repented – started to walk a New WAY into a New Life. Jesus died and was raised. There is only one way that is good news, and that is if we follow Him into it – all of it. Die to self – die to this life – in order to find True Self and True Life. The other thing is: That is the only Good News there is. All other good news only stays good if this Gospel carries it. Without this, all news ends up in an old familiar chorus: *“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes ...”*

Here comes the great liberal bugaboo: The notion that once we have forgiven someone, that is the whole story; the idea that once Jesus forgives us and we know God is a God of mercy and love, that is the whole story. Sorry, but that is just for openers. That only begins the story – it only opens up the relationship between us and God. All the real excitement is yet to come.

Just because we believe in forgiveness does not imply that we can change the requirements for salvation. **We must still awaken, repent, receive God’s love, join the Kingdom, find our true identity and destiny, go to work with and for Him, and learn to love our brothers and sisters.** Just because we believe in grace does not mean we have repealed any principles of righteousness. Just because God forgives does not mean that we have joy in being wrong (behaving wrongly), or that we can know peace while still being separated in heart and mind from God or each other. Just because Christ has mercy does not mean that we get to go on being self-centered or mean or resentful or depressed, or that despite our staying just the way we are, we will suddenly enjoy all the fruits of the Kingdom and all the delights of salvation.

We must still learn to produce the fruits of the Spirit or we will never taste them. We may be saved by grace through faith from “sin, death, and the Devil.” We may be saved by grace through faith for the Kingdom – here and coming – now and eternal. But we still have to choose it and move into it to be part of it – to experience it – to know how

it feels. Saved from destruction does not mean automatic sanctification. Do we really think all those “attitudes” are going to disappear from our psyches just because we die and go to Heaven? What is it we are expecting will change us – the mere passageway from earth to Heaven? It must be some incredible corridor, to have greater impact and power than Christ or His Resurrection!

Why do we always want magic instead of grace? The love of Christ coupled with our being with Christ will change us – if we walk with Him, here *and* there. Why would we want it otherwise? Have we some reason to suppose it will all happen automatically in the next realm? All our moods and values and resentments will suddenly be right and true, whether we learn anything or grow or have a change of heart, or not? We think there will be no possibility of depression in Heaven? No possibility that we will be annoyed by other people who are not “doing it” like we want them to? **The time to enter the Kingdom is now.** This is the training ground. This is part of it. Everything we see and experience here, and all the ways we react and respond to it, are preparing us for what is to come. As someone said: Everything I make, do, or keep – I lose. Everything I learn, become, or give – I keep. It is part of me. There is no way to take it from me. Therefore, any day I do not grow closer to God – any day I do not learn how to follow Jesus better and trust Him more – is a total waste of time and life. What a slave I have been! But now ... “I am coming with YOU.”

Being a liberal Christian does not mean you do not need Jesus. God’s love for us does not make a bit of difference to our consciousness until we receive it and trust it. Easter, with all its power and promise, has no real impact on our lives until we trust it enough to die to all former values and perspectives – and go after the One who is raised.

Do you know that we are living in God’s Vineyard?