



VIOLENCE IN THE VINEYARD

Catalog No. 1134

Mark 11:27-12:12

33rd Message

Brian Morgan

October 31st, 1999

The powerful movie *Saving Private Ryan* is the story of our country's mission to save but one man, the last remaining son of a family who already had lost three sons in World War II. The movie propels the audience into the D-Day invasion and takes us aboard a landing vessel bound for the beaches of Normandy. As the gangplank drops on the beach we come under withering machine-gun fire. Defenseless bodies are shot through or maimed hundreds of times. Corpses fall nameless into the cold hands of the beach. By morning's light the sea appears to have more bodies floating on the surface than there are fish in the deep. Silence shouts the only tribute over the watery grave. Seeing that movie did two things to me. It removed all my naïveté about the glory of war and the thought that people can be reclaimed from tyrannical demons without violent confrontation and extreme loss of life; and it spoke volumes about the character of fathers who place their sons in harm's way for something more valuable than life itself.

Mark does much the same for his readers in the section of his gospel to which we now come. He dispenses with our naïveté about the battle and reveals the glorious character of the Father who places his Son in harm's way for a salvation that is larger than life. In our last study we saw that Jesus took complete control of Israel's outer court, an area known as the court of the gentiles. Displaying ferocious authority, he cleansed that place of every vestige of commercialism, traffic and noise and restored it to its rightful place as a house of prayer for all the nations. Then he followed up these actions with a stinging sermon right out of the book of Jeremiah, in which he accused Israel's current leadership of turning God's house into a den of thieves.

In response to these events Israel's leaders arrive on the scene. From this point on in Mark's gospel there will be head to head confrontation of world forces in a cosmic battle that will decide the fate of a nation and the world.

I. By What Authority? (11:27-33)

A. Authority Challenged (11:27-28)

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, and scribes, and elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things, who gave You this authority to do these things?"

These leaders, representatives of each official ruling party, were probably sent as an official delegation from the Sanhedrin. Their mission was to question Jesus about the events of the previous day that had shut down all commercial traffic and sacrificial transactions in the outer court of the gentiles. Into that rare quiet place of sanctity and prayer now storm Israel's leading officials, in full force, angry and armed to the teeth with authority and power. Spewing their venom, they waste no time on niceties. Gundry captures the powerful nuance of their disdainful questions: "By what authority are You doing of all things, *these things*?" and "Who gave You, *of all people*, this authority?" The purpose of their questions is not to inquire, but to put down, "to embarrass Jesus, to leave him defenseless, to expose him as an imposter."¹ But they don't know whom they are dealing with. As Rikki Watts observes: "Considering Mark's cumulative presentation of Jesus as representative true Israel, messianic 'servant,' Son of David, Son of Man, and even Yahweh-Warrior and Son of God, then to confront him concerning his authority is in effect to deny him the act of appropriation and to refuse him the right to rule. This is nothing if not mutiny."²

B. John and True Authority (11:29-30)

And Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. "Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me!"

Jesus will not be embarrassed or put on the defensive. He takes complete control of the situation, acting as if he were the ruling king. He refuses to answer their two questions until they answer the one question that he puts to them. And they have no option but to answer. He forces their hand with the command, "Answer Me!" "So pointed is the dilemma posed by these alternatives, so insistent Jesus' demand for an answer – he now repeats the demand – that the Sanhedrin fall into disarray."³

Thus Jesus delivers his one question: "Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me!" His mention of John is far more incriminating than a "mere verbal fencing match (Wright⁴). It probes them deeply, revealing where they went wrong. God's final prophetic word to his people in the Hebrew Scriptures was the announcement that he would send an Elijah-like messenger (Mal 4:5) to prepare the way for Israel's king. He would be Israel's final prophet, and would anoint the last King:

“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts. (Mal 3:1)

John was Elijah, the voice crying in the wilderness (Isa 40:3-5) preaching a baptism of repentance to make ready for the coming king. But Israel’s leadership failed to submit to John’s ministry and refused to repent. Now Jesus, “the Lord of the Temple has come, cursed the fig-tree (cf. Mal 3:24 MT), and announced sentence (Jer 7:11). This is why Jesus points to John’s baptism: their refusal to prepare through repentance is the grounds for his announcement of judgment.”⁵

Whenever we take a wrong turn spiritually and end up on a slippery path, God in his grace will offer repentance. But repentance by definition means doing an about face and going back to where we made the wrong turn to start again from *there*. God will not have anything to do with subsequent issues until the first matter is dealt with. So before Israel’s leaders inquire about Jesus’ authority they must first come to terms with what they did to John.

C. Taking the Fifth Amendment

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ “But shall we say, ‘From men?’— they were afraid of the multitude, for all considered John to have been a prophet indeed. And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

After pondering among themselves every possible answer and its outcome, they realize that Jesus has backed them into a corner. There is no escape. Either John was a prophet, in which case they are guilty; or he was not, a response that would place them in an unpopular minority, jeopardizing their political careers. With neither alternative looking promising at this juncture, they come up with the best they can, an embarrassing, “We don’t know.” Jesus, who would not be embarrassed by their two questions, has now shamed them with but one (Gundry).

“Calvin’s comment is apt: ‘They do not inquire what is true, nor do they put the question to their own conscience; and they are so base as to choose rather to shuffle than to acknowledge what they know to be true, that their tyranny may not be impaired. In this manner, all wicked men, though they pretend to be desirous of learning, shut the gate of truth, if they feel it to be opposed to their wicked desires.’”⁶

But Jesus is not finished. He has a few more words to add to their shame.

II. The Parable of the Vine-growers (12:1-12)

A. Violence in the Vineyard (12:1-9)

And He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard, and put a wall around it, and dug a vat under the wine press, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. And at the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vine-growers. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some, and killing others. He had one more, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those vine-growers said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, [cf. Gen. 37:20 Joseph’s brothers] and the inheritance will be ours!’ And they took him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

It was a common practice for ancient teachers and prophets to speak in parables so that they might be free to refer to things too controversial to utter out in the open, raising emotional barriers and perhaps provoking violent reaction. Thus the parable was a ploy designed to couch a story in veiled terms, outside the hearers, in order to lure them into the story. Once they were captured by the account they would make their own pronouncements, and to their surprise, condemn themselves, much as David did with Nathan’s parable (2 Sam 12:1-7).

As Jesus skillfully tells this story we are immediately drawn to the vineyard owner’s tender and thorough care. The man makes a huge initial capital investment to acquire and plant the vineyard, and spares no expense to maintain his investment with a protective wall and tower. He is indeed a generous man. He is trusting. He grants complete care of his vineyard to others while he leaves on a journey. And he is reasonable. He does not demand a huge profit; he expects to receive but “some of the fruit” from the vine-growers. Here then is a good man, a generous man, a trusting man, a reasonable man who places his entire investment into the hands of others.

In shocking contrast is the character of the vine-growers. Each time the owner sends a representative to collect on his behalf his slave is harshly treated, each one more severely than the one who preceded him. The first is beaten and sent away empty-handed; the second is struck in the head (an almost fatal blow) and severely shamed (a terrible fate in the Ancient Near East); and the third is killed. In the midst of such bloodshed and violence the infinite patience and long-suffering of the owner is astonishing. How can he keep sending more and more slaves into this violent vineyard only to receive the same treacherous treatment? What would impel him to such long-suffering?

Finally, the owner has but one servant left. This one is not a slave, but a son, an only beloved son (a poignant echo of Gen 22:2). As Gundry says, “that a father would risk a son adds pathos to surprise.”⁷ The owner reasons they will respect him. We are gripped in terror by his naïveté. All of his other slaves were either injured or killed. Why doesn’t he go and set things right himself? But he continues to trust, giving the vine-growers the benefit of the doubt. By now we are astonished that a man would risk not just capital, but a litany of lives, and finally an only son, to merely receive “some reasonable fruit” from what was rightfully his. When the son arrives we are aghast at the response he receives: He is seen as a threat. It is as if the owner had died and the son is coming to evict the tenants and claim his right to the vineyard. So the vine-growers plot his death (using the same language as Joseph’s brothers, Gen 37:20). In their crassness they think they can kill the heir and shamefully discard his body outside the vineyard, reasoning that the vineyard will be theirs. They are as guilty as Ahab, who murdered Naboth to seize his vineyard (1 Kgs 21:1-19). The equation between good and evil could not be more overdrawn, nor the impelling demand for a verdict of severe justice. The question finally lands.

B. Judgment on the Vine-growers (12:9)

“What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others.

Justice is finally decreed. The owner will come and destroy the vine-growers and give the vineyard into the care of others. With this the parable has worked its power. Before Jesus even asks the question, the hearers have already pronounced the verdict in their hearts. Now the cat is out of the bag!⁸ The parable is the age-old story of Israel, God’s beloved vineyard (Isa 5:1-7, Psa 80:8-13), retold by Jesus. God, the beloved owner, planted the vineyard, cared for it and left it in the care of others. When he looked for fruit there was none, yet he faithfully kept sending his prophets one after another (Jer 25:4; 26:5). But these faithful messengers were harshly treated and killed. Now the beloved Son has come. He, too, will die at their hands, and with that act the Sanhedrin will be destroyed and the vineyard given over to the care of others (Matt 12:28).

With their guilt now out in the open, Jesus summons a scripture that simultaneously sentences them and vindicates him. He concludes his story with a verse from the recently sung hymn of all the traveling pilgrims, Psalm 118.

C. Vindication of the Son-Stone (12:10-12)

**“Have you not even read this Scripture:
The stone which the builders rejected,
This became the head corner stone;
This came about from the Lord,
And it is marvelous in our eyes “? “**

And they were seeking to seize Him; and yet they feared the multitude; for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him, and went away.

The dead son, the stone⁹ rejected by the builders, will become the “head corner stone” of a new temple. Mark has brought us full circle. Not only does Jesus cleanse the temple and announce its demise, he now says there will be a new temple built in its place with him as the “head corner-stone” (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-7). The word can mean either the foundation stone around which everything else is measured, or the final “cap” stone. His hearers grasp the full meaning of what he has said. Yet what irony, that “it is their very ‘perception’ that sets in train their own demise” (Watts). So the power of the parable is truly seen, for “it not only informs, it acts” (Wright). They want to kill Jesus, but again, paralyzed by fear, they can do nothing, at least for now. He makes his escape, for his time is not yet fulfilled.

III. The Story Unfolds the Character of God

What implications can we draw from this “D-Day” of confrontation and violence? Few texts in the Bible tell the whole story of God’s relationship to his people, and in the telling, draw us in to tell us our story. The amazing parable of the vineyard portrays a glorious picture of salvation history unfolding the character of the God we serve. As we worship him in the true glory that is his, we become like him (2 Cor 3:18).

A. The Goodness and Generosity of God

This is a story about the goodness of God. The first thing we learn about him is that he is generous in the extreme. God plants a vineyard in Canaan, not a meager vineyard but one well endowed with everything needed to make it productive and well protected. And God spares no expense in planting and maintaining it. This image speaks of his generosity, one that began in Eden, was re-established in Israel, and is now bequeathed to his church. It demonstrates that God’s first concern is to lavish upon man every possible blessing at the rich banquet table of life. Life is a banquet table to be enjoyed by all! This is how I came to Christ, as God graciously answered my many personal prayer requests. This is how Christians ought to be perceived by others.

B. The Naïve Trust of God and the Glory of Man

Secondly, we learn that God is totally trusting. He turns this large capital investment over to man. In fact, so fully does he trust man, he feels free to go on vacation. This is something very few of us do with our capital investments, or our children, either. So we learn that the glory of man is to be trusted as a steward in God’s vineyard, with the expectation that he will cultivate it and produce fruit that all nations may eat of this rich feast of eternal life.

We serve a generous and trusting God.

But what happens when man proves faithless to care for God's vineyard? It is then we discover the forbearance of God.

C. The Forbearance of God

When God's worst fears are realized and the tenants are neither cultivating fruit nor feeding the nations but squandering the vineyard on themselves, God continues to believe in them. With naïve abandon, even after his prophets have faced terrible abuse, he keeps investing his precious messengers in them. What glory and dignity he bestows upon man! He chooses not to act on first, second, third or even fourth facts. He continues to reason and woo, believing that, given time, he can draw something good out of man's corrupt soul. As we begin to grasp this we realize the high value that God places on us as his original creation. The mystery is that man's persistent evil eventually brings the Son forth from out of the Father's heart. In the greatest act of love, the Father places the Son into that violent vineyard and does what no human father can do: he lets go and looks away.

As we begin to see how God acts, then we will want to do the same for others. It is an admirable thing to believe the best about others until events prove otherwise. It is greatness to keep believing in them once the worst facts are proven true. And it is divine to remain committed when bad character turns into destiny. Sometimes, like God, we go bankrupt in the process. But in that act, the fragrance of Christ's sacrifice is released in the world. This is the kind of radical love we need in the church today.

God is good, God is trusting, and God is forbearing.

D. The Judgment of God

The tragedy of our story is that man mistakes the forbearance of God with tolerance of sin. As the psalmist wrote,

**"These things you have done, and I kept silence;
you thought that I was altogether like you;
But I will rebuke you
and accuse you to your face."** (Psa 50:21)

Yes, God is extremely patient, but his forbearance is not without its limits. Notice that it is only after he has spent everything that he has and is bankrupt that he comes in judgment. Only after he has given his precious boy into their hands and has nothing left to give does he come to judge them. God's judgment is never hasty, impulsive or unreasonable, but when it comes, it does so with unrelenting severity. Jesus called it as a tribulation so severe it would be unparalleled in all of time (Mark 13:19).

Yes, this was the D-Day of the kingdom. Soon, cosmic forces would be unleashed and set in motion in one of the great war machines of all history, the Roman army. Jerusalem would be put under siege. Famine, pestilence and cannibalism would follow. Finally, Jerusalem's walls would be breached. Rape would follow pillage, and the city would be burned with fire and the temple destroyed. Not one stone would be left standing upon another. In the end there would be 1.2 million casualties. God does judge. Make no mistake about it.

Thus it remains a constant principle that the new cannot be built without the old being destroyed. Let us not be naïve. There is always a great collision of cosmic forces when the kingdom of God spreads on earth.

E. The Relentless Grace of God

But the good news is that in God's story, the last chapter is not judgment but unrelenting, free grace. That grace is demonstrated in the fact that when God restores what man has destroyed, he doesn't restore it to what it was before but makes it bigger and better. Yes, the vine-growers and their temple will be destroyed, but out of the rubble God will create a new temple, with the Son whom they killed at its very center. And this new temple will not be a mere reconstruction of the old and will not be built in stone. It will be built out of living stones, and when it is finished it will fill the whole creation. So Eden's vision will be fulfilled and every particle of earth will be invaded by heaven. And once again, this generous, trusting God leaves his most precious capital investment, what we now call the church, in the hands of men.

Hearing this story, how can we not fall at his feet in worship?

© 1999 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

1. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 657.
2. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 339.
3. Gundry, 658.
4. See Wright's excellent discussion of historical and theological background for this parable in N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 495-501.
5. Watts, 339.
6. Quoted by C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 363.
7. Gundry, 661.
8. "Juridical parables work by delaying the moment of self-identification until the hearers have passed judgment" (Watts, 345).
9. Scholars have noted the word play in Hebrew between son (*ben*), stone (*eben*) and builders (*banot*).