

Who Do You Think You Are?
Mark 11:27-12:12

“By what authority doest thou these things?” That’s what the religious leaders asked Jesus, but what they really meant was, “Who do you think you are, coming in here, and throwing all the money changers out of the Temple?” Jesus’ reply, of course, is as brilliant as it is devastating. He turns the tables on his accusers, asking them instead what they thought about John the Baptist.

But why does Jesus do this? Because John bore witness to Jesus in no uncertain terms. John had pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” You can’t get much more of a positive identification than that – John clearly stated that Jesus was the Messiah.

But John also said that Jesus’ ministry would be one of authority, and even of cleansing. In chapter 3 of Luke’s gospel, John said of the coming Messiah: “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” If the religious leaders had listened to John, they would thus not have been surprised about the incident with the money changers. They should have known Who Jesus was, and they should have been expecting the royal Son of David to do things just like that. Thus, if they had accepted John’s authority, they would have recognized Jesus’ authority as well.

Okay, so why didn’t the religious leaders just admit that they didn’t believe in either John’s testimony or Jesus’ authority? Because John had been very popular. And so if the chief priests and scribes had publicly denied that Jesus was the Messiah, that would mean they were denying that John was a prophet. And that would mean that even if the people didn’t stone them for blasphemy, they would have lost whatever influence they may have had over the crowd.

And so, like so many politicians through the years, instead of giving Jesus a straight answer, they waffled. Being more interested in the pursuit of popularity than in the pursuit of truth, they refused to answer Jesus’ question. Jesus in return refused to answer them – at least not directly.

But his indirect answer, the parable of the vineyard, isn’t exactly hard to understand. Now, some of the parables of Jesus are difficult, real head-scratchers, but not this one. No, the central ideas of the parable of the husbandmen, the vinedressers are hard to miss. By telling this parable, Jesus is obviously claiming to be the beloved Son of God, sent to visit God’s vineyard. He also acknowledges that the leaders of God’s people didn’t want to have anything to do with Him – in fact, He says that the very reason they are plotting to kill Him is precisely because deep down they know He really is God’s Son. And Jesus points out that in their determination to destroy Him, the chief priests and scribes are carrying on a time-honored tradition of their ancestors – ignoring and mistreating the prophets of God.

But Jesus’ conclusion in verses 10 and 11, quoted from Psalm 118, sticks it to the religious leaders even more clearly. For even though they rejected Him, He really is the chief cornerstone of the House of God. The chief priests and the scribes might want to kill Jesus, but His ministry, He says, is the Lord’s doing. And so, the reason His actions are so marvelous, so strange to them, is because they don’t really know God at all.

Yes, Jesus’ message to the religious leaders is both unmistakable and devastating. But what about the crowds, those people who hailed Him on Palm Sunday as their Messiah, those people who were preventing their leaders from arresting Him right away? Does this parable have anything to say to them?

Of course, for it wasn’t just the leaders who rejected God’s prophets down through the years, was it? And in less than a week, the people of Jerusalem would do exactly the same thing their leaders were doing in this passage – they too would reject their Messiah. They too would clamor for the Romans to crucify the beloved son of the owner of the vineyard, and thus they too would reject the rock Who should have formed the cornerstone of their nation.

But what about us? Surely we Christians know that Jesus is the Messiah, and we know what manner of Messiah He is. We know Jesus came to take up not a crown but a cross. We Christians recognize God as the sovereign ruler of all things, the true owner of the vineyard. And we know that Jesus is His beloved son, the one to whom we owe our allegiance, the one who deserves to be the very cornerstone of our lives. We know the truth to which this parable points, the answer to the puzzle. So what can we learn from this passage?

Well, that all depends on what we think that we owe the owner of the vineyard. After all, the problem in the parable is that those who take care of the vineyard refuse to give the owner His due. It is the fruit of the vineyard that they withhold when the owner's servants come for it. And the reason that they kill the owner's son is so that they can keep all the fruit of the vineyard for themselves. The fruit of the vineyard lies at the heart of this parable – but what exactly is this fruit? What is it that the prophets and Jesus Himself say that we owe to God?

Isaiah was one of those prophets, those servants who came seeking the fruit of the people of God. In chapter 5 of his book He tells a similar story of a vineyard on which the judgment of its landowner fell. But why does Isaiah say the owner of the vineyard will remove its hedge, its wall of protection? Why does Isaiah say the vineyard shall be laid waste, abandoned to the briars and thorns, surrendered to the withering heat of drought?

Because the vineyard yielded no suitable fruit for its owner. The vineyard, which represents the people of God, produced oppression and misery instead of justice and righteousness. It produced wild grapes that were no good for anyone to eat. Would any farmer blame God for uprooting such unproductive vines and starting over?

Later on in the same chapter Isaiah says that God found His people full of greed and selfishness, buying up more houses and lands for themselves. God found His people forgetting their God in the midst of their drinking parties and feasts. God found His people calling evil good and good evil, people who considered themselves wise in their own sight. Are we bearing any of this sort of fruit today?

And so God said He would destroy His unproductive vineyard. And God kept His word, delivering His people into the hands of the Babylonians, allowing them to be ruled by godless pagans whose behavior they were so shamelessly emulating. Isaiah said, "Therefore, as the fire devours the stubble, And the flame consumes the chaff, So their root will be as rottenness, And their blossom will ascend like dust; Because they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts, And despised the word of the Holy One of Israel."

So, if we aren't bearing fruit that's any different from that produced by God's Old Testament people, then we too have rejected God's Law. We too have despised God's Son. We too are in danger of the winnowing fan and the fire.

And thus the question of Jesus' identity and authority is just as urgent for us today as it was for the people of Isaiah's time, or the Good Friday crowds. For knowing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God isn't merely the answer to some historical puzzle or some theological debate. The question before us modern American Christians is the same one that faced the religious leaders and the people of God 2000 years ago: what are we going to do with Jesus, this One Who calls Himself the cornerstone?

Oh, we may say that Jesus is the cornerstone of our lives, but what does a cornerstone do? Think about it. If you are building a masonry structure, the position of the cornerstone determines everything else. The direction it points determines the angles of the walls it anchors. The plane formed by its top will determine whether the rest of the stones or bricks stacked on top of it are level or unstable. And because it is on the bottom of the structure, it literally holds up the building, forming a key part of its foundation.

So, what would it mean for our individual lives if Jesus were truly our cornerstone? What sort of fruit would we bear for Him if we really did what He told us to do? How would our relationships be different if we really loved our enemies, if we really did good to those who hate us and reject us, honoring our commitments to family and friends regardless of the pain and

suffering they might bring us? How would our schedules and budgets be different if we really put God and other people before ourselves where it comes to spending our time and our money?

Now, such a relentless pursuit of piety and purity may sound radical, even dangerous. It certainly did to the people to whom Isaiah first preached. Like many folks today, instead of surrendering themselves completely to God, they tried to balance their loyalties and commitments, serving God as well as self. Oh yes, they wanted God in their lives, but only to a limited extent, only on their terms. They wanted to build the building of their lives based on another foundation, fitting what should have been the cornerstone somewhere else in the wall.

But that doesn't make sense, does it? For what would happen if you tried to do that with a masonry building? What if you tried to use a cornerstone, for example, as the keystone on top of an arch? It wouldn't be the right shape, and it would be too big and heavy. Its weight and size would pull down the whole arch, and compromise the integrity of the whole structure.

Meanwhile, what sort of foundation can you possibly lay without a cornerstone? Without such a firm start, the rows of brick or stone will be uneven, and the walls will end up higher in some places and lower in others. The walls would bow in and out, and when you tried to put the roof on them, the stress would probably collapse the whole thing.

No, if we try to make our commitment to Christ merely a decorative element in our lives that are otherwise devoted to the service of sin or self, we will be just as guilty as the people of Isaiah's time, just as guilty as the Good Friday crowd, withholding the fruit that is His due, rejecting our cornerstone.

And if we do that, if we try to construct our lives without allowing Christ and His teachings to hold us up and to determine our direction and to provide the point of reference for everything we do, if we try to make Jesus anything except the firm foundation of our lives, can we expect anything more than the destruction that the vine-growers received?

But if we will take Jesus on His terms, orienting our lives according to Him, our fixed point of reference, if we will test all our decisions according to the One Who defines what is straight and level, if we will build our lives on top of Him as our firm foundation, we need not fear. For if Jesus really is our God and our King, directing us in all we do, then He will be pleased when He comes into His vineyard, for He will already possess the fruit that is rightfully His – all that we are and all that we have.