Jesus, the Cornerstone

Mark 11:27-12:12

Key Verse: 12:10 “Haven’t you read this passage of the Scripture: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

I don’t want to tell a sad story this beautiful morning, but we were shocked by the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas last week. A high school teen shot his grandmother and went to an elementary school and killed 19 children and 2 teachers. Our question remains, “When will this gun violence stop?” We lament over the increase of violence and evilness of sinful men through this tragedy. But this story is not new to us. In today’s passage, Jesus illustrates the wickedness and evilness of men who rebelled against God. In the Parable of the Tenants, Jesus teaches us who he really is and what the relationship between God and human beings should be.

First, authority from heaven (27-33) Jesus and his disciples arrived again in Jerusalem. They came back from Bethany. As Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders came to him and asked him, “***By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you authority to do this.***” (27-28) The previous day, Jesus cleared the temple courts by driving out those who were buying and selling animals. He overturned the tables of money changers and the benches of those selling doves. He also said, “*Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.? But you have made it a den of robbers.*’” (15-17) Jesus was furious at the corruption and wickedness of the religious leaders. Jesus’ clearing the temple became a great challenge against the temple authorities. So, they came in a group and challenged Jesus.

How did Jesus answer them? Look at verses 29-30. “***Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!***” Jesus replied with a counter-question about the authority of John’s baptism. John the Baptist was not from the religious group like them. He didn’t get permission from temple authority, but went out in the desert and preached the baptism of repentance. Many people came to him and received baptisms from John. Not to mention John’s baptism came from heaven, from God, not from the temple or any human origin. The religious leaders discussed it among themselves and said, **“If we say, ‘From heaven,” he will ask, “Then why didn’t you believe him?” But if we say, ‘Of human origin’...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)” So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.**” (31-33a) Their answer was ‘We don’t know.’ This was because they were trapped by Jesus’ counter-question. They tried to trap Jesus, but they were trapped by him instead. Jesus said, “***Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.***” (33b) Of course we know that Jesus’ authority came from heaven. Indeed, Jesus himself is the authority over all because he is the Creator of the whole universe. He is the owner of the temple. The owner of a house has the authority and right to clear his own house.

The motivation behind the religious leaders’ question on authority was not to keep order in God’s house, but to protect their privilege and benefits through their positions in the temple. They used their authority to rule over people and to gain material benefit. Jesus did not choose them as his disciples. Rather, he chose ordinary people such as fishermen, tax collectors, activists, and so on. He called ordinary men and gave them the authority to preach the word and drive out demons. Their authority came from God. In the early stages of our ministry, some church authority in Korea challenged us, saying, “By what authority are you teaching the Bible? Who gave you authority to do this?” They asked us because as laymen without seminary degrees we were teaching the Bible and raising Jesus’ disciples among college students. One senior member got wisdom from Jesus and answered them, “John’s baptism. Does his authority come from heaven or from seminary?” All those who asked him became silent. Jesus called his disciples and commanded, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*...” (Mt 28:18-20) The moment we receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and obey Jesus’ world mission command, we have the authority to make disciples of all nations. It does not matter whether we have a seminary degree or not. It does not matter whether we are young or old. Those who obey Jesus’ command like you and me have the privilege and right to join world mission. Amen!

Second, the Parable of the Tenants. (12:1-8) We call this ‘the Parable of the Vineyard’, too. This is because Jesus illustrates the beautiful love of God through the beautiful vineyard based on Isaiah 5:1-7. This parable mainly teaches us about our relationship with God and our basic duty toward him. The parable starts with this, “***A man planted a vineyard. 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 moved to another place***.” The prophet Isaiah added more to this, that the man planted the vineyard on a fertile hillside and planted it with the choicest vines. (Is 5:1-2) This picture reminds us of the Garden of Eden where God planted in the beginning and put the man into it to work it and take care of it. (Ge 2:8,15) This picture also indicates the Promised Land God put the Israelites into after he had delivered them out of Egypt. Whether we are Adam and Eve or the Israelites, we are blessed to work in God’s vineyard.

Jesus’ story continues. Look at verses 2. “***At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard***.” Here, the owner of the vineyard has the right to demand some fruit of the vineyard as payment for rent. What does “some of the fruit” mean in this parable? The fruit indicates our basic duty as the people of God. They are our gratitude for the vineyard, faithfulness as stewards, and loyalty as people of God. To the Israelites, fruits are faithfulness as the covenant people. All these are their basic duty and minimum responsibility. Then what was the tenants’ response to the owner? Look at verses 3-5. “***But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them, they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed***.” What terrible responses of the tenants to the owner! They repaid good with evil. Their evilness increased as time passed. The owner was very patient. He waited for their repentance and sent more servants. But the evil tenants killed them, too. This tragic story reminds us of Cain murdering his brother Abel. It also indicates the Israelites’ persecution against many prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so on. They killed God’s prophets who had delivered the message of repentance.

What was the owner’s response to them? Look at verses 6-9. “***He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.” But the tenants said to one another. “This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.***” The patience of the owner continued until he sent his Only Son to them. But, the tenants killed the Son too, saying, “*This is the heir, Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.*” They thought that they would take the vineyard if they killed the son, the heir. They knew that the vineyard was not theirs, but the owner and his son’s. But they were greedy and murderous. This story climaxes with Jesus, God’s one and only Son, whom he loved. God sent Jesus his Son to this world, yet this world didn’t recognize him, but killed him. Jesus compared himself to the son in this parable.

The patience of the owner ran out. **What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others**. (9) This indicates God’s wrath and the day of judgment. God will judge this evil world. On judgment day, God will not show mercy, but justice. At that time, Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. What does this parable teach us? What lesson did you learn from these evil tenants? First, we are not the owner of our vineyard, but God. God gave each of us vineyards. They are our lives, families, children, church, school, jobs, and so on. God provided all these and made us work it and take care of it. We have to appreciate God for all these blessings and work hard for his glory and for our happiness. We are stewards and managers of God’s vineyard. We must fulfill our basic duty and responsibility as people of God and stewards. Second, we must believe Jesus as the Son of God. We messed up our vineyard because of our sin. But God did not condemn us, but sent his Son Jesus to save us. John 3:17 says, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*.” What we have to do as the unfaithful steward or manager is repent of our wrongdoings and accept Jesus as the expression of our repentance and for the forgiveness of our sins.

Third, surely God will judge this world. Peter said in 2 Peter 3:9-10. “*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief..*.” Like the evil tenants in this parable, we must not test God’s patience. We must repent before the day will come.

Third, Jesus, the cornerstone (10-12) Jesus concludes this parable by quoting Psalm 118:22,23. Look at verses 10-11. “***Haven’t you read this passage of Scripture: “‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes***’?” There is no verse from the OT more quoted in the NT than this verse. Here, the stone the builders rejected indicates Jesus himself who was rejected by the religious leaders and killed. But soon Jesus became the cornerstone of God’s household. A cornerstone is one of the most important stones in building a house. This is because the foundation starts from the cornerstone. Jesus became the cornerstone of God’s house and God’s salvation through his death and resurrection. Even though he was rejected and killed by his people, he built the foundation for world salvation through his death and resurrection. Then the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew that he had spoken the parable against them. (12) They realized that they were compared to the evil tenants and that Jesus was the Son. They had a chance to repent and to be saved, but they refused to the end.

Last Tuesday my daughter Grace and I drove to Chicago to visit sick senior coworkers in Chicago UBF church, who used to work together when my family stayed there. I met Dr. Joseph Chung, 84 years old, who has a bladder cancer. I thought he was staying home, but he came to church to teach the Bible. He said, “How blessed I am because I can serve one lost soul with the word of life in my old age!” He appreciated God for the privilege to teach the Bible. He doesn’t mind of his illness if he takes care of others. In fact, after he retired, he and his wife, Esther Chung, went to Uganda Africa and lived as missionary for 7 years. Not long after their returning home, his wife missionary Esther Chung got cancer and passed away a few months ago. Now, he himself got a cancer, still he came to church to teach the Bible.

Just before I met him, I visited missionary Sarah Barry, who is now 94 years old. When I visited her, she was preparing the Bible study for one to one. Her assistant said to me that she has 6 one to ones each week. I wondered how she teaches the Bible because she barely talks. I was so moved by their faithfulness and stewardship as missionary and Bible teachers, and I was ashamed of my laziness and unbelief. Dr. Joseph Chung and Sarah Barry are the tenants in God’s vineyard. They are faithful, grateful, and responsible tenants and workers in God’s vineyard. They serve the Lord until they end their last breath. They remind me of 2 Corinthians 4:2 which says, “*Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*”

In conclusion, we are blessed to work in God’s vineyard. Jesus is the source of our spiritual authority and the foundation of our ministry. Let us give thanks to God for our vineyard, our life, family, church, job, and all things. And let us work hard in our vineyard until the harvest time. Amen!