**JESUS, THE CORNERSTONE**

***Mark 11:27-12:12***

***“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’?” (12:10-11)***

In today’s passage, Jesus again encounters the malicious religious leaders and teaches them through a parable. Before his crucifixion, this was Jesus’ last message to call them to repentance. In a broader sense, the parable well summarizes God’s salvation history: God’s creation, Man’s fall, Redemption through Jesus’ death and resurrection, and final judgment and full restoration upon Jesus’ return. In this sense, the parable is a summary of the whole Bible and the characters in the parable can represent all human beings. Through today’s passage, we can learn who God is, who we are, and who Jesus is. May God help us to accept Jesus as the cornerstone and firmly build our lives upon him!

It was Tuesday of Jesus’ Passion Week. On the previous day, Jesus entered the temple courts. When he saw that the temple, which was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations, had become like a den of robbers, he was furious and drove out those who were buying and selling there and overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves (11:15). Then the religious leaders began looking for a way to kill him (18). Jesus and his disciples arrived again in Jerusalem. While Jesus was walking in the temple courts, Jewish leaders, the members of the Sanhedrin, approached and asked him, ***“By what authority are you doing these things?…And who gave you authority to do this?” (28).*** Jesus countered with a question of his own. 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 implied that his own authority came from the same source as John’s. The leaders’ conclusion about John would be their conclusion about Jesus. So the Sanhedrin members were surprised and called an on-the-spot emergency meeting.

Discussing among themselves, they said, ***“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’” (31)*** John had been sent as the Messiah’s herald (Lk 7:27). He prepared people’s hearts to accept Jesus as the Messiah. If the Sanhedrin members publicly acknowledged John’s ministry as being from heaven, they could not but accept Jesus as the Messiah too. So this was not an option for them. But they dared not suggest that John’s baptism was of human origin, for many people admired John as a prophet, and were baptized by him (Mt 3:6). So they were caught in a dilemma. Their reply was one of the most popular answers in court, ***“We don’t know” (33a).*** They were not interested in the truth, but only in keeping their power. Jesus said, ***“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (33b).*** Nevertheless, he answered their question by telling them a parable. Through this parable, Jesus wanted to teach them some important lessons.

**First, God rented out his vineyard (12:1-12:5).** Jesus began his parable by saying, ***“A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower” (12:1a).*** Vineyards may not be so familiar to us, but they were to the people of Israel. Vineyards were found all over Israel, and grapes were one of the main crops produced in the land. Furthermore, people could understand the vineyard metaphor, which explained God’s relationship with Israel. God had shared this metaphor earlier in Isaiah 5:1-7, which is called “The Song of the Vineyard.” A man planted a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up, cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He put a wall around it in order to protect it from wild animals and robbers. He dug a pit for the winepress. He built a watchtower to provide security, shelter, and storage. The owner did his best to make an environment for a fruitful harvest.

Then the owner rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place (1b). Here the landowner refers to God and farmers to the Israelites, especially the Jewish leaders. Historically, God set the Israelites free from their slavery in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God also provided them with every spiritual blessing. He adopted them as his own children, gave them the law to train them in holiness, and granted them regular fellowship with him through temple worship. Most of all, he gave them vision and hope to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to proclaim God’s name to the whole world. The blessing of the vineyard was God’s amazing grace to the Israelites. They were like homeless people, who suddenly became princes and princesses of a generous king.

Let’s go back to the parable again. The owner did not micromanage them. The farmers were free to run the vineyard according to their own initiative, ingenuity, and creativity. All they needed to do was to care for the vineyard, produce its fruit, and offer a portion of the fruit to the owner. So the owner sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard (2). What did they do? Look at verse 3. ***“But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed.”*** This was a very unreasonable response. What was the problem with the tenants? At first, the tenants must have been grateful. As they worked hard, however, self-righteousness and greed grew in their hearts. They wanted to live their own way without the owner’s interference. They denied their relationship with him. The owner could have sent soldiers right away to punish them and take the vineyard away from them. But he did not. Instead, he sent another servant. To his dismay, they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully (4). His servant returned with bandages around his head, limping, using a walker. Again, the owner was patient and exercised restraint. He sent still another servant, hoping they might repent and come back to a right relationship with him. And he would have forgiven all their previous wrongdoings. This time, however, they killed the servant (5a). As they continually failed to repent, they became worse and worse. How terrible they were! But even more surprising than the wickedness of the tenants was the owner’s extreme patience, enduring all their evil. He sent many other servants; some of them they beat, others they killed (5b).

Historically speaking, God’s chosen people Israel had behaved like the tenants in the parable. They became proud and unthankful. They did not honor God as God. They forgot who they were, how miserable they had been, and how God had mercy on them and blessed them. They also became greedy. When they saw the fruit of the vineyard, they became crazy and wanted to keep it all for themselves forever. They put aside God in their lives and worshiped idols made by their own hands. Consequently, they only bore the fruit of evilness. From top to bottom, the nation was covered with open sores of sins. To help them turn back to him and bear the fruit of repentance, God sent his prophets again and again. But they rejected, persecuted, and killed them. In Isaiah 1:2-3, God laments over the nation, saying, *“I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”*

Though Jesus’ immediate focus for his parable was the people of Israel, and in particular the religious leaders, in a broader sense, this parable applies to all mankind. God is the Creator, and human beings are tenants in his world (Ge 2:8). God gave us life and everything else. He wants us to be faithful stewards remembering him, worshiping him, and bearing fruit for his glory. Each person’s life is meant to bear fruit for God. God’s expectation of fruit from man is rightful and just. But God’s main purpose of requiring fruit is to maintain a right relationship with his people. When we offer our fruit to God with thanksgiving, God’s people can be truly joyful and happy in his vineyard. Then what kind of fruit does God seek? In ancient times, usually an owner demanded 50 percent of the crops at harvest time. A generous owner might demand only 30 percent. What did God ask of us in the Bible? Ten percent! Just a tithe! Offering a tithe is an expression of honoring God as God. God wants not only a material tithe, but also wants us to grow in his character and bear the fruits of holiness and love. Furthermore, God wants us to have a sense of mission to declare God’s name and proclaim God’s words to the world.

However, the Bible teaches us that we all failed in rendering fair fruit to God like the tenants in the parable. The fundamental cause is that we deny God’s ownership over our lives and insist that we are the owners. In particular, by God’s grace, we are here in this beautiful country to render fruit to God. Having the freedom to worship and serve God is God’s grace. The privilege of studying in a university is God’s grace. Our families and careers are God’s grace. As his stewards, God wants us to glorify him with all these blessings in his vineyard. But as time passes, people begin to exercise their “freedom” apart from God. They want to enjoy God’s blessing without God’s interference. As people value God’s vineyard more than God, however, their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened (Ro 1:21). As they love God’s blessings more than God, they are enslaved by idols of money, pleasure, and success. Outwardly, many young students look handsome and beautiful, but inwardly, they suffer from a broken relationship with God and the power of sin. Subsequently, people bear the fruit of sin. So God laments over such a condition in Isaiah 5:4, *“What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?”* What is the solution to this tragic consequence? Let’s carefully listen to the remaining part of Jesus’ parable.

**Second, God sent his Son (12:6-12).** Look at verse 6. ***“He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’”*** Finally the owner sent his son. This son was his one and only son, and the heir of the vineyard. To the owner, the son was so beloved and even like himself. The owner knew from experience that it was dangerous to send his son to them. Nevertheless, he sent his son, hoping that the tenants would respect him. Here Jesus revealed God’s love for mankind. God has a never-give-up, undying, unconditional love. God’s love is long-suffering and sacrificial. Out of his great love, God took the initiative to send his Son to sinners who had rebelled against him. When God sent his Son, he hoped we would be moved by his great love and return to him. God wants us to be truly happy with him eternally. John 3:16 says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* In this way, God demonstrated his love for us. Though mankind has sinned so much, God is willing to forgive all of our sins if we just accept his Son. This is the culmination of God’s love.

How did the tenants in the parable respond? Look at verses 7-8. ***“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.”*** They were under the great delusion that if they killed the son, the vineyard would be theirs. They misused God’s patient love. It was a grave mistake. Jesus said, ***“What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others” (9).*** When the religious leaders heard Jesus’ parable, they knew he was speaking about them. But they did not repent (12). When Israel rejected the Messiah, it was their final rejection of God’s sovereign rule over them and his love. As Jesus had warned, all their blessings and privileges were taken from them and given to those who accepted the Son regardless of nationality. In A.D. 70, Roman armies came and totally destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple. More than one million people were killed and the surviving Israelites were scattered among the nations. But this event is not just related to the nation Israel. This is the shadow of God’s final judgment upon those who reject his Son.

So far, the parable seems very gloomy. But Jesus concludes this parable by quoting Psalm 118:22-23 with great hope. 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’?”*** In Jesus’ quotation, “the builders” refers to the religious leaders and the nation of Israel while “the stone” refers to Jesus. When Jesus came into the world, the people did not recognize him because they thought the Son of God would be glorious and majestic. But Jesus was born in a manger. He was humble, gentle, and poor. He lived as a servant of all kinds of people and became the friend of sinners. He was a man of sorrows and sufferings and not attractive in people’s eyes. So they despised and rejected him; finally they crucified him on a cross and threw him outside the city. They thought that was the end of story. But to God, it was not the end. God raised him from the dead and made him the cornerstone. In terms of a building, the cornerstone is most important. It is the foundation and the standard for the entire building. All other stones rely on the cornerstone. We all need a strong foundation. We need something solid and unchanging that can support us in the midst of trials and challenges, including grave illnesses and even death.

Jesus is the very cornerstone of God’s salvation. He laid down his life for rebellious sinners. When we acknowledge that we are sinners like the tenants and trust in Jesus, he becomes the cornerstone of our personal lives. Even though our sins are so severe, if we trust in Jesus, there is God’s unconditional forgiveness. In Isaiah 1:18, God invites each of us, *“Come now, let us settle the matter…Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”* As we rely on him, he becomes the unchanging stone of our salvation, eternal life and the kingdom of God. When we trust money, fame, power, education or people we will be put to shame in the end. But when we trust in Jesus, the cornerstone, we will never be put to shame. Rather, we will bear much fruit and glorify God’s name. Praise God, who gave his beloved Son to us. Praise our Lord Jesus, who became the cornerstone of our salvation through his death and resurrection!

Adoniram Judson is remembered as the first missionary from the United States. He was born to Christian parents. But when he enrolled at Brown University in Rhode Island, he met Jacob Eames, who became his best friend. One evening, the friend told him proudly, “I am a Deist. I believe that God is out there somewhere, but he is not interested in us. What do we have to offer him?” As a result, Adoniram also became a Deist, abandoning his childhood faith. After graduating from college, Adoniram left for New York City in search of how to best enjoy his life. One night he stopped at an inn, but was told there was no room. After begging the innkeeper for lodging of any kind, he was allowed to share a room with a dying man. The innkeeper had hung a sheet to divide the room in half, but all through the night he heard the loud groans of the dying man. Being unable to fall asleep, Adoniram thought about the man, “Who is he?”, “Does he know he was dying?”, “Does he believe in life after death?” Then he began asking himself the same questions. The next morning, he learned that the man died in the early morning. "Who was he?" Adoniram asked the innkeeper. “A smart young man. They said he had been to college at Brown University” replied the innkeeper. “His name was Eames, Jacob Eames.” Adoniram could not speak for the next several hours. His best friend’s death not only made him sad, but made him think about everything he questioned the night before. Adoniram knew that he needed answers to these questions, so he enrolled in a seminary where he studied the Bible with his professors. He finally realized that the Bible was true, that there is a loving God who cares about people and that his own life belonged to God. Since that time on, he committed his life to Christ and to serving God! God used Adoniram as a missionary in Burma for 40 years. During his missionary life, he went through many hard times in Burma. The poor food, unbearable heat, and widespread diseases made life difficult. Two of his babies died in the terrible climate, and both his wife and Adoniram were imprisoned during the war with Britain. But he stood firmly on the cornerstone of Jesus. When Adoniram Judson died in 1850, there were 7,000 baptized believers, 63 Christian congregations and 163 missionaries in Burma. To this day, over 170 years later, his Burmese Bible translation is still in use. His last words at his death were, “I go with the gladness of a boy bounding away from school. I feel so strong in Christ.”

God is the owner of our lives. We are his stewards. Jesus is the cornerstone sent to restore our relationship with God and secure our salvation and fruit-bearing life. During our life’s journey, let’s remember God’s grace and fully trust in Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of our lives. May God be glorified through our lives in Christ!