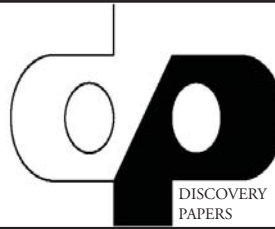


# THE SACRED DOORWAY

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



Catalog No. 100117  
Mark 11:27-12:12  
35th Message  
Scott Grant  
January 17, 2010

When I was sixteen years old, I mustered the courage to tell a girl that I, well, uh, sort of liked her. First, she complimented me on my courage. “You are so strong,” she said. Then she said, “As long as we’re being honest...” I don’t remember what she said after that. Thus I embarked on a long and inglorious career, spanning a quarter century and extending to the next millennium, before I mustered the courage to ask a woman to, well, uh, sort of marry me. Actually, I asked with more directness than that. She said yes. Really? Yes? Yes.

Rejection. We all encounter it. Can we gain something from it, other than a few buckets of tears? Let’s see.

In Mark 11:27-12:12, Jesus, returning to Jerusalem after spending the night in a nearby village, encounters some opponents and then tells them a parable. The parable sheds light on his dealings with the opponents. More importantly, for us, it sheds light on the love of God.

## Leaders challenge Jesus

Mark 11:27-33:

**They came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, “By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?” 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.” 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 people, for everyone considered John to have been a real prophet. Answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”<sup>1</sup>**

Prior to their encounter with Jesus in the temple, chief priests and scribes had already been looking for a way to stop Jesus (Mark 11:18). Jesus, in fact, has already predicted that the chief priests and scribes would condemn him to death (Mark 10:33). When Jesus and his disciples return to the temple, elders join the chief priests and scribes to form what appears to be a delegation from the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council (Mark 14:53-55). Earlier, Jesus disrupted the ministry of the temple and, in prophetic fashion, both dramatized its destruction and rebuked those who had turned what was supposed to be a “house of prayer for all peoples” into a “den of robbers,” or revolutionaries. His actions and words represented a slap in the face of the high priests, who ruled the temple,

and the Sanhedrin as a whole. Therefore, the Jewish leaders, as those in authority, question the authority of Jesus, not to learn anything from him but to expose him as an imposter.

Jesus tests their sincerity with a question of his own, asking the leaders whether the authority of John the Baptist was heavenly or earthly in origin. John, who preached a baptism of repentance, had launched a counter-temple movement, offering forgiveness of sins apart from the temple. He first prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah with his preaching and baptisms and then anointed Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 1:1-8). Jesus picked up where John left off and claimed temple-like authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10). The Jewish leaders, though, refused to repent of either their nationalism (scribes) or their corrupt collaboration with their Roman overlords (chief priests). Blinded by their narrow vision of the kingdom of God or their interest in holding on to power, they held that the baptism of John was “from men,” not “from heaven.” Therefore, they were unprepared when the Messiah, heralded by John, came suddenly to his temple (Malachi 3:1-2, Mark 11:12-18).

On the one hand, John was popular with the people, so the Jewish leaders are unwilling to articulate their opposition to him and risk a public uprising. On the other hand, if they falsely profess belief in John in order to protect themselves, they are implicitly professing belief in Jesus, whom John anointed. Therefore, the leaders answer Jesus’ question about the derivation of John’s authority insincerely: “We do not know.” The leaders, who pride themselves on what they “know,” falsely confess that they don’t know something that they do, in fact, believe they know. How embarrassing! The leaders ineptly tried to shame Jesus with two questions, but Jesus unmasks their hypocrisy with only “one” question. In reality, they “do not know” what they need to know: that Jesus acts and teaches with heavenly authority.

The leaders don’t answer Jesus’ question; therefore, Jesus doesn’t answer their question. But his non-answer is different from theirs in two respects. First, he’s sincere. Second, his non-answer is itself an answer of sorts. Jesus doesn’t come right out and say that his authority is from heaven, but both his question and his answer constitute an admission of such, coded in a way that puts the leaders back on their heels.

## Openness to Jesus

What’s our approach to Jesus? Do we approach him with an openness to learn what he wants to teach us? Or, like his opponents, do we approach him as a threat to what we hold dear? Are we more interested in winning arguments than in learning truth? Do we cling to whatever power we have, or can we yield to a greater power? Do we fixate

on our vision of how life is supposed to work, or can we open our eyes to a greater vision?

Our propensity to win arguments, to cling to power, and to fixate on our narrow vision of life will show up one day the way it showed up in the lives of Jesus' opponents. We will paint ourselves into a corner. The contradictions we've been living with will emerge. We may even embarrass ourselves by falsely confessing ignorance simply to save face. The Lord, perhaps even as we open ourselves to the Gospel of Mark, unmasks our hypocrisy, as he unmasked the hypocrisy of his opponents. At such moments, he's teaching us, with heavenly authority and compassion, what we were afraid to know but what we need to know—ultimately, that we might approach him with an openness to learn what he wants to teach us.

When I approach the Scriptures, I am regularly confronted with my limitations. When I try to understand these magnificent stories, poems, and letters; mesh them with the sweeping biblical narrative; and relate them to life, I say, "Lord, my mind and my heart are too small. Expand my mind. Enlarge my heart." I regularly encounter verses and passages that challenge my theology and expose the contradictions in my belief system. So, Lord Jesus, teach us. Show us the cracks in our belief structures. Tear us down if you must, but please rebuild us according to the truth.

Jesus unmasks our hypocrisy that we might approach him with openness to learn what he wants to teach us. What does he want to teach us? Listen to the parable.

## The Parable of the Vineyard

Mark 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. At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. They took him, and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 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 to send, 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, and the inheritance will be ours!' They took him, and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others."**

Jesus couched his controversial message concerning the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in parables in order to intrigue followers and confound enemies. Privately, he explained the deeper meanings of some of his stories to his disciples. Publicly, he kept his enemies guessing, lest they

understand him too well, mount an effective campaign against him, and bring about his premature demise (Mark 4:10-12). Now that he has arrived in Jerusalem, however, Jesus is moving toward a showdown with the chief priests, scribes, and elders. Therefore, his message in the parable of Mark 12:1-12 is closer to the surface.

The parable echoes the prophet Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard, which is a story of God's love for Israel, her rejection of him, and his judgment of her (Isaiah 5:1-7). Like so many of Jesus' parables, this one retells the story of Israel. This parable, though, is spoken directly to the Jewish leaders who were challenging him.

The Scriptures, especially Isaiah 5:1-7, help us understand the story. The vineyard owner represents God. The vineyard represents Israel, the people of God. The vine-growers represent the leaders of Israel. The slaves whom the vineyard owner sends evoke the prophets (Jeremiah 25:4, 26:5). The vineyard owner's son represents the Son of God, the king of Israel, whom Mark has identified as Jesus (Mark 1:11, 9:7). The "others" to whom the vineyard is entrusted evoke the disciples of Jesus and other followers of his.

God created Israel, loved her, provided for her, and protected her so that she might bear fruit for the sake of the world. He entrusted Israel to her leaders, hoping that they would care for his people. He was extraordinarily generous and trusting. God sent prophets to remind the leaders of their calling, but the leaders persecuted them, beat them, disgraced them, and killed them. God's generosity was matched only by his apparent naiveté. Although the leaders kept mistreating his prophets, he kept sending them anyway, hoping for a change of heart. Finally, God's apparent naiveté becomes apparent insanity when he sends his beloved Son, with all the authority of heaven, and hopes that the leaders will respect him. God continued to believe in those who disdainfully and repeatedly spurned his love. Note that horrendous evil brings forth lavish beauty from the Father's heart: it brings forth his Son.<sup>2</sup>

In the parable, the farmers apparently assume that the vineyard owner has died and that the son has come to claim the land. The death of the son, the heir, would leave the land without an owner. So they conspire to kill the son to claim the vineyard for themselves. It's not enough for them to kill the heir, however; they also cast him over the wall of the vineyard and shame him by leaving his body to rot instead of burying him.<sup>3</sup>

What more could the vineyard owner do? After parting with his son, he had no one left to send and nothing left to give. The farmers leave him with no choice. After exhausting every possibility and suffering every possible insult, he will destroy the farmers.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders of Israel are conspiring to treat the Son of God the way the farmers treated the son of the vineyard owner. They want the people and land of Israel for themselves and their narrow-minded, violent, and corrupt purposes. Jesus is warning them, however, that if they proceed with their machinations, God will destroy them and transfer leadership of the Israel of God to others who will evidently fulfill Israel's vocation to bless the world. The writer of Hebrews observes that Jesus was crucified outside the gates of Jerusalem, as the son in the story was cast out of the vineyard (Hebrews 13:11-12).

God destroyed Jerusalem, and the leaders of Israel along with it, in 70 A.D. through the Roman armies, and he reconstituted Israel around the disciples, who became apostles (Ephesians 2:19-22, Revelation 21:14).

The Parable of the Vineyard complements the cursing of the fig tree, which represented the temple and Israel as a whole (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21). Neither the fig tree nor the farmers yielded any fruit.

## The furious love of God

God has created the new Israel, comprising followers of his Son. He has loved us, provided for us, and protected us so that we might participate in his mission to the world. He has been extraordinarily generous and trusting. He has given us the Scriptures to remind us of our calling. Finally, like the last, desperate act of a crazy lover, he sends us his Son, that we might live and create and play with him in the new world. What more could he possibly do for us?

What does Jesus want to teach us? He wants to teach us about the furious love of God. The Parable of the Vineyard presses upon us. How will we respond to God? What will we do with his Son? The farmers offend us. The vineyard owner astounds us. The parable rocks us. It scares us that we see something of the farmers in us—something that would dispatch with the Son and claim the world for ourselves. But perfect love, which meets escalating evil with boundless grace, casts out fear. Yes, we will—we must—serve God in his world and honor his Son with the fruit of our labors whatever the cost. How could we do otherwise?

Brennan Manning lived in a cave by himself for seven months, seeing no one, in order to meet with God. One night, “in faith” he heard Jesus say, “For love of you I left my Father’s side. I came to you who ran from me, fled me, who did not want to hear my name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of the cross.” Realizing that no one had ever loved him or could love him as Jesus did, he went out of the cave, stood on the precipice, and shouted into the darkness, “Jesus, are you crazy? Are you out of your mind to have loved me so much?”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus teaches us, though the parable and through his life, about the furious love of God. We attempt to approach him with openness, but we can’t manage to pry open our hearts. Not many of us can—or would want to—spend seven months in a cave. Even if we did, it’s just as likely that we’d go crazy as call Jesus crazy for loving us so much. Some lessons must be learned the hard way: by living.

## A stone rejected

Mark 12:10-12:

**Have you not even read this Scripture:**

**‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS  
REJECTED,**

**THIS BECAME THE CHIEF 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 people, for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him and went away.**

To cap his parable, Jesus refers the Jewish leaders to the Scriptures. Earlier, when Jesus approached Jerusalem, the pilgrims hailed him with praises based on Psalm 118:26: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mark 11:9). Now, Jesus employs words from the same psalm (Psalm 118:22-23).

With the stones of the temple forming the backdrop, Jesus speaks to the Jewish leaders of a stone. He expects the leaders to identify with the builders and to identify him as the stone. Jesus is the odd stone out. He can’t be fit into the purposes of the Jewish leaders. Despite their rejection of him, Jesus expects to become the “chief cornerstone”—most likely, the capstone that completes a building. They can kill him, throw him out of the vineyard, and declare him useless for their purposes, but Jesus predicts his vindication. He’s predicting, once again, his resurrection, albeit in cryptic fashion in the presence of his enemies.

The pilgrims may praise Jesus from Psalm 118, but he won’t let it go to his head or dissuade him from his task. He listens to the Scriptures—in this case, all of Psalm 118, not just part of it. He’ll receive praises based on the psalm, but such praises awaken him to the prospect of rejection, also based on the psalm.

Jesus will say that “not one stone” of the temple will be “left upon another” (Mark 13:2). Jesus, though, will be the integral “stone” in the construction of a new temple, made without hands, comprising his followers (Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:4-5).

Who gave Jesus the authority to disrupt the temple and speak against it? In that the transformation from rejected stone to capstone comes about “from the Lord,” the leaders have an answer to their question. Jesus’ authority comes from heaven, from the Lord.

The turnaround, impossible apart from the power of God, is marvelous in the eyes of at least some observers. Earlier, Jesus asked his disciples, “Having eyes, do you not see?” (Mark 8:18). He’s been trying to open their eyes so that they might understand the cross-shaped nature of his mission. Jesus spoke in parables to confound his enemies, so that “while seeing, they may see and not perceive” (Mark 4:12). God will vindicate Jesus by raising him from the dead, and some will have their eyes opened to see both his identity as the Son of God and the nature of his mission.

Jesus’ parable casts the Jewish leaders in opposition to God. For once, his enemies understand him: they understand that he spoke the parable against them. Conceivably, such a parable, which features the furious love of God, could lay bare one’s heart and lead to repentance. The leaders, however, react by seeking the arrest of Jesus, but they hold themselves back again for fear of the crowd. They leave Jesus, but they will be back.

## What comes of rejection

The reversal, from rejected stone to capstone: is it mar-



velous in our eyes? Can we see that this has come about, that it could only come about, from the Lord? If so, then we know who Jesus is: the Son of God. We know the cross-shaped nature of his mission. We also know that he shares his mission with us. Therefore, we too at times will feel like the odd stone out, more or less useless, as if we can't be fit into anyone's purposes. We will be rejected. And it will hurt. We will feel like David, who wrote, "I am a worm and not a man, / A reproach of men and despised by the people" (Psalm 22:6). Rejection by humans can make you feel less than human. What hope is there for a worm?

Think about this, though: because a man was rejected, the kingdom of God came. "He was despised and forsaken of men, / A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; / And like one from whom men hide their face / He was despised, and we did not esteem Him" (Isaiah 53:3). They nailed him to a cross and shattered his heart. He even felt rejected by God, crying out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34). Why was he rejected? So that the kingdom of God might come.

Why are we rejected? So that the kingdom of God might advance. Our anguish, in the mystery of the kingdom, becomes a sacred doorway for the purposes of God. Rejection makes us *feel*. It sensitizes us. It puts us in a place where we can sense the love of God. If we can't pry open our hearts, rejection does it for us. It opens new spaces in our hearts, where we encounter the Man of Sorrows and share his sufferings. We taste the sweetness of his presence. Somehow, the Lord enlarges our hearts so that our capacity for love expands.

If we encounter the Son in such ways, then we are children of God. Each of God's children is integral to his purposes. He fits us into his living temple. "And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5). Whatever happens to you, if you belong to the Son, you too will be resurrected, which means, not least, that you will be vindicated as a child of God. What hope is there for a worm? None. What hope is there for a child of God? Heaven's the limit.

We learn about the love of God—rather, we *believe* in the love of God—by being rejected. If we have difficulty being open to what Jesus wants to teach us, then we encounter rejection as a sacred doorway.

Such was the experience of one of our great spiritual writers, Henri Nouwen, who tells of when a cherished friendship "had to be interrupted":

*All had become darkness. Within me there was one long scream coming from a place I didn't know existed, a place full of demons. ... I felt abandoned, rejected, and betrayed. ... Intellectually I knew that no human friendship could fulfill the deepest longing of my heart. I knew that only God could give me what I desired. I knew that I had been set on a road where nobody could walk with me but Jesus. But all this knowledge didn't help me in my pain. ...*

*In the first weeks it seemed as if my anguish only got worse. Very old places of pain that had been hidden to me*

*were opened up, and fearful experiences from my early years were brought to consciousness. The interruption of friendship forced me to enter the basement of my soul and look directly at what was hidden there, to choose, in the face of it all, not death but life.*

Later, he looked back on that period of his life as a time of "intense purification" that had led him "gradually to a new inner freedom, a new hope, and a new creativity":

*What once seemed such a curse has become a blessing. All the agony that threatened to destroy my life now seems like the fertile ground for greater trust, stronger hope, and deeper love. ...*

*During my months of anguish, I often wondered if God is real or just a product of my imagination. I now know that while I felt completely abandoned, God didn't leave me alone. Many friends and family members have died during the past eight years, and my own death is not so far away. But I have heard the inner voice of love, deeper and stronger than ever.<sup>5</sup>*

For Nouwen, rejection was a sacred doorway for God's purposes. It purified him and opened him up in new ways to God's love. Eventually, he heard the inner voice of love, God's voice, in a deeper and stronger way. He wrote two books based on his experience, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and *The Inner Voice of Love*, both of which have come alongside me in my journey—and thousands of others in their journeys. What can we say but: his pain, our gain?

Rejection? Embrace it. Let it hurt.

## A day with the Lord

Some years ago, in the wake of a broken relationship, I spent a day with the Lord. I went to the mountains and hiked along a creek-side trail. I poured out my heart as I journaled in a coffee house. I walked along a quiet street in the darkness. The Lord joined me. I sensed his presence in a deeper, stronger way. I heard the inner voice of love. If I lamented the loss of a relationship, the Lord reminded me that the church was the bride of Christ. If I wanted to lay down my life for a woman, he suggested that I lay down my life for the church. So, I did, or at least I sought to. I began serving the church with new vision. I started the Young Adults Fellowship, which, not coincidentally, I suppose, gathered dozens of single folks who were ten or fifteen years younger than I was, many of whom came to my door for help with their own relational yearnings and brokenness. It still happens. I got a call a few months ago from a single woman from Belgium who was depressed that she was turning thirty and had somehow found me on the internet. She said, "I have to talk to you!" Belgium?! What has come about from the Lord: it is marvelous in my eyes.

Do you see what God does with rejection? He meets us where it hurts. He shows us his love. He gives us new vision. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). The place where you hurt the most,

then, may be the place where you have the most to offer. Although it's been fourteen years since I spent that day with the Lord, I can still taste the sweetness of it. It will be with me always.

Approach Jesus with openness to learn about—to believe in!—the furious love of God, especially through rejection, the sacred doorway. “For my father and my mother have forsaken me, / But the Lord will take me up” (Psalm 27:10).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Literary structure:

- A Chief priests, scribes, and elders came to him (27)
- B Question regarding authority of Jesus (28)
  - C Question regarding authority of John (29-30)
  - C' Non-answer regarding authority of John (31-33a)
- B' Non-answer regarding authority of Jesus (33b)
  - D “A man planted a vineyard ... ” (1)
  - E He sent slaves: they were beaten and killed (2-5)
  - E' He sent his son: they killed him and threw him out of the vineyard (6-8)
  - D' Owner will destroy vine-growers, give vineyard to others (9)
  - F “The stone which the builders rejected” (10a)
  - G “This became the chief corner stone” (10b)
  - G' “This came about from the Lord” (10c)
  - F' “And it is marvelous in our eyes” (10d)
- A' They left him and went away (12)

<sup>2</sup> The Parable of the Vineyard echoes the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20). After three unsuccessful sowings, the fourth sowing yields a bumper crop. After sending three slaves (and many others after that), the vineyard owner finally sends his son. But instead of returning with buckets of grapes, as we might expect after the Parable of the Sower, the son meets with a different fate.

<sup>3</sup> The farmers are like Joseph's brothers, who were jealous of him and said, “Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits ... ” (Genesis 37:20). They are also like Ahab, the wicked king of Israel, who allowed Jezebel to arrange for the death of Naboth, who had refused to give his vineyard to the king (1 Kings 21:1-16).

<sup>4</sup> Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1992), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1996), xiv-xviii, 117-118.

---

Discovery Publishing © 2010. Discovery Publishing is the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This message from the Scriptures was presented at PENINSULA BIBLE CHURCH, Palo Alto. To receive additional copies of this message contact Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306 Phone (650) 494-0623. [www.pbc.org/dp](http://www.pbc.org/dp). We suggest a 50 cent donation per printed message to help with this ministry.

Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”), © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.