JESUS, THE CORNERSTONE

Mark 11:27–12:12

Key Verses: 12:10,11

“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’?”

Mark’s Gospel has only two major parables of Jesus, and today’s passage is one of them. We can learn many things from this parable, but mainly we want to think about what it means that Jesus is the cornerstone, and what we should do in light of it. May God speak to us through his living word today.

Read 11:27,28. It’s Tuesday of Passion Week, and the religious leaders are very upset with Jesus because of what he did the day before. When he cleansed the temple, he really made them look bad. So they come on the attack. They think Jesus, this carpenter from Nazareth, who never even attended any rabbinic school, has no right to come into the center of the Jewish religion at Passover, kick people out and start teaching there himself. This is how people usually respond; when they’re called out on something, instead of admitting they’re wrong, they question the credentials of the person who rebuked them.

They ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you authority to do this?” Where did his authority come from? In 1:11, when he was being baptized, a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” And in 9:7, this voice from heaven was heard again: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Jesus’ authority doesn’t come from these religious leaders or their schools; he has authority to do what he’s doing and to teach what he’s teaching because he’s the Son of God. During his ministry the ordinary people were amazed at Jesus’ spiritual authority seen in his miracles and his teaching (1:22,27; 2:10–12; 6:2; 11:18). By now his authority is so obvious that it isn’t even worth mentioning, much less defending.

How does Jesus respond? Read verses 29,30. It’s so wise that he raises a question about the authority of John the Baptist. These religious leaders had not accepted John’s authority, though all the people believed that John was a prophet (32b). Why not? Partly it was because John the Baptist, like Jesus, also wasn’t a part of their religious establishment. But really it was because they were spiritually so proud, they thought they were better than everybody else and didn’t need to repent (cf. Mt3:7–9; 21:32). John the Baptist’s example shows the nature of spiritual authority. It doesn’t come from a seminary degree or people’s approval. God gave John the Baptist spiritual authority when he sent him, and, because John’s ministry was based on the word of God (1:2–4). When we’re sent by God and obey his word, we too are given spiritual authority (3:14,15; 6:7).

So what happens? Read verses 31–33. These religious leaders are trapped by thinking only about what people will think. They’ve got no courage and no interest in standing up for the truth. All they care about is keeping their positions of honor among the people. They came out strong, but now they chicken out. They’re supposed to be religious leaders, but it’s all pretty sad. Because they’re like this, Jesus declines to explain anything further to them.

Jesus, does, however, go on to tell a parable. It’s one of his most famous, the parable of the tenants. What’s it about? Jesus uses an illustration from ordinary life that everybody could understand. Read 12:1. Let’s think a little bit about this man. What do his actions here show about him? First of all, he’s a man with a plan. He’s got a vision to build a vineyard. And he knows what it takes to run it. He doesn’t just plant grape vines; he builds a wall to protect the place, and a watchtower, and he wants to have wine made there right on site, so he builds a winepress. It’s going to be a great operation. He also hires some tenant farmers to get things going. That’s pretty generous of him. Maybe it’s like a good company moving into a area with high unemployment. People now have a great place to work, and jobs that will give them some income and some dignity for themselves and their children. The man also entrusts the place to these people instead of micromanaging it, showing that he basically respects them.

This parable is an allegory of Israel’s history. In several places in the Old Testament, Israel is compared to a vineyard planted by God (Ps80:8,14,16; Isa3:14; 5:1–7; Jer12:10). God invested so much in them so that they would bear good spiritual fruit (cf. Ro9:4,5). But the parable is also an allegory of how God entrusted the amazing world we live in to human beings, to be good stewards of this world (Ge1:28; 2:15). So often we fail to appreciate it, but it’s such a privilege just to be alive in God’s world and to have the chance each day to do something productive with our lives.

But this is just the beginning of the parable. Read verse 2. This was normal. The man is the owner, so of course he’s expecting to have some fruit from his vineyard. It’s a chance for the tenants to show their appreciation to the owner for giving them the chance to work there. He’s not asking for all the vineyard’s fruit, just “some” of it. He wants them to have some for themselves, too. In the same way, God doesn’t just want things from us; rather, he provides for us, wants to have a relationship with us, and after doing so much for us, he gives us the chance to show him our appreciation.

But how to these people respond? Read verses 3–5. It’s really shocking. They seem so unreasonable! And though the owner keeps sending servants to them, their behavior gets more and more violent. What’s going on with these people? It may seem like they’re just ignorant and being way too greedy. But their repeated and increasing violence shows that they really want nothing to do with the owner; they want him out of their lives completely. This, too, is an allegory of both Israel’s and all human history. In our sinful nature we human beings actually want nothing to do with God. We try to take everything he gives us and keep it all for ourselves. We think we can do fine without him, and we certainly don’t want to have to answer to him or be accountable to him.

But as we think about these verses, we’re also drawn to what they show us about people and about God. The servants represent the Old Testament prophets (Jer7:25; Ac7:51,52). Throughout their history the people of Israel treated so badly the servants God sent to them. The Old Testament is full of those stories. People still strongly reject servants of God. Why? It’s for the same reason: people just don’t want to repent and turn to God. They want to be left alone to do whatever they want. Fundamentally, people know that there is a Creator God. But they don’t want to acknowledge him as God or give thanks to him, and that’s when their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened (Ro1:18–21).

The owner repeatedly sending servants is an allegory for God’s character. Some people think the God of the Old Testament is so violent and scary. But actually, God has always been the God who is rich in kindness, forbearance and patience, who's persistently working to lead people to repentance (Ro2:4). But people misunderstand God’s kindness as weakness, and when he doesn’t immediately punish them for their acts of rebellion, they despise him and think they can get away with anything.

Jesus’ parable takes a surprising turn. Read verse 6. When we read this verse, we can’t but wonder, “What was this owner *thinking*? How could he send his beloved son to people with such a ruthless, violent history? Didn’t he know what would happen? How could he expect such people to respect his son?” But that’s the nature of love. The Bible says, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1Co13:4–7). The Bible says that God never takes any pleasure in the death of the wicked; rather, he’s pleased when they turn from their ways and live (Eze18:23). The Bible says plainly that God is love (1Jn4:8,16). 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.” We may not feel like God loves us. But God proved his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Ro5:8). God loves each of us so much that he even sent his own Son, to help us turn to him.

But when the owner sends his son, how do the tenants react? Read verses 7,8. It shows how crooked and rebellious their hearts are. It’s the biggest mistake they could ever make. Likewise, the most foolish thing we can do in life is to reject the love of God for us in Jesus. God doesn’t want to punish us, but we put ourselves under his wrath if we reject his love. What does Jesus say? Read verse 9. It tells us that just as God’s love is great, so is his wrath. There are definitely terrible consequences for those who reject the love of God. Also, we can learn from this verse that God’s plan will not fail. He’ll make it work out that he has a spiritually fruitful vineyard, by any means. In verse 9, the other people who get God's vineyard are the Gentiles. When the Jews rejected their Messiah, God’s spiritual blessings went to the Gentiles. God still entrusts his spiritual blessings to people humble enough to receive them.

Read verses 10–11. Here Jesus is quoting from Psalm 118:22,23. It’s the same Passover psalm the people were singing when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a baby donkey (11:9). Everybody knew this famous psalm. But nobody ever really knew what the stone the builders rejected who became the cornerstone really meant, until Jesus explains it here. Jesus fulfills that prophecy.

Jesus is the rejected stone, and the religious leaders are the builders. They reject Jesus because he doesn’t fit in with their blueprint of what they’re after. They want a glorious messiah that will feed their pride and that they can brag about, someone who will restore their nation to its former glory. But Jesus is nothing but a humble carpenter from a small town, Nazareth in Galilee, and he’s only been making friends with social outcasts, healing sick people and rebuking their own hypocrisy. Today, too, people still reject Jesus. Why? Because Jesus doesn’t fit in with what they want in their lives. They think Jesus may be nice, but fundamentally he’s kind of useless and irrelevant. They think they can do just fine without him. At best, people want Jesus to fit into what *they* want; they don’t want to fit themselves into what *Jesus* wants. People want to pursue a life in this world, with all that that entails; they want to get what they want; they don’t want to be bothered with God or heaven or the deeper spiritual truths in life.

Read verse 10 again. Here it’s important to think about what a cornerstone is. In masonry it’s the most important stone in construction. Especially in the ancient world when stones had to be chiseled by hand, choosing the cornerstone had to be a picky ordeal. Builders would pick the stone easiest to modify. The cornerstone needed all the most perfect right angles, vertically, horizontally, and in depth, so that the building could be based on those angles and not be crooked. It’s an allegory for Jesus. Jesus is the perfect example we all need to be following. He’s the standard. If we don’t carefully follow him, we get off on the wrong track and go in the wrong direction.

But fundamentally, verse 10 is connected with the parable, with the owner’s son being thrown out of the vineyard. In verse 10, the tenants morph into the builders. Just as the tenants threw out the son, so the builders rejected a stone. But the surprising thing is, God makes that rejected stone the cornerstone. What’s it referring to? It’s a prediction of Jesus’ resurrection. The religious leaders thought they could kill Jesus and be rid of him forever. But God made Jesus the cornerstone of his salvation plan. Later, the Apostle Peter preached this message. He said in Acts 4:11,12, “Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” It’s the greatest irony ever. Who would have thought that rejected stone would become the cornerstone?

But what does it mean to accept this? To accept Jesus as my cornerstone means to accept him as my only way of salvation. We may think we’re smart and able, but without Jesus we’ll be totally lost. To accept Jesus as my cornerstone, I need to come to him, believe in him and really treasure him as most precious to me. To accept Jesus as my cornerstone also means to join the community of God’s people who also have accepted him (Eph2:19–22). As we accept Jesus as my cornerstone, we become part of the new people of God, members of a spiritual house God is using to bring people in this fallen world back to himself (1Pe2:4–10). As we accept Jesus as my cornerstone, we participate in his sufferings and get rejected just as he was rejected, simply because we belong to him. We also need to be careful to see people who might look to us like useless rejected stones as those who might be chosen by God and precious to him.

Read verse 11 again. Nobody wanted Jesus to be the cornerstone. The religious leaders did their best to stop it. But God made it happen anyway. God overruled their plan and accomplished his own plan. It is marvelous because it reveals the glory of God, the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not (Ro4:17b). God will still accomplish his own glorious salvation plan in this world through the resurrection of Jesus, the cornerstone.

So today let's ask ourselves, “Is Jesus really my cornerstone? Have I really accepted his death and resurrection for my sins? Is he really my only source of salvation? Is he really the one I’m building my life on?” May God help us make a new decision to accept Jesus as my cornerstone.