The Parable of the Vineyard
Mark 11:27-12:12

In criminology, there's a theory: criminals return to the scene of the crime. Which is exactly what Jesus does here - at least in the minds of Jerusalem's religious leaders. Just the day before he had cast out the sellers and buyers of sacrificial animals from the temple court and overturned the money changers' tables. But now, he's comes back, and like the religious police they were, the religious leaders challenge him.

A Question of Authority
In all the coverage of the Queen's funeral, one intervention caught my eye. It was a criticism levelled at the President of the United States by a former president. Because the current president had been seated 14 rows back. To which the previous president said, 'If I were president they wouldn't have sat me back there'. And he added, no doubt it was 'a good time for our president to get to know the leaders of certain Third World countries.' Because that's who he was sat among. Which I thought was amusing, because President Biden was actually sat next to Ignazio Cassis, the current president of Switzerland. So I don't know how you're finding living in a Third World country, but I hope it's not too hard.

But wherever they were sat, among those heads of state was the full spectrum of views on authority: from authoritarian leaders who use power to stay in power, to leaders willing to change what they say they believe based on what they think the public want.

And this interaction between Jesus and the leaders is all about authority. About Jesus' authority and about their authority. But it's also about what will have the governing authority in your life. What tells you the kind of person you should be, or shouldn't be. The kind of person you're becoming.

Look at v27, 'As [Jesus] was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him.' So this is taking place in the most authoritative place in Judaism - the temple in Jerusalem. And the people interrogating Jesus are representatives the highest religious authority in the land - the Sanhedrin. And they want to know what authority Jesus claims to do what he does.

Verse 28, 'And they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?"'

And by 'these things' they're referring to the events of the last few days - Jesus clearing out the temple court; Jesus entering Jerusalem as the Messianic king, on a donkey, to the acclaim of the crowd.

But they're probably thinking about other things as well. Because throughout Mark's gospel the authority of Jesus has come up repeatedly. The authority of his teaching - no one teaches like him. The authority to forgive sins, which only God can do. The authority over the Sabbath - one of the defining features of what it meant to be a member of God's people. An authority over demons *and* the wind and waves. An authority that left people asking, *who is this man?*

And that question of his authority has now risen to the highest authority in the land. 'Who gave you this authority?'

But there's a catch in their question and the stakes are high. You see, if he says, my authority comes from God, they could charge him with blasphemy, a crime that carried the death penalty. But, if he

says his authority comes from somewhere other than God, they could charge him as a false prophet, which also carried the death penalty. So they have him in a Catch 22.

So Jesus answers them with a question, to expose their hearts.

Verses 29-30, 'Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me."

Answer me. The highest authority in the land is questioning Jesus about his authority, and Jesus says, 'No. It is you who must answer to me.'

And Jesus gives them two options: John, was his ministry from heaven or from man? Was it by divine initiative or John's initiative? God's authority or purely human authority?

Now, why pick the baptism of John? Because all of John's ministry had been preparing for and pointing to Jesus. And, it was at Jesus' baptism, by John, that the Spirit came down on Jesus, and chapter 1:11, 'A voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son."' It was where Jesus was empowered and commissioned for his ministry. The mark of the authority given to him.

So… was John's ministry from God or man? Because as one commentator writes [Edwards] 'A decision about John is a decision about Jesus.' If John was acting of his own accord, with no God-given authority, then they could go ahead and accuse Jesus. But if John's ministry was God's doing, if it really was from 'heaven' and he really had been tasked to prepare the way for Jesus, then these leaders have an answer to where Jesus' authority comes from.

So how do they answer? Verses 31-32, 'And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man'?"

And now it's them who have the problem. If they admit John *was* sent by God - and remember some of them had gone out to be baptised by John, and been rebuked by him in the process, then they could not dismiss Jesus out of hand.

But to say John was *not* sent by God, that was not an appealing option. Look what they say: "But shall we say 'from man'?" And they don't even finish the sentence. They don't need to. They all know what the implications would be if they said that. Verse 32, 'they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.'

And so, v33, 'They answered Jesus, "We do not know."

And yet, it's not that they do not know, it's that they're unwilling to know. It's that they're not willing to face the consequences of coming down on one side or the other. And what finally sways them is fear of the people. To dismiss Jesus they'd have to dismiss John. But they can't do that because the people didn't do that.

So here are the men with *the* spiritual authority over Israel, but what has authority over them? If you asked them, they'd say, God, and his Law, the Torah. But in reality it's fear of what others might say about them, or do to them.

Now, the tragedy in their case is that the crowd had it right. But it's the principle I wasn't you to see: that to decide your response to the great questions of life based on what the crowd thinks is a recipe for moral disaster.

But ask yourself, why were they afraid of the crowd? Because they don't want the crowd to turn on them. Because if that happens, it's not just their good reputation they risk, it's their position. So regardless of what they'd say to you, far from God and his law being the authority in their lives, in reality it's the desire for position and to hold on to power, and the approval of the crowd that has that ruling authority in their lives.

Now Bertrand Russell, the British writer and atheist, wrote: 'As soon as we abandon our own reason, and are content to rely upon authority there is no end to our troubles.' To which we might respond, well that depends on what authority you're relying on. Because, if rather than the truth, the crowd is your authority, because you want their approval and the power that comes with that, he's right, it'll lead you into all sorts of trouble, and you'll compromise on things you shouldn't.

But it'll also lead you to hide. And you'll stay silent when you should speak, You see, these men are responsible for the spiritual well-being of Israel. But for fear of the crowd, they hide what they really think *and* from their responsibility to lead. On the most important religious issue of their day, they're reduced to silence out of fear. So, they're not just dishonest with others, they're dishonest with themselves.

Ok, but think how this can happen with us. Because something or other is going to be *the* guiding authority over our lives, in what we do and who we're becoming.

And if you're not yet a Christian, you might be hesitating to come to a decision about Christ because of what others might think. Or, you might have already come to a decision, but you're hesitating to follow through on it because of what it might cost you. So, like them, we can hide from the truth. And the crowd can have more authority over us than the truth.

And that can present problems in another area. You see, our current culture values authenticity - that you shouldn't let any external authority tell you who you are or what you should do. But in reality, all you're doing is exchanging one external authority for another - and the crowd takes the place of objective truth. And you'll only express those thoughts, or beliefs that you think those who matter to you will applaud. So, you'll still be hiding.

Or, for those of us who are Christians, we might stay silent about Christ when we should speak, or hide from the implications of following him, for what it might cost us. Deep down, we might know what we should do, but we convince ourselves otherwise, and so hide from ourselves.

Or, as these men duck their responsibility to lead, when the approval of others has the controlling authority over our hearts we can find we aren't able to risk or act out of courage.

Ok, but, it's because they're not willing to be honest, even with themselves, that Jesus knows they're not going to be honest with him. Verse 33, 'And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."'

But if they didn't want to say John had not been sent by God for fear of the crowd, what stopped them admitting he was sent by God?

The Problem of Ownership

And as the leaders stand there, Jesus tells a parable. Chapter 12:1, "A man planted a vineyard." And immediately everyone would have known what he was talking about, because in the Old Testament, Israel was repeatedly described as God's vineyard. In fact, as he tells the parable, Jesus is using Isaiah 5 as his raw material: 'Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;nand he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.' (Is 5:1-2)

And in a short parable, Jesus describes nearly 2000 years of Israel's history. Because God is the man who plants the vineyard. And the tenants he leases it to are the leaders of the people, like the the Sanhedrin in front of Jesus. But they're tenants, not owners.

And there are some distinct advantages to being an owner, aren't there. Like of your apartment or house. Because if you're an owner you can decorate it how you like, and you can flush your toilet after 10pm at night. *And* you don't have to pay rent.

But a tenant farmer does, and in those days, they paid it from the yield of the land. And so, v2, Jesus says the owner, 'sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.' But the tenants didn't just refuse to pay, they abused that servant and every subsequent servant the owner sent. Verse 5, 'And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.'

And the servants are the prophets, whom God sent over the course of Israel's history, to call Israel's leaders and people back to him. But time and again the leaders refused. As God said through the prophet Jeremiah: 'From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear.' (Jer 7:25-26). And many of those prophets, up to and including John the Baptist had suffered or, like John, been martyred at the hands of those leaders.

But why? What's the fruit God could want from leaders and people, that they're so determined not to give?

Well, when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment of God's law is, it's as if he's being asked, what does God require of us? What's the fruit he's after? And Jesus replied, that you love him with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and that you love your neighbour as yourself. That it's you he's after.

And God had sent prophet after prophet, like a loving but spurned husband, continually reaching out, because he wanted them, and us, to come into all the goodness of a relationship of love with him. Because that's the only way we'll truly flourish and live fruitful, fulfilled lives. Give our hearts to other things, like the admiration of the crowd, or the desire for position and to stay in control, and those things will enslave us and we'll live with this constant underlying anxiety and fear as these men did. But know his love for you, and your heart will respond with the fruit of love for him.

But repeatedly Israel's leaders had refused - as these leaders refused now. Why?

Because they wanted to be the owner. Because their love *was* set on something other than God. And the same can be true for us. And when it is, we stop seeing ourselves as stewards of the good things he's entrusted to us, like our intellect, or our resources, to use them for his glory and others' good. Instead, we'll use them to serve ourselves.

So what can turn that around? What can cause us, not just to make God the authority of our lives, but the love of our hearts?

The Answer of Grace

And having sent servant after servant, Jesus says of the owner, v6, "He still had one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.''

Now, which owner in his right mind would send his son into such a situation? I mean, everything is telling him, 'don't do it!'

So, who would do it? Only a God of grace. Only a God, who is merciful and compassionate, who is abounding in steadfast love, would go to the furthest extremes of love to give people the chance to come. And Jesus is the beloved Son, sent as his Father's representative. Sent with his Father's authority, come to his Father's house, looking for the fruit of love - in this, the Father's last and final appeal to the leaders.

But of course, the tenants don't just want the fruit, they want the land. Verses 7-8, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.'

It's the age old desire of the human heart, isn't it? To be rid of God and replace him with… ourselves.

And none of this parable is lost on the leaders standing there. Mark tells us in v12 that 'they perceived he had told this parable against them'. But instead of taking it to heart, they began to plot to arrest him - and so, ironically, to fulfil the part Jesus had given them in the parable. You see, it's a sobering reminder, that you can know what God's word is saying, but not be willing to hear it.

And so Jesus asks them a rhetorical question: v9, "What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others." Because God is patient, but his patience has a limit. And as Jesus cleared out the temple, foreshadowing the destruction of the temple, so here he foreshadows the destruction of its leaders, that other might take their place. That, as the Court of the Gentiles was cleared for the gathering in of the Gentiles, so God is going to raise up new leaders over God's one united people, the true Israel, of Jew and Gentile.

Great, you might say, but look at the leaders plotting. They have no intention of handing over quietly.

Well, look what Jesus says in v10, 'Have you not read this Scripture: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.'' And he's quoting Psalm 118, the psalm the pilgrims sang as Jesus made his way into Jerusalem. And the word translated 'cornerstone' could mean just that - the stone on which everything else in a building is built. Or the keystone, or capstone, that central stone that holds up the arch of a bridge. Whichever it is, Jesus' point is clear: The very thing the leaders

are turning their backs on, is the very thing God is going to use to build his new temple and establish its new leaders.

And that cornerstone is Christ. The one around whom God's people gather and are built up as his dwelling place. It's why Peter, who was here when Jesus said this, writes, 'As you come to him [Jesus], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ… "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."' (1 Peter 2:4-7)

And it all happens because Jesus is first rejected, that at the cross he might become the ultimate sacrifice for sin. That in these leaders destroying him, he becomes the true and final temple of God. Because his authority was not based on the approval of a crowd, or the desire to hold on to the trappings of power. Instead, he humbled himself, and his authority was to give his life as a ransom for many. That the one combined people of God, the church of God, would be built on him, and bear the fruit of love and worship, not through the self-service of it's leaders but the self-sacrifice of the Son.

It's why Jesus continues to quote Psalm 118 in v11, "'this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.'"

Because when you get that the Son of God came to the vineyard, knowing what awaited him, but he did it to save you from your sin of letting something else shape you more than him, and wanting to be your own owner, and the sin of failing to love God and neighbour as you should, and he does it because he loves you, you'll see it as marvellous. And when you do, he'll have your heart, and with your heart the forming, shaping, sending authority over your life.