

Lenten Bible Study 2026

Walking the Palm Sunday Path

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Week Two, February 23 – March 1

Mark 12:1-12: Parable of the Vineyard Owner

Then he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went away. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes?’”

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Week 2: Mark 12:1–12 The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Jesus tells this parable explicitly “against” some of the most powerful people in Judea: the chief priests, scribes, and elders. The story about a vineyard functions to indict the people atop the hierarchy of power in Jerusalem, implicitly characterizing their rejection of him as an act of rebellion against God. The parable tells of vineyard caretakers who refuse to be accountable and resort to violence, illustrating the leadership’s refusal to accept Jesus as God’s own representative.

With the parable, Jesus indicates that his execution is evidence of authorities’ determination to shirk the responsibilities of generous leadership. The parable implies that aligning with the kingdom Jesus preaches is considered by some to be too costly. The parable risks propping up long-standing anti-Jewish attitudes among Christians, which means we need to look carefully at the people the parable specifically indicts. It’s not simply about religious people or Jews in general but about religious insiders, even religious insiders who are under pressure to satisfy the demands of an empire that allows them to maintain their religious responsibilities under strict conditions.

In response to the parable, we might ask: What are some of the concessions we make (or, the church makes), in order to stay in good standing in our society? How does the way of Jesus look too invasive, too costly, or too disruptive to us? What violence do we permit, if not perpetrate, in order to maintain comfort and privilege? The Palm Sunday Path calls us all to repentance.

Exploration of Text and Meaning Today

Commentary: Matt Skinner

The Gospels say little about the purpose of Jesus's death. They devote effort instead to ushering readers into the drama. We observe. We participate. We grieve and repent. As a result, we learn.

Mark, in particular, presses us to experience Jesus's death through a series of contrasts and irony. The crucifixion finally unveils Jesus's true identity as a humiliated and isolated "king of the Jews," while at the same time it exposes the vicious politics that culminate in an execution designed to dehumanize. If we are to grasp the reign of God, Mark implies, we must observe, confront, and turn away from those politics. Because Jesus's way is decidedly different.

The contrasts and the manifestations of cruelty occur throughout Mark's story, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly. For example, in Mark 10:41-45 Jesus explicitly warns about people who use coercion, threats, and tyranny to become "great." There he sets Roman virtues of domination and virility in clear opposition to the road that he and his followers will travel.

In this week's passage, Mark vividly illustrates the kind of resistance Jesus is up against. In 12:1-12 Jesus again contrasts his path to a path of selfishness and violence. We see it in how Mark narrates a parable about tenants who decide that committing murder will help them seize power.

The parable as commentary

It's no accident that the parable is located here, within a series of disputes between Jesus and authorities, which will result in the Jerusalem aristocracy's determination to deliver him to Pontius Pilate (Mark 14:2). The parable provides commentary on the overarching conflict and its theological dimensions. Jesus's inventive tale about a leased vineyard indicts a group of very powerful people in the story while allowing us readers to peer deeper into the action.

- Jesus's manner of describing the vineyard, with several connections to Isaiah 5:1-2, invites us to understand the parable as a story about Israel—not a concept, but a group of people with a particular, holy calling.¹
- The parable continues Jesus's answer to a question that a group of Jerusalem's chief priests, scribes, and elders put to him. They want to know where his authority comes from (Mark 11:27-33). Where do his vision and ethos about a new "reign" ("kingdom") come from? Who authorized him to go public with all of it? Who is he to act and speak so compellingly for Israel's well-being?
- The "beloved son" of the vineyard owner draws our attention to Jesus. Accordingly, given the use of "beloved" (*agapētos*) also in 1:11 and 9:7, we should see the owner as an allegorical stand-in for God.
- Nothing promises the destruction of the vineyard, only that its current custodians will be replaced. After all, the vineyard itself seems to be doing just fine in Jesus's parable.
- Mark's description of how Jesus's hearers interpret the parable, as a lesson told "against them," points the finger at the chief priests, scribes, and elders who entered the scene in Mark 11:27 (see also 8:31; 10:33; 11:18). This reiterates that the parable denounces specific leaders, not other Jews in general, for refusing to honor God and acknowledge Jesus's authority.
- Despite the naked villainy of the tenants, the parable refrains from commenting on the wisdom of their plan. How could exterminating the owner's son wind up in freeing them from having to render to the owner what belongs to the owner? Evidently they think the owner is impotent. Or not serious. Or maybe they believe the owner will somehow admire them for their pluck, in seizing power for themselves by any means necessary. Risky business.

Shirking accountability

In Mark, Jesus suffers rejection from everyone in view, from his closest followers (14:50) all the way up the social ladder to Pilate, the province's supreme guardian of Roman values and prerogatives. Even God abandons him (15:34). When we let the parable shape our perspective, we have to grant that Mark is not claiming a mistake was made about Jesus's identity and authority. Mark is describing a world—a whole world of people—that views following Jesus as too costly. Humanity would rather protect what we think is rightly ours than embrace a way of love, justice, belonging, and mutuality. Risky business, given what God has revealed.

The parable doesn't tell or explain the whole story of Jesus's rejection, but it does ask us to consider how that rejection is a form of rebellion against God and God's intentions for the flourishing of all humanity. As mentioned, the parable doesn't explain how the tenants of the vineyard think they'll be able to get away with it. It narrates a story about people who simply think they won't be held accountable.

The long history of Christian anti-Judaism nudges me to note again that Mark's presentation of the parable explicitly calls out the priestly aristocracy. They were highly influential leaders, caretakers of the Jerusalem temple and its rituals, and partners in an uneasy alliance with Roman authority. Rome allowed the chief priests and their associates to maintain their own religious and civil authority and institutions. But in return, they had to satisfy the empire's demands and make sure the population did as well. Jesus tells the parable as part of his larger criticism of those arrangements. Apparently he thinks that the leadership of his day suppressed their sense of their accountability to God. Yet he is not on a crusade to discredit or reject Judaism.

We Christians should read the parable, today, as an invitation to examine our own ways of navigating formal and unspoken agreements about how our religion exists within and props up political realities. Where have we come to prize respectability over discipleship? When does the allure of strength override our obligation to love our neighbor? What kinds of horrors ensue when we think accountability to God is something optional, or worth sacrificing because it strikes us as too costly to live out?

Where has the church chosen to make itself accountable instead to a political litmus test, eagerly cutting deals, securing our influence, or recklessly propping up abuses?

Live generously; Tell the truth

Let's not be naïve. Often life presents us with tough circumstances that defy simple, painless solutions. Leaders have to make difficult decisions. No one's hands are unstained. We all stray from the path Jesus walks. Even as we confess and correct our course, Jesus guides the way. His journey rejects the temptation to seize dominance and intimidation, because he travels to a cross. The journey there concludes in a mysterious display of divine solidarity with the crucified of the world—the folks considered discardable and wretched. He asks us to join him in that solidarity (8:34). He asks us to do so with love for God and for neighbors (12:28–34) as the hallmarks of our lives. He implies that our accountability to the well-being of our neighbors—whether they are familiar to us or not (Leviticus 19:18, 34)—is a means of expressing our accountability to God.

That's good news. That's the God to whom we are accountable, whose values we are called to share and enjoy. Anything else—any other motivations for pursuing and seizing some kind of greatness for ourselves or for a nation—is a false god.

False gods are liars and bullies. Jesus rejects them on his Palm Sunday Path. He summons us to a better way.