

“The Lord Has Done This”

The Thirty-Fifth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 12:1-17; Isaiah 5:1-7

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he willingly accepted the praises of the people. But if the people of Israel were willing to accept that Jesus was their messianic king, it was equally certain that the Sanhedrin would never allow it. The depth of the Sanhedrin’s hatred of Jesus became painfully evident when Jesus went to the temple after entering the city. Jesus observed that the temple, which should serve as a house of prayer for the nations, sadly, had become a den of thieves. Upon returning to the temple the next day, Jesus angrily drove out the merchants who congregated in the outer-courtyard. When Jesus drove these men out of the temple, the Sanhedrin was outraged. When Jesus returned to the temple the third time, on Tuesday, he was immediately confronted by a group of chief priests, the teachers of the law, and elders. These men demanded that Jesus tell them by what and by who’s authority was he doing these things. When Jesus embarrassed them before the watching crowds, their hatred toward Jesus prompted them to take the most drastic of measures. On Tuesday, it looked as though Jesus had the upper hand because the people were amazed by his teaching. By Friday, Jesus would be hanging helplessly upon a Roman cross, rejected and despised by all. The Sanhedrin got what they wanted, and in a bitter irony, we were saved from our sins.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of Mark, we are working our way through that section of Mark (chapters 11-16) which recounts the final week of Jesus’ messianic mission, that which is often spoken of as our Lord’s “Passion.” Jesus had entered the temple on Palm Sunday to the jubilant messianic refrain, “Hosanna,” and “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” In fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy, Jesus immediately went to the temple, where he witnessed firsthand that the temple had been transformed into a den of thieves. Merchants had set up their stalls in the outer-courtyard in the place where God intended the Gentiles to approach him in prayer. In a display of righteous anger, Jesus drove out these merchants, an act which cleansed the temple—another theme in messianic prophecy—but which further enraged the members of the Sanhedrin (the ruling religious body of Israel).

As we saw last time, when Jesus returned to the temple area on Tuesday, after driving out the merchants the day before, various members of the of Sanhedrin confronted Jesus, including chief priests (who conducted temple services), teachers of the law (the religious scholars), and elders (older, retired priests and teachers of the law). But so did the Pharisees (who were the fundamentalists of the day), the Herodians (those who favored making peace with Rome) and the Sadducees (the religious liberals). While these groups (denominations within Judaism) often schemed and conspired against each other, and even though they almost never agreed upon anything, they are united in their opposition to Jesus once he enters Jerusalem. Mark’s point is that Jesus is being rejected by the entire religious leadership of Israel, not just an isolated group. These men all saw in Jesus a threat to their own power and prestige. Their hearts were so blind to the things of God, that when Israel’s own Messiah entered Jerusalem and then went to the temple, instead of welcoming him, they confront him. When Jesus repeatedly turned the tables on them, these mortal enemies conspire together and hatch a plan to have Jesus killed. This is the tragedy of all tragedies. It also reveals to us the depths of Jesus’ humiliation. According to John, Jesus came to that which was his own (Israel), but his own would not receive him (John 1:11).

When members of the Sanhedrin challenged Jesus about the authority by which he had cleansed the temple, they were hoping to expose Jesus as a false teacher, blasphemer, or law-breaker. This would

discredit Jesus before the eyes of the people and demonstrate that the Sanhedrin was the defender of the true religion of Israel. But when Jesus asked them about John the Baptist—“was his baptism from heaven or from men?”—he exposed these men for what they were. If they answered that John’s baptism was from God, then the obvious question was “why did they not accept John as a prophet and Jesus as the Messiah?” If, instead, they answered that John’s baptism was from men, it would be clear that they had rejected both John and Jesus. But then this would have gotten them in trouble with the people who thought that John was a prophet. And these same people had cheered for Jesus when he entered the city.

Jesus’ question amounted to a line in the sand. Either the Sanhedrin accept John and Jesus as being sent from God (and at the very least, prophets), or else, the Sanhedrin declares that Jesus and John are from men, thereby openly rejecting them. Religious politicians that they are, the Sanhedrin will do neither. With everyone in Jerusalem listening for their answer, the Sanhedrin backed down. After discussing the matter among themselves, they answered Jesus’ simple question with a lame, “we don’t know.” They would now seek to care of the matter privately and began plotting to have Jesus arrested and killed.

This, then, is the background to Jesus’ sayings recorded in Mark 12, in which Mark continues to describe the increasing tension between Jesus and the members of the Sanhedrin.

In the first twelve verses of Mark 12, Jesus tells a parable which has come to be known as the Parable of the Tenants. The parable is found in all three of the synoptic gospels. The setting for the parable was the historical situation in first century Palestine, which, at the time, was a land covered with large estates, many of which had absentee owners and which were run by tenant farmers, who worked the land in the land-owner’s absence and who paid rent to the land-owner in exchange for the privilege of working the land and harvesting whatever crops could be produced. In other words, these farmers rented the land, worked it as their own, but paid the landowner rent from their profits in exchange for the use of the land.

In terms of categorization, this parable is clearly a parable of judgment. While set against the backdrop of the very real historical situation in first century Palestine, this parable also points ahead to the events which would come to pass in the next few days. The parable dramatically reveals that the members of the Sanhedrin were already plotting to take Jesus’ life. It also reveals that God’s judgment was soon to come upon all those who sought to put Jesus to death.¹ In a sense, this parable has the same effect as Jesus cursing the fig tree. Through this parable, Jesus is making it clear that a horrific event is about to come to pass (his own death), and that this terrible injustice will lead to Israel coming under the covenant curses, before its people are dispersed into all the nations. We also learn that this tragedy (the death of Jesus and God’s judgment upon Israel) will be the means by which God will give the inheritance to those who truly honor him. Here is the proof that God can, as Paul puts it, turn all things together for good.

Mark does not give us a specific time reference as to when this occurred, but given the prior question in Mark 11 about Jesus’ authority to do these things, and given the fact that in the other synoptic gospels we are told that Jesus spoke these words to those who questioned him about his authority, it is very likely that Jesus spoke these words at the same time he asked the members of the Sanhedrin his question about the baptism of John.² That incident leads to this one.

¹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 416.

² Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 364.

As Mark recounts these events for us, we read in verse 1 “*that [Jesus] then began to speak to them in parables.*” Recall that in these parables, Jesus hides the truth in plain sight, so to speak. On one level, the parable Jesus is about to tell is a story about a Palestinian land-owner and some shady farmers who rented his land. But on another level, the parable recounts the true meaning of redemptive history and places both Jesus and the members of the Sanhedrin in their proper places within that history. We will fail to understand these parables if we are looking for the “moral to the story.” The parables do not communicate timeless truths (like Aesop’s fables). Rather, when Jesus tells a parable like this one, we need to identify the roles that the Messiah and his people (Israel) play in the story behind the story.

Jesus tells the parable as follows. “*A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.*” There can be no doubt that these words are an echo from the “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5:1-7, our Old Testament lesson. Some seven hundred years earlier, the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah, saying “*I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. `Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 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? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.’ The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*” As originally given, the “Song of the Vineyard” was a warning to Israel in those days before the exile. God warns his disobedient people that he will turn his vineyard over to the Gentiles.

Just as in Isaiah 5, when Jesus tells this parable, Israel is the vineyard.³ The owner of the vineyard is YHWH. But the new element which Jesus adds are the tenant farmers, who are clearly the members of the Sanhedrin, to whom Jesus is now speaking. The true owner of the land, YHWH, has leased his vineyard to hired hands (the Sanhedrin). In the proper time, the land-owner will send his agents (the prophets and then the Messiah himself) to collect the money (repentance) which is due him. This is a direct reference to the demands of the covenant, which YHWH made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Listen carefully to Jesus’s words in verses 2-5, “*At harvest time he [the landowner] sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.*” In these words, Jesus has just recounted the history of Israel. The Old Testament repeatedly speaks of the prophets as God’s servants (Jeremiah 7:25 ff; Amos 3:7; Zechariah 1:6).⁴ No one listening would have missed this connection. The prophets came to declare God’s will and call for repentance (analogous to collecting dues),⁵ but the people of Israel rejected some and killed others.

³ See the discussion in; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 417.

⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 418.

⁵ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 367.

Realizing the gravity of the situation and living far away in a distant land, the land owner sends his favorite son to deal with the farmers. Surely, the owner reasons, the farmers will respect my son. But as we read in verses 6-8, “[the landowner] *had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'*” *“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.” Not only did these wicked tenants murder the man’s beloved son in an attempt to take the son’s inheritance for themselves (namely, the land), but with no regard for his dignity and honor, the son’s dead body is unceremoniously pitched over the vineyard wall without proper burial—which in the first century was the ultimate sign of disrespect. With these words, Jesus has just predicted that he will be rejected by those who seek to take what is not theirs for their own. The utter disrespect shown to him as God’s son will lead to his death on a Roman cross outside the walls of the city. Such a detailed prediction in the form of a parable of judgment is remarkable to say the least.

What will happen to the men who do such a thing? Jesus continues in verse 9. *“What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”* These words echo Isaiah 5:5 and tie the events in the parable directly to redemptive history. The tenant farmers think that the distant landowner can do nothing to stop them and that they will inherit what belonged to the son. The reality is that the landowner will return with his men, kill the wicked tenants and then rent the land to others. Jesus has just foretold of the judgment soon to come upon Israel in A. D. 70 when the Romans destroy Jerusalem and its temple and when the Jews are then dispersed into the four corners of the earth. That Jesus alludes to Isaiah 5 and the “Song of the Vineyard” at both the beginning and the end of the parable means that Jesus intends for those members of the Sanhedrin to know that he was speaking about them and that he was clearly warning them of the consequences of their actions.⁶ The land and the inheritance will now be given to a people who were not YHWH’s people (Israel), but who soon will be YHWH’s people (i.e., the church, the New Israel of God).⁷

But Jesus is not done announcing the impending judgment upon Israel. Jesus cites Psalm 118:22 as yet an additional warning that the one whom the Sanhedrin is rejecting will be completely vindicated and exalted by God.⁸ In verses 10-11, Jesus says, *“Haven’t you read this scripture: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’”* Psalm 118:22 referred to one of the foundation stones for Solomon’s Temple which had been rejected for use as the foundation, but was later used as a capstone for the portico.⁹ This stone was originally slated to be used as a foundation stone, but ended up being the most visible stone. By citing this passage and applying to himself, Jesus is making the point that even though Israel will reject him, he will fulfill that glorious role which God has given to him. In other words, even though Jesus will be rejected by Israel, God will vindicate him in such a way that all Israel will know that Jesus is the Son of God. Whatever Israel does to Jesus, God will reverse the circumstances so that judgment instead comes upon all Israel.

The men to whom Jesus were speaking were biblical scholars—they were not dim bulbs. They probably

⁶ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 419.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 462.

⁸ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 369.

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 420.

knew the passages from memory which Jesus was citing. They immediately picked up on the fact that Jesus was speaking of them in a less than flattering light. But by telling this parable in this way and showing how he was the one spoken of in the Old Testament, Jesus did not move these men to repent. In fact, because they lacked faith and were filled with unbelief, when Jesus preached the word to them through this parable, like Pharaoh, their hearts were only hardened all the more. In fact, when Jesus had finished speaking, *“Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.”* The Son of God and Israel’s Messiah had come to save his people from their sins. Jesus had just warned them of what was about to happen. But these men wanted none of it. Instead, they seek to have Jesus arrested, the first step in a larger plot by which Jesus would be subjected to capital punishment. Even though they have been warned, because of their deep hatred of Jesus, they begin the very process of bringing to pass that which Jesus had just foretold. They are putting God and his covenant promises to the test. They will bring judgment down upon themselves in ways they could never imagine. This is all a horrible tragedy.

Again, these men feared the reaction of the people, and so yet again they slink off to plot and plan their next move. But their next attempt to get Jesus to say or do something which would allow them to arrest him, was once again thwarted by Jesus. Mark recounts this in verses 13-17.

Keep in mind that while the Sanhedrin sent these men, the Pharisees and Herodians were mutual enemies and not on good terms with each other. It is likely that the only thing they agreed upon was that Jesus was a common threat. According to verse 13, *“Later, they [the Sanhedrin] sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.”* Mark doesn’t tell us how much later this occurred, but it appears to be just long enough for the Sanhedrin to meet and put these two groups (the Pharisees and the Herodians) up to the effort to trap Jesus. Mark’s account implies that the Sanhedrin had thought of specific questions which might trip Jesus up. So let us be clear here—these are not honest questions, asked of Jesus by men with honest intentions. These are men who hate each other, and who have conspired together to trick Jesus, so that he’ll say or do something for which they can arrest him. And so members of these two groups come to Jesus and pretend to have a question about a well-known difference between them, which they hope Jesus will settle for them. It is all quite despicable.

According to plan, these men approach Jesus, their words dripping with false flattery. *“They came to him and said, ‘Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?’”* This was a very loaded question because the Jewish people hated paying tribute to Caesar—a tax which had been levied on them some twenty years earlier. This was an issue which could put Jesus in a bad light with the people. If Jesus favored paying tribute to Caesar, as did the Herodians, the people would be angry with Jesus since they hated this belittling tax, which is unlike a modern income or sales tax which went to the government to pay for roads and armies. Tribute to Caesar helped Rome oppress them. This tax paid for Roman roads and Roman armies, not Hebrew roads and armies. On the other hand, if Jesus opposed paying the tribute (as did the Pharisees), then the Romans might arrest him for insurrection or treason. In any case, this trick question was clearly designed to leave Jesus without any wriggle room. The Sanhedrin had Jesus trapped no matter what he said, or so they thought.

Mark recounts that Jesus saw right through their phony efforts. *“But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. ‘Why are you trying to trap me?’ he asked.”* Their scheme was so obvious that we do not need to see Jesus here using divine attributes such as omniscience to figure out what was happening. The hypocrisy was patently obvious to all. Everyone watching, no doubt, knew it as well. Jesus again turns the question

around and uses it to expose their hypocrisy. “*Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. They brought the coin, and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’*” In these words, Jesus offers what is the clearest teaching regarding the two kingdoms found anywhere in Scripture.

While Caesar was soon to become a divine figure in Roman culture, at this point his portrait on the denarius (which was a small coin which would have had the image of Caesar Augustus shown as a demi-god, and which would have been worth about eighteen cents), meant that Caesar was the legitimate representative of human government. Israel may have hated Rome, but Rome was that authority to which the Jewish people answered. Because his face is on the coin, Jesus says, Caesar has the right to tax. And what is more, the Israelites are obligated to pay that tax.

But Jesus also makes it plain that there is a divine authority (the kingdom of God), over which the state exercises no absolutely control whatsoever. There are things which belong to God, spiritual things which do not fall under the control of Caesar. These would be the religious elements of Jewish life—the temple and its sacrifices, what goes on in the synagogues, etc. In fact, the New Testament will later go on to speak of state-sponsored attempts to control the kingdom of God, or otherwise ascribe divine rights and privileges unto the state, as the work of Satan. In these cases, the state becomes the beast and its leader becomes an Antichrist figure. Thus Jesus establishes the state as the legitimate ruler over the affairs of the city of man, but the state can make no claims upon the authority of the kingdom of God. There are two distinct kingdoms, each ordained by God, and each given a particular role and authority.

So, instead of falling into the trap which had been set for him, Jesus appealed to the divinely ordained mandate for these two kingdoms, which, while completely distinct, nevertheless apply to all the citizens of Israel. God has ordained both the city of man and the kingdom of God. And so once again, Mark reports that instead of being cornered, Jesus’ opponents are thoroughly embarrassed by his answer, and as Mark puts it, “they” (referring to those trying to trick him) “*were amazed at him.*”

What, then, do we take with us this morning in terms of application?

When Jesus tells the Parable of the Tenants, he is warning the Sanhedrin of what is about to come. He is God’s beloved son, who will be rejected and killed, and whose body will be cast from the vineyard. Speaking prophetically, Jesus has just predicted the crucifixion. Jesus also makes it clear that the Sanhedrin are the unjust tenants and that when they kill the beloved son, they too will be killed and the land given to someone else. Jesus has foretold of the fate of Jerusalem, its temple, and of the dispersion of the Jewish people. When Jesus says the land will be given to others, he is speaking of this in two ways. One is that the land will be occupied by the Romans—who will crush the Jewish revolt in A.D. 70. The other sense is that when Jesus speaks of the inheritance being given to others, he’s referring to the blessings of God’s kingdom being given to the Gentiles. Jesus has just given us a picture of the course of redemptive history. Israel will be cut off and as a result, the gospel will go to the Gentiles who will receive that gospel with great joy.

Paul describes this in similar terms in Romans 11:11-15. “*Did they [Israel] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression [Israel] means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!*” The implication is that God is not done with Israel. Israel still has a future. Paul goes on to say in verse 13, “*I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may*

somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"

Thus, when Israel is cut off (as Jesus and Paul both declare) it is because it is God's purpose to save Gentiles—that's us. But, it also seems that Paul believes that at some point in the future, God will call Israel back to faith in Jesus and that the spiritual blindness of the Jews, such as that we see in the Sanhedrin, will be taken away, and Jews will come to faith in Jesus in huge numbers. And so while Israel is currently cut-off, we should expect that one day the Jews will return to their Messiah. The conversion of Israel is, I believe, one of the great signs of the end and something for which we must watch and pray. The natural branches, Paul says, will be grafted back into the root (who is Christ).

The other thing we need see here is that Jesus clearly establishes a doctrine of two kingdoms. We need to be careful here not to see this as modern secularists do, as merely a separation of church and state. Rather, this is a declaration by Jesus that God ordains the civil government, giving it the power to tax, so that it can provide for the common well-being of the people (i.e. roads, police and fire, national defense, and so on). But the kingdom of God is not in any sense under the authority of the state. God's authority will be shared with no one—rather, God's authority is made manifest through the ministry of the church, through word and sacrament and through the governance of the local church and its consistory.

As Christians, we are simultaneously members of both of these kingdoms. We are to be the best possible citizens of the city of man that we can be, because God has ordained this kingdom and given it a particular mandate. But we are also Christian citizens, because our membership in the kingdom of God will transform all that we do in the City of Man. While these two kingdoms must be kept distinct, we are simultaneously and inescapably citizens of both kingdoms and possess a dual citizenship. Therefore, as Christian citizens, we will live our lives in the City of Man in constant reflection upon what God says in his word. We gladly submit to Caesar and give him his do, but we do so realizing that Caesar has been given his power by God himself, and that Caesar can never stop the ever-advancing kingdom of God. In fact, in the realm of the kingdom of God, Caesar is just another sinner in need of saving grace.

When Jesus utters these words, he is, in a sense, forming a new order. Under the terms of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, the church and the state were essentially one. This can be seen in Jesus' day with the Sanhedrin, which was a faint reflection of the Jewish monarchy. Now, according to Jesus, even the pagan Caesar's authority is legitimate, although it is clear from Jesus' directive that Caesar's authority is limited to the realm of civil government and the affairs of men and nations.

But the kingdom of God, on the other hand, cannot be controlled by a human government. It is a kingdom which never takes up the sword, and yet constantly conquers through the humble means of the preaching of the gospel. It is a kingdom which grows by the hour and which turns everything on its head. This is a kingdom where the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the sick and the strong, the young and the old, the black and the white, all are members with equal standing. This is a kingdom where the rejected stone, becomes the capstone. This is a kingdom where the rejected Messiah suffers and dies so that we might be saved from something far worse than Roman rule, namely the guilt and power of sin. This is a kingdom where the Lord himself does marvelous things all the time, at which we can but stop and wonder. This is a kingdom, where we confess each Lord's day with both awe and amazement, "the Lord has done this . . . and it is marvelous in our eyes." This is a kingdom which has come in great power, even this day, bringing salvation to those who were strangers and foreigners, but who are now heirs to all the glorious things that God has promised his people. This is what Jesus had promised that day in the temple. This is what is now ours. Beloved, the Lord has done this. Amen.