

Mark 12

Introductory Comments

1. In Mark's Gospel there are two major divisions: Jesus' teaching and healing ministry (1:1-10:52), and the Passion narrative (11:1-16:8). Near the opening of each division a major parable appears: the parable of the Sower in Division One (4:3-9) and the parable of the Tenants in Division Two (12:1-12). Each one is a kind of plot synopsis for the respective division. In the first division, Jesus is presented as the preacher of the gospel, and the parable of the Sower shows a man spreading the seed (the Word) with uneven results. In the second division, Jesus is portrayed as the public messiah-king, claiming his city, temple, and kingdom, and the parable of the Tenants pictures the arrival and death of the heir of the vineyard.
2. The emphasis on "heir" and "inheritance" in the parable of the Tenants should alert the audience to the importance of this new perspective on Jesus' identity. The audience has known from the beginning of the story that Jesus is the son (1:1), indeed the beloved son (1:11; 9:7), but what does it mean that he is additionally the "heir" and that the vineyard is his "inheritance"? Never fear, we shall see...
3. Outline of Mark 11:1-12:44
 - A. Introduction – 11:1-11 – Triumphal entry
 - B. 11:12-13:37
 1. 11:12-25 – unfruitfulness and fig tree
 - a. 11:12-14 – failure of fig tree
 - b. 11:15-19 – cleansing of temple
 - c. 11:20-25 – fig tree and faith
 2. 11:27-12:12 – Jesus' and John's authority
 - a. 11:27-33 – controversy over authority
 - b. 12:1-12 – parable of the Vineyard and the Tenants
 3. 12:13-44 – tests and teachings
 - a. 12:13-34 – three controversies to test Jesus
 - i. 12:13-17 – payment of taxes
 - ii. 12:18-27 – resurrection
 - iii. 12:28-34 – Great Commandment
 - b. 12:35-44 – three teachings by Jesus
 - i. 12:35-37 – David's Lord
 - ii. 12:38-40 – hypocrisy of scribes
 - iii. 12:41-44 – widow's offering

Questions and read Mark 12 aloud

Discussion Questions

1. What is the narrative point of the parable of the Tenants (12:1-12)? *It provides an indirect answer to religious leaders' previous question, "From where does he get his authority?" It is also a plot synopsis for the rest of Gospel, as Jesus demonstrates mastery and authority in various places and is met with increasing opposition and resistance. **What is the theological point?** It illustrates from where Jesus (and all the prophets) gets authority and sets up the recognition sequences to come (Jesus demonstrating his authority and others finally seeing it). It also establishes Jesus as Heir of the Vineyard (not just the Davidic kingship), and continues to frame what that inheritance includes. As the triumphal entry and cleansing of the temple suggest, Jesus' power goes much further than a Davidic messiah-king with military and political sway, but includes the universal religious domain of priest and scribe. The parable also establishes that God's compassion is far greater than that of humanity (by human standards, it was completely foolish love to send Son)*

2. Based on the Parable of the Tenants, does the Vineyard owner send the son expecting him to die? *No. Mark's Jesus was not crucified as a predetermined ransom. It was only the result of hardened hearts and conniving intentions on the part of certain leaders and authorities who produce no fruit (and who are soon to be thrown out and replaced by the Lord of the Vineyard). Note, this is not a rejection of all Jews, just those in power.*

3. In 12:13-17, what was the trap into which the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to trap Jesus with the whole "paying taxes to Caesar" question? *They were trying to do what they had been doing since 3:6 – to get him to say or do something to be used against him so they could have him killed. In this case, their effort was to get him to offend either the crowds (who hated paying taxes to Rome) or the Roman overlords (who hated when people didn't pay taxes even more). **How does Jesus wriggle out of it?** When he looks at the coin bearing the emperor's image and says "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," he is implying that each person bears the image of God (as stated in Gen 1), and hence belongs to God. Jesus demonstrates mastery over the proper relation of religion to state. Here, he is a better lawyer than the lawyers.*

4. What is the intention of the Sadducee's question in 12:18-27)? *Trying to make him look like a fool while asserting silliness of resurrection. **How does Jesus wriggle out of this one?** Throughout the Gospel, Mark has made many references in support of resurrection: Jesus three-time reference to his own passion and resurrection; Jairus' daughter; Herod's thought that "Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead" (6:14); the disciples' testimony that the people considered Jesus to be John the Baptist or Elijah raised (8:8:27-28); the Transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah are talking to Jesus (9:4). Jesus picks up on that line of reasoning and here asserts that since God is God of the living and spoke in the present tense to Moses about people who had died generations earlier, Scripture demonstrates the dead are raised to life, and thus the Sadducees are wrong about Scripture and about God's power to raise the dead. Here, Jesus shows his mastery of the proper interpretation of tradition. He is a better priest than the priests.*

5. **For Mark, is Jesus' resurrection a unique event?** *NO! It is part of God's long-standing procedure. In Mark, God's activity of raising the dead extends back at least to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Elijah; it continues presently through events like Jairus' daughter; and it will continue in the future for Jesus and his followers. For the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' **death**, as the death of the final messenger, the son, which provokes the coming of the lord of the vineyard, **is what makes Jesus distinctive and vitally important**, while his resurrection is depicted as simply an assured aspect of God's abiding practice. That Mark ends with just an announcement that Jesus has risen and an empty tomb (16:1-8), rather than the glorious appearances of the resurrected Jesus that close the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, accords well with this understanding.*

6. **What is your impression of the scribe in 12:28-34?** *Positive, though we know that his kind monolithically oppose Jesus. This encounter illustrates that it IS possible to surmount types. **What does 12:32-34 illustrate about Jesus' authority?** He has authority not only in matters of Jewish law and tradition, but in matters of the Kingdom of God. The way Jesus is given the last word indicates that, while the scribe may have the power to evaluate Jesus' mastery of the law, Jesus possesses the greater power, the power to determine that the scribe is "not far from the kingdom of God" (12:34).*

7. **What is 12:35-37 all about?** *It refutes the expectation that Jesus is literally the "Son of David." He is much more than a Jewish King. He is "Son of David," but not in any traditional sense. This title is only one aspect of his broader identity as Heir of the Vineyard. The Christ is God's heir, not David's.*

8. **In his last two teachings of the chapter (12:38-44), is it surprising who illustrates what you should and shouldn't do?** *Not at all. It fits exactly into Mark's typology. But it does reinforce the negative view of Scribes after the positive interaction with that one scribe. And that brings up a pattern in Mark. The Gospel often describes good actions and responses as **individual** actions, whereas groups are portrayed neutrally or negatively. Those healed are single individuals emerging from the crowds; the true offering of the **one** poor widow is contrasted to the abundance of the **many** rich people (12:41-42); the one wise scribe stands apart from the typical beliefs and actions of scribes in general; and the opponents of Jesus are mainly collectives like the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, the elders, the scribes, the chief priests, and, of course, the disciples. The good soil is motivated from within, and follows the path of faith even when others resist or fall away.*

*** For next session, read Mark 13