

We're turning this morning to Mark 12. It's one of those chapters that we dip into from time to time – there are bits of it that are very well known. We're all familiar with the saying in verse 17: 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.'

The other obvious one is in verses 29-31 where Jesus focuses on the two great commandments – these were culled from the heart of the Old Testament ... in fact, Jewish people recite the first part every day, it's called the Shema. It's all about loving the Lord and giving him first place in our affections.

Jesus deals with 4 big questions in the chapter – the first is the question of authority, and that goes down to verse 12; the second is the question of responsibility, and that's in verses 13-17; the third is a question about eternity, and that's in verses 18-27; the fourth is the question of priority, and that's in verses 18-34.

It's not in my remit today or next Sunday, but in verses 35-37, Jesus asks them a question – how could David's son also be David's Lord? We know the answer – it would only happen if he was born as a man – God in a human body. That's what the incarnation is all about.

Today, we're reflecting on verses 1-12 ... murder in the vineyard. It seems to me if we're going to really understand this passage, we have to begin with the last few verses in chapter 11. That's where the Jewish leaders were asking about his credentials, they were always looking for a loophole in his character, they were trying to trip him up ... what right did Jesus have to do the things he was doing?

In a sense, they were only doing their job – that's what they were paid to do – they were the official guardians of the Law. They had the right and the responsibility to investigate anyone who claimed to

be sent by God (you can read all about it in Deuteronomy 18).

That said, their motives were not pure – and their minds were closed to the real facts. Basically, they were out to get him. They wanted to nail something on to him!

So that's the situation as we find it right here ... and it's in that context that Jesus told them this parable, a story with a very clear punchline. Jesus showed them where their sins were leading them ... and it certainly wasn't heavenward. The bottom line is, if you receive God's blessing but reject his Son, you must face God's judgment.

The story here is meant to impact upon their hearts and lives – in it, Jesus described something of the hope of God for his people – the divine aspiration, as it were; he also showed the kindness of God for his own; then he deals with the severity of God and, finally, we see the ultimate triumph of God in history. In this parable we see a series of pictures of God – it's like a photograph album – it reveals what kind of God he is. A lot of people have a god of their own making; they believe in the kind of god they want to believe in, rather than the God who is revealed in the Bible.

They take the bits they like and they trash the rest!

Here is a cameo of the goodness of God in verse 1 ... a man planted a vineyard, he built a hedge around it, he put a vat down in the ground to catch the juice as the grapes were crushed. He erected a watchtower so that the whole enterprise could be protected. This man did everything to make the vineyard what it ought to be.

The lesson is that our God is a good God! We read in Romans 11:22, 'Consider, therefore, the kindness of God.' That kindness of God is the goodness of God.

We see it in a couple of ways ... first of all, it is true of Israel historically.

That's the primary point of the parable – that God was good to Israel historically. The man in the parable represents God. The vineyard represents the nation of Israel. The servants who were sent to the vineyard are the prophets of God. The farmers are the Jewish leaders. The son in the parable is the Lord Jesus. In picture-speak, Jesus was recounting the history of God's goodness to his ancient, covenant people.

We read in Psalm 73:1 that "God is good to Israel". He gave them the land. He gave his law to guide them and to care for them. He sent his prophets and preachers to preach the word to them.

There are many figures of speech used to describe the nation of Israel. Sometimes she is compared to an olive tree. Other times she is compared to a fig tree. Here Israel is compared to a vineyard. The Lord was saying to them: "I planted my nation in the land, I cared for them, I cultivated them, I gave them every provision necessary for their lives."

Yes, God was good to them as a nation and as a people historically. It's also true of us on a personal level. He is good to me ... he is good to you! Not just some of the time, or even most of the time, but all the time!

He has given us this world, designed for our benefit and blessing. We can live here on Planet Earth – all that we need to get by is found right here. God has placed food in the ground so we can eat; he has placed the ingredients in this world so we can have clothing; he has given us air to breathe – all of this, and so much more!

When we think about how good our God is, it seems to me that we should be immensely thankful. Every day we should praise him and adore him ... the Bible says that the goodness of God leads us to repentance

– the least we can do, as people made in his image, is to turn our lives totally over to him.

Second, this parable also reminds us of God's witness in verses 2-8. We know from Acts 14 that he has not left himself without a witness – in other words, God has revealed himself. The question is, how did he do it?

Well, first of all, he sent his servants – we see that in verses 2-5. In this parable, the owner sent one servant, then another servant. Historically, God sent Israel a series of prophets, a series of preachers, to witness to his goodness and to call the people to faith. The big question is, what happened when God sent those prophets? Jesus said that the tenants rejected them. They beat them, they sent them away empty, they even killed some of them. It was one rejection after another.

That's the real problem. The same is true today – God reveals himself in the world of nature all around us; he has given his witness to every man's heart (Romans 1). But what do people do? They turn away – instead of receiving and responding to the divine witness, they worship their intellect. They think about Number One. They live for material things instead of adoring the One who has lavished so much on them. And over and over again, God sends his messengers to us – but people still give them the cold shoulder, they want nothing to do with him or them! And yet, in an amazing way, still God is patient. Why does he do it? It is because of his longsuffering (2 Peter 3:9).

He also sent them his Son as in verses 6-8. So we read in verse 6: "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved." This was God's ultimate revelation of himself. One look at Jesus and you see God. Everyone else was a forerunner, preparing the way, like John the Baptist ... but, last of all, he sent his one and only Son, the one whom he dearly and deeply loved.

When the farmers saw the son coming, they said, “This is the heir.” That reminds me of the words we read in Hebrews 1:2 where Jesus is set before us as ‘the heir of all things’. When we trust in the Lord, the good news is that we become joint-heirs with him. What happened in the story, what did they do? All the farmers said: “Let’s kill his son, the heir, and the vineyard will all be ours.” Isn’t that what happened to Jesus? We know the story so well – we read all about it in the gospel narrative ... he came unto his own and his own received him not! Ultimately, they nailed him to a cross. A murder took place in the vineyard! The negro spiritual asks the question ... were you there when they crucified my Lord? The truth is, we were – you and I were there. We all had a part to play in the death of the Lord Jesus. If Jesus were to come today, the fact is that people would do the same again!

The final side of God’s character is seen in verses 9-11 where we are challenged with his sternness. The poser is there in verse 9: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do?” The time comes when God’s patience is exhausted – when time has run its course ... when all that is left is judgment from an angry God. That same verse I quoted earlier from Romans 11:22 combines the goodness or kindness of God with the severity of God ... all in the same sentence. They are two sides of the very same coin.

It is abrupt in verse 9 ... did you see how suddenly it all came about? One minute they’re alive, the next minute they’re dead and gone! As fast as that, and as certain as that. There’s an abruptness to it, a finality to it, a sense of endless eternity to it.

But it’s also absolute as we discover in verses 10-11.

In the book of Revelation, Jesus is pictured as both a

lamb and a lion. The question is, do you want to meet him as the lamb of God who died for your sins, or as the lion of Judah who comes to judge?

Jesus suddenly changed the metaphor in the parable from a vineyard to a building. We read in verse 10 that “the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone”. In a sense, God has reversed man’s assessment of his Son – he has made it so clear that salvation is found in Christ, and in him alone. There is no other way for there is no other Name!

Jesus quoted to them from the book of Psalms, 118 to be precise. They knew that! It was one of the Hallel psalms that were sung during Passover week. The ‘stone’ was a well known symbol for the Messiah – we read about him in the Psalms as well as in the book of Daniel. Peter is also in on the act too in 1 Peter 2. The reality is, it was a double whammy – they not only rejected the Son, they also refused the Stone.

Their response was typical of their track record – it says all that needs to be said – they were pricked and they knew Jesus was pointing the finger at them. For them, there was no leg to stand on, no place to hide. They walked out, they walked away, they walked into eternal oblivion ... and there’s the challenge facing each of us. What road will we walk down? Will we accept Jesus or will we choose to reject Jesus? This is the one who went from the deepest depths of rejection to the highest heights of exaltation. The choice is just as dramatic today ... so too are the consequences!