

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 6 - MANIFESTO

TEXT: MARK 12:1-12 (ESV) - CF. MK 11:27-14:2



Rev. Russ Ramsey
October 12, 2008

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Tuesday Afternoon

Last week we stepped back from our study of the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry to see how in the space of three days (Palm Sunday to Tuesday morning) Jesus claimed for Himself the three offices Israel viewed as God-ordained—prophet, priest and king. He doesn't just claim them, He presents Himself as superior to all others, historically or currently, and as the last of each the people of God will ever need. Now we resume the unfolding Gospel narrative and pick up the story on Tuesday afternoon, right after the Chief Priests demand Jesus give an account of His actions, which He declines to provide.

On Monday when Jesus entered the temple, He overturned the money-changers tables, and in a stunning display of fearlessness remained to spend the day teaching and healing the lame and blind. On Tuesday, He returns and is immediately met by the temple leaders who demand to know who gave Him authority to act as He did. He answers them with a question of His own—one designed to reveal whether or not the religious leaders know the difference between something that is of God versus something contrived by man. When they refuse to answer Him due to a fear of the public response, He refuses to answer them on the principle that they are not interested in the truth.

If Monday's arrival in the temple was marked by Jesus' all inclusive, living parable of cleansing God's house, Tuesday's entrance is marked by a direct, verbal confrontation with the appointed leadership. Here again, when Jesus makes His point, refusing to regard these leaders as having any authority over Him, He elects to spend the rest of the day right there in the temple so that He might teach the people the word of God.

But this would be His last time. As best as I can trace the chronology of the Gospel narratives, Tuesday afternoon would be the last time Jesus would publicly teach in the temple as a free man. This would be His closing argument—His manifesto. Before leaving, Jesus would deliver a summary of sorts of His teaching and perspective. Some of the more familiar things He ever said were spoken on this afternoon. This message will try to summarize several chapters of text by way of expounding one of the particular parables Jesus told that day.

Mark 12:1-12

¹And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. ²When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.

"He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰Have you not read this Scripture:

"'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'"

¹²And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

He Means Us, Doesn't He?

Let's begin unpacking this parable by looking at the response it received. The religious leaders "perceived Jesus had told this parable against them," so they sought a way to arrest him, and as Luke says, they wanted to lay hands on Him right then and there, ^(Lk 19:19) but they feared the people gathered who, Matthew tells us, regarded Jesus as a prophet. ^(Mt 21:46)

Perceiving this as "against them" means they got the parallels right—they were the wicked workers, God was the land-owner and Jesus was the son. The other servants sent before the son, they would presume, were the prophets. You can imagine the way their cheeks would've flushed with anger as they began to realize, by Jesus' words and probably by the suppressed smirks of others listening, that they were the intended target of this unfolding tale—vilified by analogy, the butt of a joke. But Jesus wasn't laughing. He didn't mean for them to miss His point.

Jesus used vineyards in several of His parables ^(Mt 20:1-16, 21:28-32, Lk 13:6-9) for a couple of reasons. First, they were everywhere, part of everyday life. Second, the vineyard's purpose was the same as that of God's people—to bear fruit. Jesus' return to this setting reminds us that we're here for a reason, to bear fruit for our Keeper. In Jesus' day, most households had a few vines, but throughout the land, as it is today, there were large vineyards run by rich land-owners who often lived in other parts of the country. These land-owners, as it still happens, were often resented by those who worked for them but never saw them.

This is Jesus' setting—a vineyard where the workers are critical of their boss who is, to many of them, a demanding, absentee mogul. Here we learn something even in Jesus' set-up. There were those who regarded themselves as people who worked for God but got little interaction or reward from Him. They resented the impression that the God Who gave them such difficult and costly work seemed to be removed far from them.

In the parable, the land owner would send servants to inspect the fruit of the workers' labor, and the workers would abuse the servant, either because they had no fruit or because they didn't feel the land-owner deserved to see it. Jesus is referring to the prophets here—men sent on God's behalf, with a charge to report the Lord's expectations and assess and evaluate the quality and integrity of the work being done in His name. These were disregarded, abused, beaten and sometimes even killed.

Seeing he was getting nowhere, the parable continues, the land-owner sent his son, the heir with his father's authority to hold them accountable. The workers saw this as an opportunity to take out the land-owner's only heir. Casting his corpse outside the vineyard as if it were garbage for burning, they didn't just mean to kill the son. They meant to pour contempt on his father, hoping to get something for themselves out of the deal. According to Jewish law, if a man could prove uninterrupted possession of a place for 3 years, they could claim ownership. With the owner's servants decimated and his heir dead, what recourse could the master have to retain ownership of his vineyard, unless he returned himself. The workers are betting he has bigger irons in the fire than dealing with this place.

Here's the thing about parables—they are parallels to reality. But they don't always tell the story as the people represented in the analogy see it. The parable paints what the story-teller sees. The Pharisees and Chief Priests are angry because they don't see themselves as Jesus has cast them. They don't believe they're working against God, or that they've dispensed with the words of His prophets. They certainly don't believe the murder they are well underway with is the murder of God's Son.

But think about this. Jesus, master story-teller, does something chillingly brilliant. There are only a few in the room who know of the plot to kill Him. Jesus is one of them. So most are unaware of this unfolding, murderous parallel. But between Jesus and the Sanhedrin, Jesus tells them He knows what they are plotting and what is driving them. And He uses these last moments in the temple to go on record—forecasting their scheme and anticipating how they'll try to make it all look legal.

Manifesto

Jesus doesn't end this parable with the wicked murder of the land-owner's son, but with a stern word about the land-owner's retributive justice which ends in them losing not only their jobs, but their lives. (Mk 12:9) The inheritance is given to "others." Here Jesus means the Gentiles along with all who will honor the Father by yielding to the Son's authority. The Son they reject will become the cornerstone of a whole new Kingdom. Everything the people know about who is in charge the temple and how a person finds access to the Holy presence of God is about to change, ironically, because the Sanhedrin will succeed in their plot to kill Jesus. He Himself will see to that.

Their chief strategy is to try to trip Jesus up in His words, casting aspersions on His fidelity to God or even, if they have to, to Rome. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the rest of what He said Tuesday afternoon. It reads like a manifesto—a clarifying statement on who He is and what He believes.

When the Chief Priests arrested Him on Thursday night, they brought Him to a trial before the Sanhedrin, thinking witnesses against Him would come out of the woodwork. But none did. Some false witnesses came forward, but they couldn't agree on their own details. (Mk 14:58-61) Getting nowhere, the Sanhedrin moved on to the two main charges that would be brought against Jesus, blasphemy and a subversion of Roman authority.

These accusations reveal something fascinating that happened on Tuesday. Jesus vindicated Himself before the unjust charges were brought against Him. With His last teaching in the temple, Jesus got out in front of both of the primary charges coming His way, peppering holes through Thursday's paper thin accusations before they were even spoken. If Jesus wanted to show them baseless, He'd only need to bring up those things He said there in the temple on Tuesday. See how He does it.

CHARGE: HE WAS A BLASPHEMER—This, the Sanhedrin said, made Him worthy of death: He opposed God's Law. But on Tuesday, when a struggling scribe asked Him, "*Which command is the most important of all?*" Jesus answered, '*The most important is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There's no command greater than these.*' And the scribe said to him, '*You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*' (Mk 13:28-33) If Jesus was a blasphemer, what was with this succinct yet comprehensive summary of God's Law He offered on Tuesday—the one the scribe called "*right*" and "*true?*" There, like a sheep before His shearers, He didn't open His mouth. (Isa 53:7) He just took it.

CHARGE: HE OPPOSED PAYING TAXES TO CAESAR—Satisfied the people were convinced Jesus was a blasphemer, they brought Him to the Roman Prefect. Knowing Pilate wouldn't care about blasphemy, they lied, "*We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.*" (Lk 23:2) Everyone would have found this display deceptive from the start. Why should the Chief Priests care if one of their own opposed paying tribute to the pagan occupiers governing their Holy Land by force? Every Israelite in the land opposed this in principle.

The reality is that on Tuesday Jesus answered a direct question about paying taxes. When asked, He said "*Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.*" They brought one. And he said to them, '*Whose likeness and inscription is this?*' They said to him, '*Caesar's.*' Jesus said to them, '*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*' (Mk 12:15-17) All Jesus needed to do was remind the people He had just said this. He did not.

CHARGE: HE UPSETS PEOPLE—Eventually they told Pilate: "*He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.*" (Lk 23:5) This was true. But this wasn't against Rome. Even Pilate recognized this. (Mt 27:23-24) But Jesus was upsetting. He was direct, as seen in Tuesday's teaching in the temple. His view of God's Law was water tight, His concern for the poor, admirable. (Mk 12:41-44) His presentation of God's Coming Kingdom, certain. (Mt 24:36-51) His indictment of the religious leaders' hypocrisy, penetrating. (Mt 23:1-36) His teaching on sincere faith, convicting. (Mk 12:41-44) Tuesday, Jesus made all this clear. His teaching on this last day as a free man was His manifesto.

Late Thursday night, before sending Jesus to Pilate to be crucified, the Sanhedrin ask one final question which hearkens back to the parable of the tenants from Tuesday: "*Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?*" Is He the son in the parable? The question lingers. This really is the fight, isn't it? Then Jesus speaks: "*I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of Heaven.*" (Mk 14:62) It was less an answer than a roar from a mighty Lion they were beginning to realize they had by the tail and better not let go.

When Jesus left the temple Tuesday for the last time as a free man, "*the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him.*" (Mk 14:1) But they couldn't take His life from Him solely on the strength of the charges they meant to bring—not if He defended Himself. But He would not. Instead, by His silence, He'd offer up His life for a world of blasphemers and traitors and liars who so desperately needed to be upset. This was what He had come to do, and as He left the temple that Tuesday afternoon, He knew He would do it soon.