

February 22, 2026

THE ANATOMY OF UNBELIEF

Mark 11:27-12:12

*(6 of 15 in a study through Mark 10-16)*

If you had been one of Jesus' disciples after the temple cleansing, I wonder what you would have been thinking on the night that happened? I mean, remember the scene. Jesus had gone into the courtyard of the temple and not just said something like, "It could be really helpful if you all would take this commercial activity to another area so that Gentiles can come in here and pray if they want to." No, he had driven out those who were buying and selling, flipped over the tables that men had set up to exchange currency, and refused to let anyone travel through the temple at all. This was a bold, physical, and violent protest against all that was going on in the temple. So, again, imagine that you were one of Jesus' disciples that night, sitting around in Bethany, knowing that tomorrow you'd go back to Jerusalem.

Perhaps you would have been excited. Maybe you would have been thinking, "Alright, let's go. I've been ready for a clash, and this thing is just getting started." But you could also have been feeling a bit nervous, thinking, "Good grief, Jesus. I don't think you're realizing the backlash you're about to get." Either way, you knew that a confrontation was coming. Those responsible for overseeing the worship of the temple weren't going to sit still while Jesus came in and caused such a scene. And sure enough, that's what happens the next day as Jesus and his disciples arrive in Jerusalem. Mark tells us, "And they came again to Jerusalem. And as [Jesus] was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, 'By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?'" (vv. 27-28).

Now, when Mark tells us that these specific groups were confronting Jesus, we need to understand that this wasn't just a ragtag group of people who had no authority themselves. These three groups made up the Sanhedrin, which was the supreme religious council for the Jews. The chief priests included the current high priest and any living former high priests, and they were responsible for the worship in the temple. The scribes were supposed to be legal experts in the law of Moses. And the elders weren't an official vocational group, but they were the most influential lay leaders among the Jews. They would have represented the heads of tribes among the Israelites. And so, this group approaching Jesus carries a lot of weight. And add to the fact that this group was comprised seventy-one members, and this doesn't appear to be a fair fight. Jesus is going to have to answer by what authority he's done these outrageous things before these numerous and weighty figures. If you were one of his disciples who'd been nervous about Jesus' actions the day before, you might have been thinking, "I knew this was going to happen," and wanted to run away (something most of his disciples would be doing by the end of the week after Jesus was arrested).

And yet, this scene of great confrontation that we find in Mark 11:27-12:12 doesn't end with Jesus apologizing. It doesn't even end with Jesus defending himself or even giving an answer.

Rather, this whole episode serves to expose the dark, sinful, and hardened hearts of Israel's leaders. Therefore, what I want to do is show three things that Jesus exposes about these members of Israel's religious elite, and I'll try to stop and make some application along the way. First, Jesus exposes that Israel's leaders are not seeking the truth.

### **Israel's leaders are not seeking the truth**

As they ask Jesus by what authority he'd come in and cleansed the courtyard of the temple, Jesus responds not by giving them an answer but by questioning them. Mark tells us, "Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things'" (v. 29). Then he asks them, "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me" (v. 30).

Now, on the face of it, this seems like a fair question. Perhaps you'd imagine them huddling together and saying, "Who all thinks John was sent from God, and who all thinks he wasn't?" Then, they could get their answer and say, "All or most of us think this or that." That's all they have to do. But Jesus knows that this question isn't a simple for them. And the reason it's not simple for them is because they actually aren't concerned about pursuing truth.

Mark tells us, "And they discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man?'" and Mark adds, "They were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet" (vv. 31-32).

In other words, this question put them on the horns of a dilemma. If they said John was sent from God, then it was clear that John was preaching that people should repent and follow Jesus as the Lamb of God who'd come to take away sins. So, they couldn't acknowledge that because they weren't following Jesus but rebelling against him and even seeking to kill him. Therefore, they should say that John was a charlatan, claiming to be a prophet sent from God when he was nothing of the sort. However, they knew that by and large all of Israel believed John had been a prophet, and so if they said he wasn't sent from God, they'd have to deal with the backlash from the people. And they didn't want that because they cared about themselves and preserving their positions of authority above all else. Therefore, Mark tells us that they answered Jesus, saying, "We do not know," and Jesus responded, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (v. 33).

Now, to be clear, it wasn't that Jesus was ashamed or bashful about his authority. He made clear all kinds of times that he was merely obeying his Father's will, and he'd been quite open with his arrival into Jerusalem that he was the Messiah, God's promised king. He could have easily said that he did this by the authority of his Father or by the authority he has as the Son of God. But Jesus refused to give an honest answer to dishonest questioners.

You see, what their deliberations and answer revealed was that they weren't seeking truth and aiming at proclaiming what they believed to be truthful. Their answer was simply about managing the consequences of whichever route they went. They might claim to be the

proclaimers of truth and pursuers of truth, but they wanted none of it. Jesus exposed with his question what they already knew in their hearts. They weren't about seeking and proclaiming the truth. They selfishly were about pursuing whatever kept them in a place of power, with control over the people.

Now eventually, I want to note how all of this gives us insight concerning unbelievers and what that means for us. But at this point, let's just pause and ask ourselves, "Is there any place where we're struggling to bow the knee to the teaching of Scripture because we're afraid of the consequences of that truth?" Maybe we're slow to acknowledge the clear teaching of Scripture that something is sinful because we don't want to let go of it and change our practice. Maybe we're resistant to clear theological truth because we don't want to acknowledge we've been wrong in where we've stood or adjust our thinking accordingly. In other words, could we be those who say, "I just want to know what the Bible says and believe and obey it," while actually holding ourselves back from that truth because of what it might mean for us? If so, let's not be like these religious leaders. Let's repent. Let's show ourselves to be a people always in pursuit of knowing the truth of God's Word so that we might believe and obey it. But let it be clear, that wasn't true of Israel's religious leaders. Jesus had just exposed that.

Now, after Jesus responded to their insincere question by exposing that they had no interest in the truth, he goes on the offensive and tells them a parable that exposes that they're rebelling against God.

### **Israel's leaders are knowingly rebelling against God**

Here's the parable Jesus tells. He said, "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. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And 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.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others" (vv. 1-9).

Now, first, let's just make sure we understand the parable in its earthly elements. In other words, if the parable had no greater meaning than just a story, let's track what Jesus is saying. The scene Jesus refers to would have made sense to these first century hearers. Oftentimes land was owned by someone who lived far away. Therefore, the man would lease his land to those who would use the land to sow crops. In this case, the land was used as a vineyard to harvest grapes that could be made into wine. Well, when the time for harvest came, the owner would send someone to gather his portion since the agreement might be something like having the tenants take half for themselves while the land owner would collect half for himself. Whatever the

specific terms or breakdown of the agreement, the owner would eventually want to get his harvest—whatever part he was due. That’s the nature of the parable. And, of course, in this parable the tenants are acting wickedly, not only refusing to hand over the owner’s rightful portion of the harvest but abusing and even killing his servants, all the way down to killing his son who comes to collect the harvest.

But understanding the nature of the parable in its earthly sense is only part of the story, isn’t it? We know that parables point beyond themselves to other realities, and so this one does as well. First, in the parable, the vineyard stands for the people of Israel. Now, that’s not immediately obvious if you just read Mark 12, and I’m not claiming any special insight. But any reader of the OT would have known the vineyard represented the people of Israel in Scripture.

In Isaiah 5:1-7 the Lord had spoken of the nature of the Israelites, comparing them to a vineyard. And as the Lord spoke of this vineyard and how it had not borne fruit, he ended that text, saying, “For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the host of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting” (Is 5:7). So, everybody would have known this vineyard represents Israel. It’s like how anyone who knows anything about American history knows that I’m referring to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address if I refer to something happening, “For score and seven years ago.” I don’t have to tell you that’s what I mean; your mind just automatically goes there. So it is with the vineyard imagery. The religious leaders knew this was about the people of Israel.

What then do the servants represent? Well, this is a picture of those whom God sent to his people, Israel, namely, the prophets. Over and over throughout the OT God would send prophets to his people to declare his Word, and over and over they were mistreated and even killed. And so, this parable can feel far-fetched when the owner of the vineyard keeps sending servants though they’re getting abused and even killed, but this is actually how gracious and longsuffering God is throughout the OT. He sends prophet after prophet, calling his people to repent, though prophet after prophet is abused or even killed.

How about the tenants? Well, the tenants represent Israel’s religious leaders. These men were in positions of religious and governing authority over Israel. And so, the tenants represent the very men who have come to confront Jesus. That might feel obvious, but just in case you miss it, these men themselves know they’re the tenants. We’re told in verse 12 that “they perceived that he had told the parable against them.” And the son, of course, is Jesus, who has already prophesied that he’ll be killed at the hands of wicked men.

But here’s what is astounding about this. Not only do the men perceive that Jesus is talking about them when he speaks of these wicked tenants, but they respond by seeking to arrest him according to verse 12, which they will do prior to handing him over and demanding his execution by Roman authorities.

Why do I say this is astounding? Well, imagine if someone from California were visiting us today, and you got into a conversation with him after the service. And in the course of that conversation, he told a parable about a west coast kid coming to the south and being mistreated

by everyone. You'd no doubt perceive he was talking about Tennesseans mistreating those visiting from California. So what would your response be? You'd no doubt want to distance yourself from that, right? You'd probably apologize if anyone in our church mistreated him and go out of your way to make him feel warmly welcomed.

What do the chief priests, scribes, and elders do in response to Jesus' parable about mistreating those whom God sends to his people? They seek to arrest Jesus so that they might have him killed. In other words, they're not looking to distance themselves from Jesus' declaration that they're morally rebelling against God. They're doubling down and fulfilling it. Jesus exposes their moral rebellion against God.

And that right there is the reason people don't believe in Jesus. It's not because there haven't been clever enough arguments or they need some miraculous display to witness. They're rebelling against their God, suppressing what they know to be true about him. They know the God of the Bible exists because nature tells them, but they suppress it. They know what God demands of them because his law is written on their hearts, but they suppress it to continue in rebellion, even trying to make excuses for their actions. But their problem is rebellion.

A few years back the International Mission Board of the SBC started a campaign saying that "lostness" is the greatest problem in the world, and I don't really love it. First, I don't love it because I'm not sure "lostness" is a real word (is "foundness" a word, then?). But the main reason I've struggled with it is because we can't lose sight of the fact that those who are "lost" haven't simply lost their way. They're in moral rebellion against God. But I doubt that a slogan that says, "Moral rebellion is the greatest problem in the world" would sell as many shirts or garner as many donations. But it's true. And the reason it's important that we recognize it's true is because only the gospel can overcome man's moral rebellion. Man needs a new heart. He needs to be born again. And only the gospel is the power of God to save man and bring about those things. So, let's not resort to clever tactics or the like without proclaiming the gospel. Let's make sure to preach the gospel to our neighbors and the nations.

And finally, we're going to see that they'll face judgment, and Jesus will be exalted.

### **Israel's leaders are going to face judgment, but Jesus will be exalted**

There is one element in the parable that is hard to reason. Why do the tenants think that by killing the owner's son they'll be able to inherit the vineyard? Did you see that in verse 7? Some commentators suggest it could be that they reason that the owner has died, and that's why the son is coming, and under Roman law if there were no one to inherit land, then those leasing the land would be able to take possession of it. Well, perhaps, but those are some details we have to supply. Others suggest that it could be that they reason the owner is unwilling to do anything outside of sending others to fetch his crops, and so by killing everyone at his disposal it will simply leave them to inherit it. I mean, again, perhaps. But ultimately their reasoning feels irrational, and I wonder if that's not the point.

After all, think of the logic of Israel's religious leaders here. The chief priests, scribes, and elders certainly think that if they kill Jesus, their rule and authority will continue, as Jesus will no longer be able to disrupt them or unsettle the people against them. No doubt that's part of why they choose to respond to this parable by seeking to arrest Jesus. But that's not what will happen. The one they're trying to remove as a threat to their authority is one who has multiplied food, cast out demons, healed all sorts of diseases, and even raised the dead. The thought that they could have this one arrested and even killed and go back to ruling their little area feels as irrational as those tenants thinking they could seize the field through their actions.

And Jesus makes clear that things won't play out as they hope. He ends the parable saying that the tenants will be judged and "destroyed" by the vineyard owner. Then he quotes from Psalm 118:22-23, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" (vv. 10-11). With this, Jesus is prophesying that these religious leaders who have rejected him and are seeking his death will be judged. Killing Jesus would seem to silence him, like a stone that builders toss to the side. But he will not be silenced. He will rise from the dead and reign as king over the whole world. Their power will soon flutter away. We don't even know most of their names to this day. Perhaps we could come up with the names of a couple of high priests. But Jesus continues to live, and he reigns at the Father's right hand, will judge these men on the day of judgment, and will reign forever, allowing his redeemed people to reign alongside of him over a new heavens and a new earth.

We live in the midst of a world where most people don't bow the knee to our king. But this text sheds light on their hearts. They're not seeking the truth but suppressing it. They're not victims but knowingly rebelling against God. And they'll face Jesus' judgment on that last day if they continue to oppose him.

So, what does that mean for us? Two key things. First, don't be shaken by them. Can you imagine an Israelite seeing this scene of seventy men approaching Jesus to challenge him and thinking, "Man, I better make sure I'm on the side of the religious leaders in opposing Jesus"? That would have been a gross miscalculation. And so, for us, don't feel the pressure of the world and let your knees buckle. Don't hold to teaching they put forth that opposes Scripture. Hold fast. Christ is king, and they'll be judged.

And, second, let's keep preaching the gospel. The world in its opposition to Jesus has only one hope of salvation, and it's that they hear the gospel, which can transform their rebellious, hardened hearts. So, let's preach it—to our neighbor and to the nations—proclaiming the crucified and risen Christ as our only hope of salvation. And it's a certain hope, which we'll remind ourselves of now as we come to the table. Amen.