

Who Is This Man? : The Storyteller
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 12:1-12

Our final Scripture reading is Mark 12:1-12. May God bless the reading of His holy, inerrant, and infallible Word. “Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: "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. At harvest time he 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. He 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. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. 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?'" 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.”

Stories are a huge part of our lives, and we pay a great deal of money for stories we want to hear. The top 100 grossing movies of all time each have made over \$700 million dollars worldwide; the top 32 have made over \$1 billion each. James Patterson, the world’s best-selling author, makes \$95 million dollars a year. There’s a fortune to be made in storytelling.

But that’s not the only storytelling we find. We read it every day on our screens and in our newspapers. When I took journalism courses in high school and college, the key question was, “What’s the real story?” We were looking for the angle that made the story interesting and unique, but we also looked for the truth – what really happened? Truthfulness used to be the guiding star of journalism. Now, we live in an era where truth is considered relative and every news story we read, we have to check for accuracy.

We want truth in our stories, even in fictional ones. We point out plot holes to one another in books and films because they cause us to lose our suspension of disbelief. We even know the rules of our fictional worlds and point out when they’re broken – if Superman can see through lead or runs away from saving people in distress, there’s a problem. Stories that don’t fit our view of reality might comfort us, distract us, and engage us from time to time – but we need true stories. We may not like them, but we need them. Because true stories point us back to God and our need for Him.

And that’s what we’re going to discuss today. As we look at Jesus over these few weeks before Easter, we’re looking at different aspects of what He did and who He is to get a richer portrait of our Savior. We’re also looking at points of fact about Jesus that we can discuss with skeptical friends. Today, we’re going to see how Jesus was a master storyteller.

God is a storyteller through and through, and He made us in His image to become storytellers as well...not only with pen and paper, creating fantasy worlds or news articles, but through the story of our lives. He designed us to be chapters within His larger story, showing His goodness and grace in making us like Him. Look at Genesis 1:28. God blesses humanity and says, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

He’s telling them, write your story on this world that I have given you. Make it your own. You are to have dominion over this place, which means you are king and queen; multiply and fill the earth, for your sons and daughters are princes and princesses. Write your fairy tale here, full of heroic knights and fair maidens, full of goodness and truth and light, where each discovery is better than the next, where each mountain you climb is seen to shout out God’s name, where each orchard you plant reveals more of God’s goodness, where there is no death or pain, only new places to find, new lands to tame, each and every one giving glory to God and you giving Him glory as you claim it in His awesome and holy name. God’s story and our story are meant to be inseparable.

And yet, at the fall, when our ancestors sin against God through their disobedience, we lose the plot. We start to think the story is all about us. The tragedy of Adam and Eve is that, after they leave the Garden of Eden, we’re never told of another direct encounter between them and God. In fact, we’re told that it’s not until Adam’s grandson Enosh is born that anyone calls on the name of the Lord. That’s almost 250 years. For a huge portion of time, God is left out of humanity’s story.

By Genesis 6, God sees that wickedness has completely overcome the human race – “every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” God saves Noah’s family to restart things, and yet the very next story we read is the tower of Babel – humanity trying once again to make a name for themselves apart from God.

Eventually, God asks Abram to trust Him. Abram moves to Canaan at God’s command; he learns that his story is part of God’s story and not the other way around. God blesses Abram, renames him Abraham, and calls him friend. And even though Abraham does stupid things, wayward things, he keeps trusting in God, and he passes that faith down his family line. God eternally blesses Abraham’s line because of his faithfulness in a time when everyone else forgot the story of who they were made to be.

And God keeps His promise despite the fact that Abraham’s descendants do their best to throw God out of the picture. When God told the people to bind His sacred words of Scripture to their doorposts, the Israelites did it literally. But they forgot what God said it meant – that they should tell God’s story before they sleep and as they wake, as they walk along the way and sit in their homes. The rest of Israel’s history in the Old Testament is one of her prophets trying to convince the people to remember God, to tell His story, to do His will.

But God is a storyteller, and He makes His story known. What's surprising about the Bible is that it is a historical narrative told over thousands of years. It's a story. All the material about how we should live, the law, the "rules," it's encased within story. When you go to a set of American law books, you see law after law after law, thousands upon thousands of them. There are 4,450 federal crimes and over 20,000 laws just about guns. But no stories.

In comparison, there are a total of 613 laws in the Old Testament, and throughout the books that detail the law, there are stories interspersed – stories about Moses and the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness outside of the promised land of Canaan, stories of rebellion, stories of disobedience, of a census count of the people, of the priestly family, even of enemies trying to bring down curses on Israel!

God knows we relate to stories. We understand things better when they come to us in stories. Stories help us process things from a different point of view. And so when Jesus came, He came as a storyteller. He told stories to get our attention. He was a great teacher, and we'll talk about that in a coming week – but part of the brilliance of His teaching is that much of it was wrapped in memorable stories that stick with you. And just as we lost the plot of the story we were made to tell at the fall into sin, Jesus came to restore the heart of the story to us.

So it should be no surprise that of all the parables and stories Jesus tells, a great many of them tell us about the Kingdom of God – what it's like, how it grows, who is there. He describes how the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that blooms or a tiny bit of yeast that spreads through a loaf of bread – how something so small winds up growing bigger than all expectations.

He describes the Kingdom in terms of weeds and wheat – how they grow up together, but at the harvest they're separated from each other – and He explains how the weeds are the unbelievers and unfaithful while the wheat are the faithful believers. He describes the Kingdom of God as a rare treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price that the jewelry merchant would sell everything to have.

Jesus' parables establish not just God's Kingdom but God's personality. We've all heard the parable of the Prodigal Son, but it should really be called the Parable of the Loving Father of Ungrateful Oafs. In modern times, we think it's the story of the prodigal son because it fits with modern evangelism – you stray from God, you come back, and He welcomes you with open arms. Yet the emphasis when we look at it that way is on the son who returns, not the Father who forgives.

But the story is really about the Father, who cares for his wayward son even though he's wayward. He's a Father who runs out to meet his son in an era when respectable men never ran anywhere – He is willing to look a fool because He loves His son so much. And the Father loves His unappreciative son, too, the one who never left home but also never appreciated his Father and who is angry that the Father would care about his wayward brother. Both sons are in need of forgiveness, which the Father extends.

But the stories don't end there. They also tell us how we should live and warn us of the consequences of remaining disobedient. The parable of the Good Samaritan destroyed the idea of a priest or holy man being faithful merely by their title or work. The outsider is shown to be the faithful one because he was the only one who actually helped. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus show that those who do not care for others are cast into outer darkness rather than welcomed into the Kingdom. Parable after parable – the parable of the talents, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the parable of the watchful servant, to name a few – all caution us: be prepared, because you don't know when God will bring about your reckoning!

Jesus even tells stories about His coming and death and what it means. Our passage today is a story that encapsulates the whole of history. God creates and hands over His creation to us, who are tenants – people who are caretakers, not owners. Yet the tenants want to overthrow God, ignoring, beating, even killing God's servants who come to proclaim God's truth. When the son of God comes, they do the same thing, thinking that now they truly will have claim to God's Kingdom. And ultimately, this parable underlines that God rejected the religious and priestly class of Israel who murdered His Son, those who claimed God but were unwilling to follow His ways or His Son. God throws them out, and instead accepts all who turn to the Son, all who turn back to the true story.

That Jesus was a masterful storyteller is not really up for debate. His stories were short, memorable, and profound. Hear them once or twice and you remember them, even if you don't completely understand their meaning or even agree with them. Wherever you are on the faith spectrum, it's difficult to argue anything but that Jesus wanted people to draw closer to God. His stories weren't about how to have your best life now or how to solve problems at your job or in your family. They were all about God's Kingdom. Those are the facts. The next part is where our faith meets with Jesus in our daily life.

First thought: *we satisfy our purpose in life best when we remember that we are actors in God's story and not the other way around.* History is always about more than one person. Abraham Lincoln had an immense part to play in the Civil War – but what would American history be without George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, FDR, Harry Truman, to say nothing of the other 40? What about the pilgrims, Lewis and Clark, the founders of New York and Boston, and so many others? A nation not yet 250 years old has countless players in its story.

God's story encompasses all people, all nations, all places, through the whole of time; it's the one that matters. Yet that's hard because it humbles us. It is difficult for us to see outside of ourselves from someone else's perspective. Our view is the only view we truly know. But God's view encompasses everything. His view is genuine and true; if we are to do what is right, we must give Him center stage.

I don't know if you've ever seen a movie that was miscast, but it creates huge problems in the end. A movie can bomb when even a great actor is cast in the wrong role. A recent series of films with Tom Cruise have been lambasted because the character he's playing – Jack Reacher – is described in his books as blond, 6'5 and 250 pounds. Tom Cruise is 5'7, dark-haired, and thin. Dwayne Johnson was in the running to play the character. That's miscasting.

When we try to take the lead role in our story, we are miscast. We're playing the wrong part. And inevitably, it won't go well for us. Instead, when we let God take over our story, when we make our lives about Him – when we, as Jesus said, take up our cross daily and follow Him, when we put to death our sinful selves through the power of the Holy Spirit – we find the role we were born to play. Our story becomes far more meaningful because we're telling it the way God intended.

How do we do that? We read His word daily. We talk with Him daily. We talk about Him daily. We grow in Him daily. We start serving Him daily by looking for ways to show kindness and love and charity to others. We tell others God's story and how He has changed us, and how putting Him first actually makes us better people. It sounds impossible, and it is unless God is at work in you. But with the Holy Spirit, not only is it possible, we'll find that we'll find God's peace as it happens.

Second thought: *When God has His rightful place in your life, your story matters.* Have you ever noticed how some of the most memorable characters in a story are the supporters? There's a reason there's a category for that at the Oscars. Harry Potter is the lead character; his name is in the title of all his books. Yet his story is a hit because of Hermione and Ron, Dumbledore, and the cast of eccentric teachers and students at Hogwarts.

When you let God take the lead and you support, what God does through you suddenly takes on greater importance. We celebrate the life of Billy Graham this week, but not because he was an intellectual preacher; his messages rarely changed that much from night to night. Not because he was particularly handsome or uniquely charismatic. Not because he made a lot of money or started some global corporation. The world mourns his loss this week because he gave his life over to God fully in a way not many people do, and God used him.

God takes those whose status and intelligence and history is unremarkable, even lousy, and makes their stories wonderful. Don't think that you're at a small church in suburbia with an OK job and OK life and that means you're off of God's radar – Jesus made apostles out of small business owners, a tax collector, a prejudiced Bible student, and a radical. Don't think because you're old God can't use you – Moses became God's spokesman at 80. Don't think because you're young God can't use you – God called the prophet Samuel when he was only a boy.

And don't think your story can only be wonderful if it goes viral. God doesn't make most people famous. He uses them in their own communities, in their own situations, to make a difference, to change things, to make His name known. It is OK if your job is to teach 20 children or to help a few dental patients each day or to learn at school. God does not expect the extraordinary from everyone; He expects simple faithfulness. Your faithful story will not reach millions. It will reach whomever it is God wants it to reach to accomplish His purposes, so His name might be known and glorified and we might experience His grace, love, and forgiveness.

Jesus was and is a storyteller. For believers, His story is our story; they're intertwined. Our life story cannot be told without His. He told us stories about who we are as children of God's Kingdom and how we can be faithful to that Kingdom. May we share the story and live it out today.