

**Series:** Mark

**Title:** How to Spiritually Thrive

**Text:** Mark 12:1-12

**Date:** February 21, 2021

### **Verse 1**

Mark 12:1 provided an introduction of a parable from our Lord. It said, “He began to speak to them in parables: ‘A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug out a pit for a wine press, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and went away’” (Mark 12:1). The word translated “parable” was a compound word that literally meant “to throw alongside.” It referred to a story that was told in order to make an important point. It involved placing a story alongside a teaching point in order to clarify that point. It also was known for using comparisons (placing things alongside one another) for the purpose of teaching religious truth. Jesus first spoke in parables earlier in Mark’s gospel in Mark 3:23-30 and 4:1-34).

In our text, Jesus told a parable to make a point concerning those who challenged His authority. Remember the incident from Mark 11:27-33.<sup>1</sup> He intended to rebuke them for their heinous rejection of God’s Son, and He meant to foretell the horrific judgment that would fall on them in the future.

When Jesus made mention of a man planting a “vineyard,” His hearers would have realized He was referring to one of Isaiah’s famous teaching. Isaiah 5:1-7 used a vineyard as a metaphor for the nation of Israel. The prophets and the psalmists used Isaiah’s metaphor in their writings (Psalm 80:8-11, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 19:10, and Hosea 10:1).<sup>2</sup> Isaiah’s story of the vineyard would have been as popular for first-century Jews as the parable of the Good Samaritan is for us (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus christianized the prophet’s parable to reveal important New Testament truth.

In one way, this parable can be seen as a historical survey of the nation of Israel. Through the story, Jesus, in effect, covered fifteen hundred years of Jewish history.<sup>3</sup> The story started with a man planting a vineyard. One is prompted to remember both Genesis 12:1-9 and Isaiah 5:1-7. In His sovereign purposes, and by His power, the Lord birthed the nation of Israel in order to delivering a redeemer.

Notice several of the real-life features Jesus inserted into His story. Most farmers would install a “fence around” their vineyards. The language of the text depicted a “wall” or a “hedge.”<sup>4</sup> Usually, ancient farmers made such a structure out of the rocks they had dug up from their field during the cultivation process (Isaiah 5:2).<sup>5</sup> The resulting fence was used to keep vines from growing outside the boundary of one’s property. It was also designed to provide protection from wild animals.<sup>6</sup> The biblical metaphor provided a picture of both ownership and security.<sup>7</sup> Those who belong to the Lord are promised both of these blessings.

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<sup>1</sup> Schnabel, 282.

<sup>2</sup> Schnabel, 282.

<sup>3</sup> Ryle, 194-195.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 93.

<sup>5</sup> Schnabel, 282.

<sup>6</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Schnabel, 282.

Jesus' hearers would have been familiar with the "pit" of which He spoke. Usually, grape farmers made a hole in the ground for the purpose of crushing grapes.<sup>8</sup> A ditch was typically dug into a hillside. A grate of some sort was placed over the top of it, and the bottom of the ditch was paved. A vessel was placed at one end of the ditch to catch the juice that ran from the crushed grapes.<sup>9</sup> Jesus had such a trough-like feature in mind as He shared the parable in our text.

The "watchtower" was a feature that was present in Isaiah's story concerning the vineyard (Isaiah 5:2). It was a stand from which farmers, or their workers, could keep an eye on the harvest.<sup>10</sup> One should not view the aforementioned items as having significant meaning in the parable.<sup>11</sup> One has commented, "While the vineyard clearly symbolizes Israel, the details of the wall, the winepress and the tower probably do not have allegorical significance."<sup>12</sup> There is danger in trying to find an application in each detail of a parable. The fence, pit, and watchtower, were simply meant to set the stage for the main characters of the text – the "tenant farmers." In interpreting parables, it is often helpful to remember that most parables have one overall main point. Some symbolism can be seen in secondary details, but one should not try to find hidden meanings in each detail.

The mention of the farmers in Mark's account is a diversion from Isaiah's narrative. The prophet didn't mention them, but Jesus did. Our Lord borrowed a customary practice from first-century farming practices. "Tenant farmers" were ones who "made a contract with the landlord to tend the vineyard in return for a part of its produce."<sup>13</sup> In some ways, they can be likened to the sharecroppers who marked the landscape of the American South in past years. Jesus added the characters to His parable in order to make a point concerning the religious leaders of His day. Just as an owner would entrust oversight of his land to such workers, the Lord had entrusted His covenant promises to Israel.

After hiring "tenant farmers" to work his land, the landlord "went a way." The original language depicted one taking a trip or traveling to a foreign country.<sup>14</sup> One can see a picture of the Heavenly Father in the language. Though He dwelt in the far-off country of Heaven, He entrusted His covenant people, the Jews, to manage His Word and His covenant.

## Verse 2

Jesus set the stage for the plot of His parable in verse 2, saying, "At harvest time he sent a servant to the farmers to collect some of the fruit of the vineyard from them" (Mark 12:2). A good length of time elapsed between the events of verse 1 and the events of verse 2. Usually, the first harvest of grapes wouldn't occur until three or five years after a vineyard was established. Jesus' hearers understood this reality. They probably waited with anticipation to hear the outcome of the first harvest.

Jesus spoke of the way in which the landowner sent a "servant" to collect his earnings. The word translated "servant" is significant. It represented another group of important characters

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<sup>8</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Robertson, 364.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks, 190.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, 190.

<sup>12</sup> Schnabel, 283.

<sup>13</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 93.

in the parable. As we will see in verse 4, Jesus used the servants as an allegory for the prophets. When we read the Old Testament, we learn that the prophets were often referred to as God's servants (Jeremiah 7:25, Amos 3:7, and Zechariah 1:6).<sup>15</sup>

The word translated "sent" is the one from which we get our word "apostle." It depicted a person being endowed with authority from a royal official. It conveyed the idea of one being commissioned with a task.<sup>16</sup> The inclusion of the word in our text made allusion to the way in which the Lord had entrusted His people with His covenants. He communicated His will to them by sending special messengers known as prophets.

As with the miracle performed on the fig tree earlier in the Holy Week (Mark 11:12-14 and 20-26), the current parable was designed to teach the importance of spiritual fruit amongst the nation of Israel. In keeping with John the Baptist's preaching, the Lord's covenant people were expected to "produce fruit consistent with repentance" (Luke 3:8). Unfortunately, they were unresponsive to Jesus' preaching. They didn't produce fruit. They were spiritually bare, empty of the good works that should typify God's people (Ephesians 2:10; James 2:26; and Revelation 20:13).

### **Verse 3**

Jesus' story took a dramatic turn in verse 3. Jesus said, "But they took him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed" (Mark 12:3). Our Lord's story was based on cultural norms. In His day, it was not uncommon for tenant farmers to plot a revolt against landlords.<sup>17</sup> Jesus used that societal norm as a vehicle to deliver a stinging rebuke. His opponents would have been familiar with Isaiah's (6:9-10) teaching about the people's refusal to listen to the Lord's prophets. The Lord told His parable to accuse His opponents of a similar rejection of God's ultimate Prophet.

### **Verse 4**

In response to the killing of his first messenger, the landlord sent another. Jesus continued his story: "Again he sent another servant to them, and they hit him on the head and treated him shamefully" (Mark 12:4). Some believe verse 4 contains an allusion to John the Baptist. Perhaps the mention of "head" was intended to stir thoughts about the way John was unjustly killed by Herod (Mark 6:25-29). The people in Jesus' day were indeed guilty of shunning the Lord's truth. Despite countless appeals from His messengers, they displayed hardened consciences.

Despite the people's unfaithfulness, the Lord remained faithful. He sent a second servant, even after they killed the first. While first-century landowners used servants to manage land, and while revolts were common, it is unlikely that a landowner would have sent a second servant in the situation portrayed in our text.<sup>18</sup> He would have typically acted in haste to snuff out an uprising.

Why would the landowner in Jesus' parable have given his farmers a second chance? Perhaps Jesus meant to depict the way in which God had demonstrated immense grace in sending prophets over and over again to His chosen people (Jeremiah 7:25, 29:19, 44:4-5). The sending of multiple messengers is a reminder of God's mercy towards man. He is "not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). May we be quick to listen to His gracious summons, and may we be speedy in our responses.

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<sup>15</sup> Brooks, 190.

<sup>16</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 93.

<sup>17</sup> Ferguson, 188.

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, 189.

## Verse 5

Verse 5 told of the way in which the master of our parable sent many other servants to collect fruit. It said, "Then he sent another, and they killed that one. He also sent many others; some they beat, and others they killed" (Mark 12:5). First-century Jews were well familiar with the way in which their people had mistreated many of the prophets. There was a famous Jewish text entitled *Lives of the Prophets* that was written around the time of Jesus. It reported popular traditions concerning the martyrdom of prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and Amos. The prevalence of the tradition related to the prophets deaths is seen in the gospels (Matthew 5:12) and in Paul's writings as well (1 Thessalonians 2:15). As Jesus spoke about "many others," his hearers knew what he was talking about. His words summoned memories of the famous stories about the martyrdom of Israel's prophets.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus' words in verse 5 also likely conjured up memories of 2 Chronicles 36:15-17. In that passage, the Lord rebuke His people for rejecting His messengers:

But the Lord, the God of their ancestors sent word against them by the hand of his messengers, sending them time and time again, for he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept ridiculing God's messengers, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the Lord's wrath was so stirred up against his people that there was no remedy. So he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their fit young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary. He had no pity on young men or young women, elderly or aged; he handed them all over to him (2 Chronicles 36:15-17).

The "many others" of Mark 12:5 represented the Old Testament prophets the Lord used to speak to His people (1 Peter 1:10-12 and 2 Peter 1:20-26).

The word translated "beat" in verse 5 was one that was used in the first-century world to speak of one skinning or flaying an animal.<sup>20</sup> Jesus used the grotesque term in His parable to emphasize the cruelty experienced by many of the Lord's prophets. Hebrews 11:32-38 gave more details concerning this matter:

And what more can I say? Time is too short for me to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead, raised to life again. Other people were tortured, not accepting release, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Others experienced mockings and scourgings, as well as bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they died by the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and on mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

Jesus' reference to the prophets in our text reminds us that the Word of God will often be met with harsh resistance. It is required of God's people to be vigilant and to persevere nonetheless. Our Lord taught us concerning this matter in the Sermon on the Mount, saying, "You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of

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<sup>19</sup> Schnabel, 284.

<sup>20</sup> Robertson, 365.

me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

### **Verse 6**

In response to the harsh treatment of numerous servants, the landowner had the idea of sending his own son to collect his earnings. Mark 12:6 said, “He still had one to send, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’” Jesus’ story was a way of confronting His opponents in a veiled manner concerning their plans to kill Him.<sup>21</sup> The word translated “beloved” means much more than just “loved.” The word carried the idea of one being cherished because he or she was unique.<sup>22</sup> The same Greek word from our text was used in the Septuagint’s rendering of Genesis 22:2, depicting Isaac as Abraham’s one and only loved son of promise. The Bible speaks of Jesus in such terms in John 3:16.

Their rejection of Him was grounded in a lack of “respect.” The Koine Greek underlying the English translation uses a word that meant “reverence.”<sup>23</sup> The religious leaders of Jesus’ day erred in regard to the fear of the Lord. They needed to learn the truth of Proverbs 1:7 – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline.”

### **Verse 7**

Verse 7 describes the way in which the tenant farmers plotted to kill the heir. It said, “But those tenant farmers said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours’” (Mark 12:7). The word translated “heir” referred to the one who would be granted possession of a given property once the property owner died.<sup>24</sup> Jesus’ parable depicted his opponents as wanting the heir’s “inheritance” for themselves.

The New Testament teaches that Christ will indeed take inheritance of the kingdom one day (1 Corinthians 15:25). He will rule over what is rightfully His, displaying His power of the creative order (Philippians 2:9-11 and Revelation 20:4). The first-century religious leaders wanted to steal what belonged to Christ. They desired the kingdom of God on their terms. Through their Mishnaic code of ethics, and their bankrupt system of religion, they showed disdain for the ways of Christ. They had their own expectation of how things should go, so they spurned the Lord and His truth.

Jesus’ story hit close to home for some of His listeners. Because He knew the hearts of all men (Mark 2:8 and John 2:24-25), He knew some of them were plotting to have Him killed (Mark 3:6 and 11:18). They were the scheming tenant farmers of the parable. The religious leaders stand as a memorial of the importance to respond to Jesus’ claims in the correct way. Many harden their hearts to Jesus’ truth. The New Testament warns us of doing such (Hebrews 3:8 and 15, 4:7). True repentance (Mark 1:15) is the remedy to such a response.

### **Verse 8**

The farmer’s rage reached a crescendo in verse 8 as they killed the landlord’s heir. We read, “So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard” (Mark 12:8). In the first-century world, killing and disposing of a body in such a way was viewed as barbaric. It was deemed

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<sup>21</sup> Ferguson, 188-189.

<sup>22</sup> Schnabel, 285.

<sup>23</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.

outrageous sacrilege to deny someone an appropriate burial.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, victims of crucifixion were often not buried according to normal Jewish custom. Their bodies were disposed of in the famous Potter's Field. We knew our Lord did receive a proper burial (Mark 15:42-47), but maybe He made a slight prophecy concerning the means of His death through His reference to the heir being thrown out of the vineyard.

As Jesus shared the dramatic turn in the story, His hearers were likely shocked. The behavior of the tenant farmers would have been regarded as unjust and heinous by first-century Jews. The story showed the depravity of the human heart (Genesis 6:5 and Romans 3:10). There is no sin too shocking or too sinful for mankind. Left to him or herself, there is no iniquity that is off limits for man or woman.

Jesus' parable gave a fitting portrayal of the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees and elders. Together, they would consent to have Jesus put to death on unsubstantiated charges (Mark 15:14). Peter would later rebuke the Jews for their crime. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, he thundered, "This Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did among you through Him, just as you yourselves know. Though He was delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge, you used lawless people to nail Him to a cross and kill Him (Acts 2:22-23). Interestingly, Peter's stinging indictment was associated with the giving of the gift of tongues, a sign gift that pronounced judgment on the Jews (Isaiah 28:11, 33:19, 66:18; Acts 2:4). In God's eyes, the Jewish people were guilty as a whole for the unwarranted killing of Jesus.

### Verse 9

In verse 9, Jesus remarked on the way in which the tenant farmers in His parable were worthy of justice. He said, "What then will the owner, of the vineyard do? He will come and kill the farmers and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9). Verse 9 contained frightening imagery of judgment. The question at the beginning of the verse was designed to make Jesus' hearers think about the solemnity and certainty of coming judgment.<sup>26</sup> Maybe Jesus paused for a moment before offering His answer to the question.

The word "kill" meant more than simply killing a person. It carried the idea of total destruction and annihilation.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the same Greek word was used in Mark 3:6 and 11:18 to speak of the religious leader's schemes to kill Jesus. Though they plotted His destruction, they would be the ones who experienced destruction.

It should be regarded as a metaphor for Divine judgment. It ultimately depicted the spiritual death that awaited Jews who rejected Jesus. In the short term, it made reference to the coming siege of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>28</sup> The Lord would completely wipe out the false religion and misplaced nationalistic zeal of the first-century Jews.

Though they had heard God's truth from the mouth of the Messiah, the religious leaders, and the nation at large, had hardened their hearts. They refused to listen to the Lord's Anointed One. As a result, a terrible judgment awaited them. Jesus' pronouncement reminds us of Solomon's warning in the Proverbs — "One who becomes stiff-necked, after many reprimands will be shattered instantly—beyond recovery" (Proverbs 29:1). In Matthew's gospel, Jesus spoke of the horrific judgment that awaits the Jews who rejected Him (Matthew 25:41-43). To do so, He

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<sup>25</sup> Brooks, 191.

<sup>26</sup> Schnabel, 286.

<sup>27</sup> Schnabel, 286.

<sup>28</sup> Schnabel, 289.

spoke of the Son of Man separating sheep from goats (Matthew 25:31-46). John likewise spoke about a special judgment for those who played a part in Jesus' death. In the book of Revelation, he said, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him" (Revelation 1:7).

Jesus' statement concerning the way in which the owner would "give the vineyard to others" is a reference to the Lord's blessing of the Gentiles. Though the church has not replaced Israel, we are living in a time known as "the time of the Gentiles" (Romans 11:25). Because of the Jews rejection of their Messiah, the Lord chose to pass over them for a season and pour out special grace on the nations. Paul understood this reality. That's why, after having preached to Jews in synagogues, he committed himself to primarily preaching to Gentiles (Acts 18:1-6).

### **Verses 10 and 11**

Jesus concluded His parable with a reference to Scripture, showing that the entire point of the story was rooted in God's Word. He quoted Psalm 118:22-23 in verses 10 and 11. Peter quoted the same passage from the Psalms in 1 Peter 2:6 when teaching on the supremacy of Christ. The Psalm was a famous Hallel song that was often quoted at Passover.<sup>29</sup> Jesus recited it, saying, "Haven't you read this Scripture: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This came about from the Lord and is wonderful in our eyes?" Jesus' question was intended as a rebuke.<sup>30</sup> He meant to imply that the Jewish leaders weren't familiar with a seminal passage of Hebrew Scripture.

A "cornerstone" was the foundational stone that was placed at the corner of a building to give stability to the entire structure.<sup>31</sup> Building metaphors are often used of the church in the New Testament. See passages like Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Corinthians 3:11-12 and 1 Peter 2:5. Jesus used the cornerstone imagery to depict Himself as the foundation of God's plan of redemption. In their rejection of Jesus, the first-century Jewish leaders unwittingly rejected the anchor of God's plan of salvation. Their sin and folly was indeed great.

It is interesting to note that Jesus, the cornerstone of redemptive and revelatory purpose, quoted Scripture when confronting His foes. When He taught, He taught directly from God. His spoken Word was direct revelation, but He still felt a need to cite Scripture in His teaching. His faithfulness to quote Scripture showed that His authority was in alignment with the Word. Those who challenged Him should have recognized that His ministry was in alignment with God's truth. Because He was the incarnate Word (John 1:1), who existed in eternity past as the embodiment of God's truth (Proverbs 18), His teaching was one with the teaching we find in the Bible.

He frequently quoted Scripture (Mark 7:6-7) in order to show that His authority was rooted in Scripture, but to also model that God's people should look to God's Book as their authority for faith and practice. When we face critics and adversaries, may we follow Jesus' model. Instead of responding with the wrath of man, may we set our hearts and minds on God's Word, entrusting ourselves to Him.

### **Verse 12**

Verse 12 concluded Jesus' parable of the vineyard owner, saying, "They were looking for a way to arrest him but feared the crowd because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. So they left him and went away" (Mark 12:12). The religious leaders weren't dumb. They knew Jesus was talking about them. He had previously masked his teachings to a degree in order to

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<sup>29</sup> Schnabel,

<sup>30</sup> Schnabel, 287.

<sup>31</sup> Schnabel,

avoid an untimely death and to keep the program of redemption on God's sovereign schedule (Mark 1:25 and 4:10-12). In speaking about the vineyard owner, Jesus was more direct. Matthew's account of this same teaching tells us so. In Matthew 21:43, Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit." Jesus didn't mince words. A.T. Robertson has said that our Lord's sermon took a "straight shot" at His opponents.<sup>32</sup>

The point of the Lord's parable was plain. Provoked to anger, the self-righteous religionists amped up their schemes. Ironically, their response was actually a fulfillment of Jesus' parable. The phrase translated "looking for a way" in verse 12 employed an imperfect active indicative verb. The tense depicted a continual action in the past. Mark intended to depict the religious leaders as repeatedly seeking a way to arrest Jesus.<sup>33</sup> They were dead set on finding away to have Him killed.

Earlier they had plotted to have Jesus put to death (Mark 3:6 and 11:18). Now they wanted to arrest him immediately. They were detoured, however, because of the crowd. They were nervous the general populace would react violently to the arrest of Jesus, since He was immensely popular (Mark 11:8-10). Mark said they "feared the crowd." It is likely that hundreds of people were present in the outer court when Jesus presented His parable.

Because of the Passover festivities, thousands of people had descended upon Jerusalem. Most of them would have been favorable to John the Baptist's ministry (Mark 11:27-33) and Jesus' ministry as well (Mark 11:1-11). Thus, the religious and political leaders balked in their scheming. It is for this reason that they would eventually enlist Judas to help in a betrayal plot (Mark 14:10-11). In addition, they would have to arrest Jesus in the secrecy of night (Mark 14:43-52) to avoid a public uproar.

The defiled consciences of the religious leaders once again caused them to operate on the basis of the fear of man. Solomon said, "The wicked flee when no one is pursuing them, but the righteous are as bold as a lion" (Proverbs 28:1). Mark has previously depicted the way in which the chief priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees were in bondage to the fear of man (Mark 11:18 and 32). Their unhealthy concern with the opinions of others drove them to do ungodly things. They needed to heed the warning of Proverbs 29:25 – "The fear of mankind is a snare, but the one who trusts in the Lord is protected."

We can learn a lot from Jesus' opponents. They stand as a testament concerning the importance of listening to God's Word. Their greatest sin was their rejection of the Lord's Messenger. Because of their flagrant and flippant rejection of Jesus, their hearts had become like Esau's – too hard-hearted for repentance (Hebrews 12:17). Because of their rebellion, they exhibited a greater fear of man than God. A fearful judgment awaited them. Their spiritual failure teaches of our need to honestly and humbly listen to the Lord. Are we ever guilty of dismissing His claims on our lives because of our preconceived religious notions, our own personal agenda, or our cultural leanings. Our passage teaches us of our need to seek after real truth and real repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9-10).

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<sup>32</sup> Robertson, 365.

<sup>33</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.