

The Parable of the Tenants

Luke 20:1-19

Key Verse: 20:13

“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’”

As we studied last week, Jesus entered Jerusalem as king, riding on a donkey’s colt. Then, the Jewish religious leaders felt threatened. They began to challenge Jesus’ authority in order to discredit him. Each time they did, Jesus responded with words of truth that were amazing and life-giving. This is largely what Luke chapter 20 is about. It has been called “the chapter of questions and answers” between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. Through this pressure-packed series of exchanges, Jesus revealed clearly his true nature as the Son of God and the King. Jesus was full of wisdom and majesty. In verses 1-8, Jesus responded to a question about his authority. In doing so, he exposed the religious leaders’ contempt for truth. But he did not stop there. In verses 9-19, Jesus told them the parable of the tenants. It is an exquisite summary of God’s history. It gives deep insight into the relationship between God and men. As we discover its distinctive relational aspects, it should guide us to make a better relationship with God. Let’s pay attention to Jesus’ parable and learn more about him and ourselves, and respond to him rightly.

I. Who gave you this authority? (1-8)

In verse 1, Luke emphasizes that Jesus spent his final days on earth in the temple courts, teaching the people and preaching the gospel. Knowing that he would go to the cross in just a few days, Jesus spent his time teaching and preaching the word of God. Jesus could have retreated to a quiet place to prepare for his coming ordeal. Instead he boldly preached the gospel in the temple courts, where God-seeking people had gathered. Jesus preached the gospel as a dying man to dying men, in order to save some. Here we learn the urgency of preaching the gospel in any and every situation. People of the world are all under a death sentence due to our sins. The only salvation is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The most urgent need of any person is to hear the gospel, so that we can believe and be saved. This coming weekend is the Chicago Harvest. It is a God-given opportunity to bring lost people throughout Chicago to hear the gospel through Pastor Greg Laurie’s evangelistic message. We should pray for the effective preaching of the gospel, and make every effort to bring the lost. We should do this in the midst of many other pressing demands of life. This pleases Jesus.

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As Jesus was preaching the gospel, lost souls who heard his words entered God's presence. Directionless people found God's purpose for them as their light of truth. People broken by sin's power received forgiveness and new life. People who were crushed under the power of death glimpsed new hope in Jesus. But this beautiful time was rudely interrupted. The chief priests, teachers of the law and elders came up to Jesus. It was the full force of the Sanhedrin, the top governing body of Israel. They demanded, **"Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?"** They could not criticize Jesus for what he was doing, since he was teaching the Bible in the temple. So they tried to question his authority to do so. They implied that he had no right to operate in the temple without their consent. The basis of their authority was family heritage, religious tradition, and the establishment power of the Romans, with whom they collaborated. Upon such human constructs, they based their authority. Now they wanted to accuse Jesus of preaching without a license.

How did Jesus answer? Look at verse 3. **"He replied, 'I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism--was it from heaven, or from men?'"** John the Baptist was known by all as a man sent by God. His message had power to move sinners' hearts. People repented and were baptized as a sign of their faith. They did not respond like this because John was well educated or because he had a position in the religious establishment. They did so because they heard God speaking to them through John. Furthermore, John's miraculous birth in fulfillment of prophecy, his pure lifestyle, and his martyrdom for the sake of God's truth all testified to the genuineness of his calling. This John had proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah. Now, by asking if John's baptism was from heaven or from men, Jesus was forcing them to take a stand in regard to John's claim. Without doing this, there was no answer to their question. But as we see, they were unable to do so. They said, **"We don't know."** They were not willing to take a stand, for they did not care about the truth. Their single intention was to maintain positions of power, whether by deceit or intimidation. In fact, they would acknowledge no authority beside their own--not even God's. When this was exposed, people could see clearly the evil nature of their intention. Then Jesus said, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."**

We may be shocked at the elite of Israel. But this suppression of the truth happens in our times too. When God's servants preach the gospel, there are those who try to undermine them. Some so-called theologians, who talk about sophisticated concepts in great detail, do not believe in God. They deliberately

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suppress the truth and try to lead others astray. In the end, their folly will be revealed. Some intellectuals use science to deny God's existence. They talk in elaborate detail about new discoveries and their possible implications, trying to prove that there is no God. But they cannot answer the simple question, **"If not God, then who or what?"** Whenever they try to answer this, they say something like, "It is in the stars," or, "Aliens from another planet are the source of life." Bible believing people have nothing to fear from unbelieving intellectuals. Sooner or later their folly will be revealed. We can learn from Jesus to expose their root problem of suppressing the truth, and not to argue further. Most of all, we learn that we should preach the gospel to dying souls in our time with a life-giving spirit.

II. The parable of the tenants (9-19)

With a simple question, Jesus disarmed all of the Sanhedrin members. Of course, Jesus knew they were going to regroup and attack him again later. But Jesus was deeply concerned about the people he had been teaching and preaching to. He wanted them to see things from God's point of view and hold on to the truth they had received without fear. So he went on to tell the parable of the tenants. He explained who God is, who Christ is, who man is, and the nature of our relationships. It summarizes God's redemptive history, and connects the Old and New Testaments. We learn several things.

First, God gave man many privileges and a mission (9b).

Look at verse 9b. **"A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time."** In light of Isaiah 5:1-7, the vineyard owner represents God, the vineyard is the nation of Israel, and the farmers are the people, particularly her leaders. More broadly speaking, based on Genesis chapters 1-2, the vineyard owner is God, the vineyard is the world, and the farmers are mankind. This teaches that God gave privileges and blessings to each person free of charge. In return, God wants man to do his work--carry out his mission. God does not micromanage each person, but gives freedom to use God's resources wisely and purposefully. There is an understanding that at some future time God will return and ask for an account.

So it is important for each of us to realize what God has given us and how we are using it. What has God given you? God has given each of us our very lives. No one created his own life; each person's life is a gift from God. God has given us the families we were born into. No one chose to be an only son or a youngest

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son or an eldest daughter. God gave each person their family situation according to his divine purpose. No one chose which nation to be born into, or which time period in history to be born into; this too is God's sovereign guidance and blessing. In addition, God has given each person talents and abilities, personality traits, strengths and weaknesses of character, and many other things. God did this for a purpose. It is essential for each of us to discover God's purpose for our lives and to live for it, mobilizing the resources he has given to carry out that mission. And we should be thankful, recognizing all the grace God has given us freely by his love. Each person should be like a happy farmer who works hard each day with a song of gratitude in his heart to God. This is all doubly true for Christians, who have been born of the Spirit and have new life in Christ, including spiritual gifts and ministry opportunity.

When we consider the Jewish leaders, they had failed on this very point. Though they had decorative garments and spoke with a distinctive religious flair, they did not know God at all. In 7:30, Luke had said of them, **“But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.”** When they ignored John's simple message of repentance, they ignored God. When they ignored God, they rejected God's purpose for themselves. They make a great contrast with those who simply repented when they heard God's word. For example, Jesus' disciples were not among the elite of Israel. But when they heard the message of repentance, and God's calling, they simply left their old lives and began to follow. They acknowledged God as God (Lk 5:8-11). When they did so, they found the true purpose and direction of their lives and began to obey God's will for them. So even though they made many mistakes, Jesus was gracious and understanding of them. To repent of our sins before the holy God and to accept his purpose is the beginning of having a personal relationship with God. Those who do this submit to spiritual authority, for they understand that it is God's blessing to fulfill his purpose.

Here we see that we must pray for America. God blessed America abundantly and exceedingly for a purpose: to carry the gospel message to the ends of the earth. **But these days many churches are filled with people who want only blessings, without any mission. Many pastors do not talk about the world mission command of Christ in their messages, but only the benefits of believing in Jesus. May God restore his purpose in the hearts of his people, that we may be a great missionary-sending nation for his glory.**

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Second, man's rebellion, God's patience (10-12).

Look at verse 10. **“At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.”** At first this shocks us. The tenants should recognize the owner’s right to fruit. But they treated him like an intruder and beat his servant. How could this happen? As time passed, and they did not see the owner, they gradually forgot about him. They forgot that they had received everything freely by his grace. They began to think about their own labor. They thought, “We worked hard; the owner did not even lift a finger.” Their effort became significant in their minds and the owner’s grace vanished from their thought. They began to think of the fruit as theirs. Then they began to think of the vineyard as theirs. Finally, when the owner's representative came, they treated him like a robber by beating him and sending him away.

This describes the sinful nature of mankind. Romans 1:21 says, **“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”** When people take God’s grace without embracing God’s purpose for them, they fail to glorify God and thank God. Then they fall into foolish ignorance. One young man faced the ruin of his marriage to a wonderful and godly woman because of his sins of unfaithfulness. But when he cried out to God his family was restored. He received God’s blessing of restoration gladly, but did not embrace God’s purpose for himself or his family. Then, strangely, he began to forget about God right after receiving grace. He worked long hours at his job, honoring his boss more than God or his family. When his wife suggested that he remember God’s grace, he began to mistreat her.

How did the owner respond? Look at verses 11-12. **“He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.”** The owner was patient and persistent. He sent his servants one after another, even though they were being mistreated. Historically, this refers to God sending his prophets to the people of Israel again and again, even though they were persecuted badly. Then and now, God is patient with sinners. God does not punish us the moment we sin. Rather, God gives us another chance, and another chance, in the hope that we will repent of our sins and fulfill our mission (Ro 2:4). Yesterday God blessed us with two beautiful weddings: John and Linda Martin, and Michael and Mary Mark. We could see clearly God’s love and grace and blessing being

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poured upon them. But behind this beautiful scene was an intense spiritual battle. Especially Pastor Teddy Hembekides and M. Little Sarah Kim served John and Linda with a life-giving spirit, enduring many misunderstandings. God's great patience was revealed through them. Thank God for such servants of God.

However, we can see in the parable that the tenants abused the patience of the owner. Their treatment of the servants became progressively worse. They went from beating, to treating shamefully, and finally to wounding. They went from sending away empty-handed to throwing him out. When God confronts man's sins through his servants and they do not repent, they become worse than before. We should learn to repent quickly.

Third, God sent his Son to demonstrate his love (10-13).

Look at verse 13. **“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’”** The owner loved his son dearly. He knew that it was risky to send him to the tenants. But the owner sent his son anyway, in a demonstration of his love and trust. The owner sent him in the hope that the tenants would respect him. Of course, the Son is Jesus Christ. Jesus stood before the Jewish leaders, despite their long history of rejecting and offending God and his servants. Jesus stood there with an open hand and an open heart, as if to say, “God loves you; I love you. Accept this love even now and show your respect to God. Restore your great purpose in God.” The love of God for sinners is amazing. It is deeper than the ocean and higher than the mountains. This love is offered to us all. Romans 5:8 says, **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** Even now, Christ calls each of us to receive his love, restore our relationship with him and take up his great mission for us. No matter how badly we have failed or how rebellious we have been, God loves us and wants to restore us. Let's accept his love with faith and make new decisions to serve him. One young man decided to leave God's ministry because he did not want to accept God's calling to be a sacrificial shepherd. He spent the last fifteen years wandering in darkness of various kinds. But God has been patient with him. He has come back to our ministry. May God help him receive God's love and restore God's mission in his life.

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Fourth, when rebellion persisted, God's judgment came (14-16a).

How did the tenants respond to the owner's son? In their delusion, they thought that if they killed the son, the inheritance would be theirs. So they killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. This was literally fulfilled when Jewish leaders condemned Jesus to death and threw him outside the city to be crucified as a criminal. Look at verses 15b, 16. **“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”** Though God is very patient, in the final analysis, he is also the Sovereign Ruler of all. He is the Judge. In A.D. 70, the Roman army under General Titus entered Jerusalem and annihilated the people living there. For the next 1800 years, the Jewish people had no homeland of their own, but wandered from place to place. The privilege of serving God as the bearers of the gospel was taken from the nation of Israel as such, and was given to the Christian church, which has become largely Gentile. This should serve as a warning to us. Those who reject God's mission and persist in rebellion will finally face God's judgment. So we must fear God from our hearts.

Fifth, God made Jesus the capstone (16b-19).

When the people heard Jesus' parable, they understood its meaning. Jesus' parable had roused them out of their spiritual complacency and made them alert to their danger. They did not want to lose the blessing of being God's children and enjoying privileges in relationship to him. They pleaded, “May this never be!” But it was too late. Israel's opportunity to repent as a nation had passed. Now their only hope was for individual people to accept Jesus with faith and become part of the new history he was making.

Look at verses 17-18. **“Jesus looked directly at them and asked, ‘Then what is the meaning of that which is written: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone”?’ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”** Though his people had rejected him, God was with Jesus. Though they tossed Jesus aside, God raised him from the dead. God made Jesus the King of kings and Lord of lords. Now Jesus is the only way of salvation, the only way for man to come to God. God made Jesus the cornerstone of his church, the foundation of gospel history. God made Jesus the capstone, that is, the head and crowning glory of his church. Jesus' death and resurrection became the hinge on which God's history turned. Disobedient Israel

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was set aside for a time and all of God's rich blessings channeled through Jesus Christ to the Christian church.

The Jewish leaders realized that Jesus was telling the parable against them. They would be the ones left out of God's history because they rejected Jesus. They were going to lose everything. They became desperate and tried to arrest Jesus immediately. But they could do nothing, yet, because they were afraid of the people (19).

In this passage we have heard Jesus' parable of the tenants. I believe this has touched each of us personally. We have learned something more about God, and more about Jesus, and more about ourselves. We may be under conviction for our sins. But let's remember that Jesus is holding out his hand in love to receive us, even now. Let's accept his love and restore our respect for God and accept his mission. Let's pray for our people to accept God's love and restore our mission as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.