

“What Kind of Tenant are You?”

April 18, 2021

Luke 20:1-19

I. Introduction

The week of this Passover was unlike any other Passover in history. The Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth was causing an uproar. It all began when He entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey while His followers and others cheered for Him. The enthusiasm and expectations of the Messiah were so thick they could have been cut with a knife. Luke 19:39-40 says that “some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’ ‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’” Then on the next day, Monday, Jesus returned to the Temple, but He didn’t come to look around or to make a sacrifice or even to pray, He came to drive out all the merchants & buyers and to keep people from using the Temple as a short cut to the city.

Luke 19:47-48 adds that “every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.” The Jewish leadership must have had some sleepless nights as they watched their influence and power drain away. Usually the members of the Sanhedrin—the chief priests and the teachers of the law and the elders—were at each other’s throats, each with their own little domain, but in Jesus they had a common enemy. He had exposed the unethical economic practices of the chief priests, He continually embarrassed the teachers of the law in debate, and He refused to accept the teachings of the elders as being equal to God’s Law. The final straw had been the cleansing of the Temple. From their viewpoint, Jesus had to be stopped.

When Jesus returned to the Temple on the third day, they were ready for Him. They had come up with a question that would pin Him down and would turn the people against this so-called Rabbi. So as Jesus “was teaching the people in the temple courts,” they sprang their trap.

II. The Confrontation

A. The Loaded Question: It began with a couple of loaded questions: “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” Basically, “*Who do you think you are?*” As the official guardians of the Law, the members of the Sanhedrin had both the right and the responsibility to investigate anyone who claimed to be sent by God; and that included Jesus. But they didn't come with open minds or sincere motives. They weren't looking for the truth; they were looking for evidence to destroy Jesus.

In the past, Jesus had always gotten out of the traps they had set for him, but this time they just knew that He would discredit Himself publically. Knowing that in the past He had claimed that His authority had come directly from God, they assumed He would say the same thing now. When He did, they would accuse Him of blasphemy, call for His execution and the people would have to support them.

B. Jesus' Question: But Jesus answered their question with a question, “John's baptism—was it from heaven or from men?” In other words, “*From where did John's authority come?*” By answering a question with a question, Jesus was using an accepted rabbinic practice. Jesus knew what the leaders were doing, so He countered their question with another question and exposed their hypocrisy.

Jesus' question put the religious leaders between the proverbial rock and the hard place. They were caught in their own trap. John the Baptist was the extremely popular forerunner of the Messiah; Jesus said in [Luke 7:28](#) that he was the greatest prophet who had ever lived. The phrase “John's baptism” covered his entire ministry; his preaching, his teaching, his calling of the people to preparedness and repentance, and his declaration that Jesus was the Lamb of God, the Messiah.

C. The Leaders' Quandary Jesus' question turned the tables on the leaders—now they had the problem. Before answering, they withdrew and debated among themselves. They weren't asking “*What is true?*” or “*What is right?*” but “*What is safe?*” Each possible answer ended in their defeat. On the one hand, if they said, “From heaven,” they knew they wouldn't be able to answer Jesus' follow-up question, “Then why didn't you believe him?” But on the other hand, they didn't dare reply, “From men,”

because they were afraid that “all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.” To reject God’s prophet was to reject and blaspheme God Himself. That would make them worthy of death.

Since neither answer nor outcome was acceptable to them, the religious leaders could only reply, “We don’t know where it was from.” It must have torn up those proud, egotistical men to say, “We don’t know.” In a US court of law, they would have taken the 5th saying, “*I do not choose to answer on the grounds that it might incriminate me.*”

Having silenced His opposition, Jesus ended the discussion by saying, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” He was through talking with them. After 3 years of teaching and performing miracles as proof that He was the Messiah, He was finished. There was no point in continuing to cast pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6). But before they had an opportunity to escape, Jesus told them a very pointed parable.

III. The Pointed Parable

A. The Parable The leaders’ desire to murder Jesus and Jesus’ knowledge of His coming death came together in this parable. As was the case with all of Jesus’ parables, this one used images that were familiar to all the people. The vineyard itself was a familiar image of Israel—turn to Isaiah 5:1-7. In Jesus’ parable, as in Isaiah 5, the owner “planted a vineyard.” Mark 12:1 adds that Jesus said, “He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower.” The owner did everything possible to ensure the success of his vineyard.

Having fully prepared the vineyard, the owner rented it out “to some farmers and went away for a long time.” This was a fairly common practice—an absentee landlord rented his land to tenant farmers for an agreed upon share of the harvest, which he would receive after the crops were gathered. “At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard.” This was normal behavior and was the expected action.

But in an unexpected response, the criminal tenants refused to pay the vineyard owner his share. Instead, in violence, they seized the servant, “beat him and sent him away empty-handed.” This action would have shocked those listening to Jesus. This was wicked behavior that was cruel and in open defiance of the terms of any contract. But the owner didn’t give up, “he sent another servant to them.” But he was treated no better, “that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed.” The violence escalated when the vineyard owner sent a third servant —“they wounded him and threw him out.”

To everyone there, the answer to “the owner of the vineyard’s” question, “What shall I do?” was obvious—bring vengeance and retribution on those criminals. But in a display of patience and mercy, the owner made a final appeal to them as he sent his son, “whom I love.” That the owner would do this would have shocked Jesus’ listeners—it was unexpected and unacceptable and even foolish of him.

Thinking that if they could do away with the heir and then would have a clear claim to the property, the farmers “threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” They wanted to preserve their own position and were willing to kill to accomplish their evil purpose.

Jesus then asked, “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?” Matthew wrote in his account in [Matthew 21:41](#) that the leaders answered the question first, “‘He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,’ they replied, ‘and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.’” Jesus repeated their answer as a solemn verdict from the Judge: “He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”

B. The Application At that point the meaning—the application—of Jesus’ parable was crystal clear to the leaders and the people. The owner of the vineyard is God. The vineyard is Israel. The tenant farmers of the vineyard are the leaders of Israel. The servants of the owner are the prophets of God, including John the Baptist. Jesus was the Son and Heir and the final messenger.

Jesus made it clear to those who sought to murder Him that He knew exactly what they were planning to do to Him. And by taking the side of the vineyard owner and condemning the tenants, the

Jewish leadership passed judgment on themselves. The vineyard owner's destruction of the rebellious tenants foretold God's judgment on Israel in A.D. 70. God had been remarkably patient with His disobedient, rebellious people but the time for judgment had come. The coming destruction of Israel and especially Jerusalem would be devastating. Tens of thousands of Jews would be slaughtered, and thousands more sold into slavery. The Temple would be totally destroyed thereby ending the entire religious system of sacrifices, priests, rituals, and ceremonies.

IV. One More Parable

Before everyone left, Jesus quoted from a Messianic Psalm ([Psalm 118:22-23](#)): “**The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.**” (This was from the same Psalm many had shouted on Palm Sunday.) “**The Stone**” was a well-known symbol for the Messiah. To Israel's leaders the stone did not measure up. It was a rejected stone, inadequate, imperfect, unacceptable, not fit to be the head of the corner. But they were dead wrong. Jesus is God's cornerstone. It's interesting that just weeks later Peter used the same verse when he stood before the Sanhedrin—[turn to Acts 4:5-12](#).

Jesus closed this teaching with a serious warning against rejecting the Savior. “**Everyone who falls on the stone,**” i.e., those who stumble over Christ in unbelief and rejection, “**will be broken to pieces.**” On the other hand, those on whom He “**falls in judgment will be crushed.**” Jesus was warning the Sanhedrin that they would only destroy themselves if they condemned Him. In either case, the end result is the same—destruction.

V. Conclusion

Throughout history, skeptical unbelievers have claimed that Jesus' rejection and death were a surprise—a miscalculation. To some, Jesus was a philosopher who taught morality and ethics. To others, Jesus was a revolutionary, a crusader for social and political justice. Such people feel that He managed to antagonize both the Jewish and Roman authorities and quite unintentionally got Himself executed. But as we see in this parable and in other places in God's Word, Jesus' death was not a surprise. His death was the reason that Jesus came into the world. In [Mark 8:31](#) we read, “**He then began to teach them that the**

Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” Turn to John 10:17-18. In 1 Tim. 1:15 Paul wrote, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Never let anyone persuade you otherwise: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son . . .” (John 3:16).

To many people today, God seems to be like an absentee landlord, and a foolish one at that—easily betrayed and cheated. The owner in the parable lost his servants, his son, and seemingly his vineyard. Similarly, people today seem to get away with injustice, oppression, and murder. God’s messengers continue to be rejected, mocked, beaten, and even killed. God sent His Son and sends His servants with the goal of bringing people to repentance—2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” People think that they can get away with sin, but God’s judgment will inevitably come—Hebrews 9:27 says, “(Just-as) people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” This parable assures us that God will win even when it seems that He has lost. Those who reject God’s claims on their lives and God’s call to repentance will always be the losers even when it seems as if they have won. Like the Sanhedrin, they sow the seeds of their own destruction.

This parable also applies to the church today. In the beginning, Israel was chosen by God to reach out to world for Him. God equipped them specifically for the task, but the leaders and people mistook that assignment as a special privilege and wanted to be accountable only to themselves, not to God. For the time being, we are now God’s vineyard and the farmers taking care of the vineyard. Are we as individuals and as a church doing what we should be doing? As Jesus said in Luke 10:27, do you “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and will all your strength?” Do you “love your neighbor as yourself?” In Matthew 7:16 Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them.” What kind of fruit are you bearing? Turn to Galatians 5:16-23.

What kind of tenant are you?