

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.’”

In the last passage Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey’s colt. Jesus knew what awaited him there: he would suffer and die on the cross for the sin of the world. From a human point of view, it was humiliation and defeat. Spiritually, it was Jesus’ obedience to God. It was God’s will to sacrifice Jesus in such a way for the sin of the world. Then God would raise Jesus from the dead and give him spiritual and eternal victory. Therefore, Jesus entered Jerusalem with a sense of victory in his heart; Jesus entered as God’s King. At the same time, Jesus entered humbly and gently, riding on a donkey’s colt. King Jesus is mighty to save. King Jesus is also humble and gentle. He reigns with peace and love. May this Jesus reign in our hearts now and forever more.

In today’s passage the religious leaders come to Jesus to challenge his authority. Jesus exposes their hypocrisy and defuses their attack. But Jesus did not stop there. Jesus went on to tell the parable of the tenants. This brief parable summarizes the history of God’s work in Israel and foresees the future as well. This parable is so deep and wide; we need to study it repeatedly to understand its meaning. Most of all, we learn the heart of God and how to have a right relationship with God.

First, by what authority? (1-8)

Now Jesus was in the temple courts teaching the people and preaching the gospel. How wonderful it was! The temple was being used for God’s intended purpose. Before Jesus’ coming, the temple had been used as a business center by the chief priests and their agents, who abused their priestly privileges to extort money from pilgrims. But when Jesus entered the temple, he drove them out and restored the temple as a house of prayer and a place of Bible study. Now he was teaching the word of God diligently to those who were coming and going. Teaching the word of God was so important to Jesus. Jesus had only a few days left on earth. Jesus felt the burden of the cross weigh heavily upon his shoulders. Yet he taught the word of God in the temple as of first importance. The word of God is the word of life and it has the power to save men’s souls. In Romans 1:16 Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” 2 Timothy 3:15 says, “...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (Jn 5:24). Hearing one word of God can save a person’s soul for eternity.

As Jesus taught the word of God, those listening were captivated by his words. Luke says, “...all the people hung on his words.” The words of Jesus had great power to work in them. They felt despair melt from their hearts, and the living hope of the kingdom of God came in. They felt fear dissipate, and courageous faith in God Almighty came in. They felt anger and frustration vanish, and peace and joy came in. One by one, their grumpy faces changed into smiling faces and began to beam with spiritual life and joy. Some wept; some began to sing in their hearts; some sighed in deep contentment of soul. What a beautiful moment it was when Jesus taught the word of God in the temple.

However, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders intruded on the scene. They said to Jesus, “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?” They did not think about what was right before God. They did not care that dying souls were being brought to life by God’s word. They disrupted Jesus’ life-giving Bible teaching by raising the issue of authority. What did they mean by “authority”? They meant religious authority that comes from the religious hierarchy or political authority that comes from Herod or Caesar. They had both of these kinds of authority. Until then, no one had challenged their authority to run the temple as they pleased, though they abused the privilege terribly. But when Jesus cleansed the temple, quoting the word of God, “My house will be a house of prayer,” they were overwhelmed by Jesus’ authority. Jesus’ authority was not political or religious; Jesus’ authority was spiritual. Jesus’ authority came from God when he obeyed the word of God with an absolute attitude. The religious leaders had left the temple in shock. Probably they needed some kind of therapy

to recover. Then they tried to find a way to counterattack. They came up to Jesus and said, "Who gave you this authority?" They wanted to accuse Jesus of teaching the word of God without a license.

What did Jesus say to them? Look at verses 3-4. "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism--was it from heaven, or from men?" When they heard Jesus' question, they realized they were in deep trouble. If they said, "from heaven," Jesus would ask why they did not believe him. But if they said, "from men," they could be stoned by the people who all believed that John was a prophet. So they said, "We don't know." Thus, they were disqualified to deal with questions of authority. Their threat was nullified by Jesus' wisdom. The work of God was not stopped by their political power and authority. The work of God was going forward according to God's will and purpose.

Second, the parable of the tenants (9-16a).

Jesus did not stop with neutralizing the threat of the religious leaders. He went on to tell them a parable, the parable of the tenants. The parable of the tenants is a summary of God's history through his chosen people Israel. Jesus wanted the religious leaders to realize that God was the sovereign Ruler of Israel and come back to their senses. It was the best answer Jesus could give to settle the issue of who gave him authority. Look at verse 9b. "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time." "A man" refers to God. "Some farmers" refers to the chosen people Israel, and the "vineyard" to their nation with its special blessings and privileges given by God (Isa 5:1-7). God had redeemed the people of Israel from cruel bondage in Egypt through mighty acts of judgment against their captors. God trained them for forty years in the wilderness. Then God led them to the land of Israel and helped them conquer the land. In Joshua 24:13 God said to them, "So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant." God did this to use them for his holy purpose. As he said in Exodus 19:5,6a, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Therefore, they must regard their nation Israel as God's possession and do their best to fulfill their holy duty to preach the gospel to the world. When they did so, they could bear much fruit for God and be truly happy.

Look at verse 10a. "At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard." It seems that the owner did not ask bluntly for fruit by presenting an invoice. He hoped the tenants would willingly give him some fruit out of their thanks and respect. Thus, they could acknowledge that the vineyard was not theirs, but the owner's. They could maintain a proper relationship with the owner. In the same way, God did not leave his people alone in the promised land. He visited them through his servants to encourage them to produce the fruit of justice and righteousness (Isa 5:7).

How did the tenants respond? Look at verse 10b. "But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed." What a surprise! The tenants beat the owner's representative. It was the power of sin. Sin deceived them and made them suppress the truth that the vineyard belonged to the owner. Sin made them think the vineyard was their own. So they saw the owner's representative as a threat. They treated him like an enemy, beating him and sending him away empty-handed. This is the exact description of fallen man's mentality. Romans 1:21 explains this so well. It 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." Sinful man is not rational at all. Sinful man is irrational and he is wicked to the degree that he deliberately forgets about God. Hosea 13:5,6 says, "I cared for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me."

The power of sin is deeply rooted in the heart of fallen man. The power of sin makes man irrational and unpredictable. Cain had the privilege of being the firstborn in his family. He should have been a shepherd for his younger brother Abel. But the power of sin, aroused by jealousy, made him murder his brother and break his relationship with God. From that time on, he lived as though he had nothing to do with God. Since then, his descendants say to God, "Leave me alone. I am my own man."

The tenants' act of rebellion against the owner was unforgivable. They could have been punished immediately and severely. But the owner did not do that. Look at verse 11. "He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed." The owner gave them another chance. It was nothing but the one-sided grace and forbearance of the owner. But the tenants did not recognize this grace. Instead, they became bolder

in their defiance. Not only did they beat this servant, they treated him shamefully. The power of sin grows. When men abuse God's grace they become more evil than before. When the third servant came, they wounded him badly and threw them out. The tenants degenerated into gangsters.

What did the owner of the vineyard do? 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.'" By now, the owner knew that the tenants' actions were deliberate and that they did not show proper respect to his representatives. He would have been justified to throw them out of the vineyard and to file criminal charges against them. But he did not. He decided to send his son to them. His son was the object of his affection. By sending his son, he wanted to show them how much he loved them and trusted them. He was willing to risk his son's life to restore a right relationship with the tenants. This shows us the heart of God. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." How amazing the love of God is! God demonstrated his love by sending his one and only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins!

How did the tenants respond? Look at verses 14,15. "But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." The tenants totally misunderstood the owner's intention in sending his son. They did not realize that the owner respected them and loved them and wanted to restore their relationship. Instead, they saw this as an opportunity to destroy the heir and take over the vineyard permanently. So they committed the unspeakable act of killing the owner's son and throwing him out of the vineyard.

What did the owner of the vineyard do? Look at verse 16a. "He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." Until now, the owner had dealt with the tenants with longsuffering patience. As long as there was a possibility for them to repent, he sacrificed everything to try to restore them. But when they killed his son, they went too far. The owner came and killed them and gave the vineyard to others. Jesus knew the people of Jerusalem would reject him as King and he would be crucified on the cross outside the city. Then God's terrible punishment would come upon them. Their privilege as chosen people would be taken away and given to others—to the Christian church.

This parable was told to the people of Israel. But it applies to all mankind. God is the Creator and owner of all things. God made us in his own image to be the stewards of his world. It is our basic duty to give thanks to him always. This is why St. Paul said, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." No matter what, we must thank God. Moreover, God wants us to produce fruit that pleases him. Primarily, this is inner growth that reveals God's own character in us. Galatians 5:22-23a says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." When we bear these fruits in our daily lives, it pleases God.

Third, Jesus is the capstone (16b-19).

What was the response of those who heard what Jesus said? Look at verse 16b. "They said, 'May this never be!'" They were appalled by the evilness of the tenants and shocked by the severe punishment that would fall upon them. They didn't want anything like that to happen. But it was about to happen. Look at verse 17. "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?"'" Jesus himself is the rejected stone who became the capstone (Ps 118:22,23). Jesus came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (Jn 1:11); they killed him and threw him away like a rejected stone. They thought Jesus hindered their lifestyles. They thought Jesus was too poor and humble. They thought that if they killed Jesus, they would be free to live as they pleased. But it was a big mistake.

God raised Jesus from the dead and made him the source of eternal salvation. Beginning with Jesus, God would build a new history of redemptive work. Jesus is the capstone or cornerstone. This was a favorite quotation of the early Christians to describe the death and resurrection of Jesus (Ac 4:11; 1Pe 2:7).

In verse 18 Jesus said, "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." Jesus is God. He is irresistible and immovable. No one can stand against Jesus. Look at verse 19. "The

teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.”

In this passage we learn that God is the owner of all things, including our lives and this world. We are stewards of God’s world who have been given a vineyard to work in for his glory. Let’s repent of our fallen man’s mentality and recognize God as God. Let’s give thanks to God for all his grace poured out upon us. Most of all we learn that God loves sinners. God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to restore us as stewards of his world. Let’s welcome Jesus with repentance and faith and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit for his glory.