

53. The Parable of the Vine-Growers

Luke 20:1-19

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem during the Passover, we see a clash of kingdoms. The battle lines were drawn now. The religious elite of Israel, the power brokers, had their authority challenged when Jesus came into the city on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy that the Son of David, the rightful heir to the throne, was to come into the city in such a way (Zechariah 9:9). How infuriated the chief priests and religious elite became when He started overturning the tables in the Court of the Gentiles and throwing all their money to the ground:

He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers" (Mark 11:15-17).

The Lord Jesus would allow no commerce in the temple precincts, thus forcing the hand of the leaders to try and find some way of stopping Him. Can you imagine watching Jesus as He took a stand, preventing people from passing, and not allowing people to carry anything through the temple? What made Jesus so angry that He would accuse the religious elite of robbery?

At this time, the priesthood, led by Annas, was profiting by the sale of the sacrifices. The money-changers were also making a huge profit, which imposed the greatest burden on the poor who could least afford it. The temple tax had to be paid annually, and those that had made pilgrimage to Jerusalem did not have shekels—the only currency without someone's image on the coin. However, the moneychangers charged a fee for transferring currency, and they also insisted that the tax be paid in either exact half-shekels of the sanctuary or in Galilean shekels. The merchants had their money-making scheme set up right inside the Temple and now Jesus was upsetting their whole system!

The Chief Priests and leaders doubtless felt that the situation was getting out of their control with the crowd's hanging on to His every word (Luke 19:48). Their jealousy and fear of losing their financial empire made them acknowledge that their efforts to stop Christ's popularity had little effect. They said, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him" (John 12:19). They decided that they had to try to undermine the people's faith in Christ's spiritual authority. They would ask Him about His certificate of ordination to be a Rabbi. What religious school had taught Him, and under whose authority was He doing these things? Of course, they knew that He had attended no "seminary" or "yeshiva" and that He had no formal authority from men. This tactic, they thought, would discredit and undermine the people's faith in Him. They waited until many were gathered around Him in the temple courts:

The Authority of Jesus Questioned

¹One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. ²"Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this

authority?" ³He replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, ⁴John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?" ⁵They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Why didn't you believe him?' ⁶But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet." ⁷So they answered, "We don't know where it was from." ⁸Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (Luke 20:1-8).

Question 1) In verse 5, why did the chief priests answer Jesus the way they did? What two things would they be admitting to if they acknowledged the baptism of John?

Mark tells us that the verbal attack from the Chief Priests and Elders occurred the day after Jesus overthrew the moneychanger's tables (Mark 11:20, 27). The cleansed Temple Courts now filled with crowds of people due to the arrival of many pilgrims for the upcoming Passover feast (Matthew 21:46). Hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, were crammed around Jesus as He began to teach and preach.

The religious elite of Jerusalem walked boldly into the large open area of the Court of the Gentiles of the Temple grounds. Before the multitudes of people, they interrupted His teaching. "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?" (Verse 2). They thought they had Him. All the people looked on, awaiting Jesus' response. We can imagine that there must have been a quiet lull as people anticipated His answer. After all, where did this authority come from? How would He defend Himself?

Jesus replied with a question for them. If they would answer His question, He would answer theirs. "The baptism of John; was it from heaven or from men?" (v. 4). This put the religious elite into a difficult position because they had rejected John the Baptist's mission:

²⁹All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. ³⁰But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John (Luke 7:29-30).

The Pharisees and religious leaders would not admit that they were sinners and fell short of God's righteousness, so they had rejected John's message. Jesus did not evade their question. He used the question to expose the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. In commenting on this passage, William Barclay writes:

He asked them to answer the question, "Was the authority of John the Baptist human or divine?" The point is that their answer to Jesus' question would answer their own question. Everyone knew how John had regarded Jesus and how he had considered himself only the fore-runner of the one who was the Messiah. If they agreed that John's authority was divine then they had to agree that Jesus was the Messiah, because John had said so. If they denied it, the people would rise against them because John the Baptist had been perceived as a prophet. Jesus' answer in fact asks the question, "Tell me—where do

you yourself think I got my authority?” He did not need to answer their question if they answered his.¹

Fearing the crowds, whom they assumed would side completely with them, the religious leaders were humiliated when Jesus would not answer their question. What could they say? If they responded by saying that John’s message was of God, they would have to admit that Jesus was the Messiah because that was the crux of John’s message about the One who would follow him (John 1:32). They hadn’t believed John’s message about repentance and being ready for the Messiah, but they also knew that most of the people that stood before them had. They did not want to risk inciting a heated debate, perhaps leading to mob reaction. They had to back down before all the people.

The Lord now went on the offensive and further pushed the priests, scribes and elders. In front of the crowd gathered in the temple courts, He spoke another parable:

The Parable of the Vine-Growers

⁹And He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time. ¹⁰“At the *harvest* time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, so that they would give him *some* of the produce of the vineyard; but the vine-growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹“And he proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. ¹²“And he proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³“The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ ¹⁴“But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.’ ¹⁵“So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶“He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others.” When they heard it, they said, “May it never be!” ¹⁷But Jesus looked at them and said, “What then is this that is written: ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE’? ¹⁸“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.” ¹⁹The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour, and they feared the people; for they understood that He spoke this parable against them (Luke 20:9-19).

Question 2) Who do the characters in the parable represent? What does the vineyard in the parable represent?

Jesus had often spoken familiar stories to the people of Israel, e.g. a shepherd and sheep, seed and harvest, fish and nets, so as Jesus started to talk about a vineyard, most of them would have understood that He was talking about the nation of Israel. Above the entrance to the temple and within view of all the listeners was a massive, carved vine made of solid gold with leaves and

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke*, Page 244, Saint Andrew Press. Edinburgh.

clusters of grapes the size of a man, also made of solid gold.² Isaiah the prophet had spoken of Israel as a vineyard:

¹I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one *had a vineyard on a fertile hillside*. ²He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then *he looked for a crop of good grapes*, but it yielded only bad fruit. ³"Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. *What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?* When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it." ⁷*The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.* And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress (Isaiah 5:1-7).

The man who planted the Vineyard represents God the Father. The farmers who have had the land leased to them are the spiritual leaders of Israel, the very leaders that were standing against Jesus and challenging His authority. They were not owners, although they thought of themselves as such. They were tenant farmers. The land had only been leased to them for a time. They were under responsibility to choose their own methods to sow the land, protect the vines from savage animals, pull up the weeds, and maximize their harvest by their efforts. The Lord had spoken in the third book of Moses as to whose land it was:

“The land must not be sold permanently, *because the land is mine* and you are but aliens and my tenants” (Leviticus 25:23).

They were under contract to give a portion of the fruit to the owner. The three servants who are sent represent many prophets down through the years that God had sent to call His people back to spiritual fruitfulness. The son being sent represents the Lord Jesus.

The parable is a prophetic story of how God will call the leaders to account for their rebellion and rejection of the Father’s authority over His land and people (see also Ezekiel 34). All the Earth belongs to the Lord (Psalm 24:1), but there is one small area of land and people that God has specifically set apart for His own purposes, i.e. the land that He has given as a stewardship to the children of Israel. The Vineyard was a picture of the nation of Israel, the representative of God’s covenant love and care.

Question 3) Why did the Owner send His son? (Verse 13). Do you see a parallel in this story and the one that was unfolding?

There were and are evil spiritual forces at work that sought then and continue to seek in our own time to divide up God’s land, destroy the Jewish nation, and take the land for their own purposes (Ezekiel 36:5; Psalm 83:1-12). This battle over the land of Israel will continue until the Lord

² <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14304-temple-of-herod>

steps in to execute judgment on those who divide up God's land. Governmental leaders are not owners, but tenants. They will be held to account:

I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land (Joel 3:2).

The spiritual leaders of Israel were those shepherds who had been allowed to cultivate the land and bring forth a harvest for the owner, God. Men motivated by greed and lust for power had managed to get into positions of leadership in the nation. Their motivation was to keep hold onto power by their rejection of God's authority over the land and people of Israel. The leaders wanted profit, power, and control over the land, i.e. the very authority that Jesus was challenging. All were under God's authority, but they were in rebellion to the thought that all authority is derived from above. Jesus reminded Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, as to where authority comes from: "You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above" (John 19:11).

Sending servant after servant, the owner speaks of the patience, love, and desire of God to bestow mercy on those who would come to Him in repentance. God had sent prophet after prophet over several hundred years, but they had been stoned and killed. The Lord then sent John the Baptist to call the nation and the elders to repentance, but the ruling leaders would have none of it. God tried every option to reach the wayward shepherds of His flock, but now things had come to a head with the Owner of the vineyard sending His Son.

As with all of Jesus' parables, the story pulled the people to the point where they became part of the story. Then, Jesus got to the part where He stated the owner's dilemma: "The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do?'" At that point, it's very likely that the Lord stopped speaking and looked in silence around the crowd to let the question settle into their hearts. I wonder if people in the crowd interrupted with shouts saying, "Get rid of those evil tenants." His yearning for the leaders to repent and have a broken spirit seems to spill from this parable. Peter the Apostle wrote, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). The mercy of God amazes me!

The Plan to Kill the Heir

After allowing the question to settle a few seconds, then He said, "I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him" (v. 13). When the Lord instead spoke of the Owner's sending His son, perhaps many in the crowd suspected that was not a good thing to do. But Jesus carried on with a shocking statement: ¹⁴"But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.' ¹⁵"So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." All the people listening were bought into the story. Perhaps, the tenant farmers thought that, maybe, the owner of the vineyard was now dead and this was the heir coming toward them. This was their opportunity to gain complete control of the vineyard. Those that were listening to the story were not thinking or cogitating on the ramifications of what He was saying. They were emotionally involved in the story until, suddenly, He posed another question: "What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them?"

(v. 15). There were gasps in the crowd, “What should he do?” It was obvious to all of them. The logic was so sound—He should destroy them! I believe at that point Jesus stopped again and let the response come from the people before finally He said, ¹⁶“He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others.” When they **heard** it, they said, “May it never be!” (v. 16).

In verse 16, the Greek word that is translated as *heard* means to see with all the implications what Christ was saying. They understood. It clicked. The full consequences of what the parable was about was brought home. That is why they responded with, “May it never be!” The Jewish leaders and nation would lose the authority they had abused. Jesus could foresee the judgement that was to come, in 70 A.D., and He had a glimpse into the suffering that would come upon the nation, but this would not stop the forward movement of the Kingdom as Jesus said; “My Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). The Kingdom ministry was about to be released to all nations through the body of Christ, the Church, made up of both Jew and Gentile.

Jesus the Stone Rejected

Jesus carried on by saying, “What then is this that is written: ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE?’” Their horror at Jesus’ words of judgment brought Christ to respond by reminding them of the prophetic word in Psalm 118:22: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” Many translations of the English Old Testament translate the Hebrew word *Rosh Pinna* into the word *Cornerstone*. According to my *Logos* software, the Hebrew word means: “head; hair; a person, individual; height, peak, upper end; beginning; topmost, outermost, best; leader, chief; value, total amount, sum.” Ray Vander Laan, the teacher, author, and archeologist, speaks of an old Rabbinic parable that has some bearing on the parable at which we are looking:

When Solomon’s temple was being built, it was forbidden for the sound of hammers to be heard at the job site because it was a holy place of worship. You can’t have worship with construction going on in the background! So it had to be quiet. What this meant for the construction was that each and every 20-ton stone had to have a ‘shop drawing’ and was made several miles away in the quarry. Several miles away each stone was carefully cut for its exact spot in the temple. From the very start, there was a plan for each stone. The very first stone to be delivered was the capstone, but that’s the last stone needed in construction. So the builders said, “What is this? This doesn’t look like any of the first stones we need. Put it over there for now.” Well, years went by and the grass grew over the capstone and everyone generally forgot about it. Finally, the construction was done and the builders said, “send us the capstone” and the word came back from the quarry “we already did”. They were confused. Then someone remembered what they had done with the very first stone sent to them. It was taken from its lowly position among the overgrown weeds where it had been forgotten, and it was honored in the final ceremony to complete the temple. Thus the scripture says, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.”³

³ <https://thinkhebrew.wordpress.com/2009/08/27/the-stone-the-builders-rejected/#footnote1>

Just like Jesus' parable, this rabbinic parallel is a picture of Jesus. When He came the first time, He didn't fit the blueprint the builders thought they needed, so they tossed Him aside as wrong and rejected Him. They didn't recognize Him. Later, much later, they will recognize Him for who He is, and give Him his rightful place as the capstone.

The capstone was what completed the building at the apex and brought the walls all together. In an arch or a temple, the capstone carries the weight of the two sides completing the arch. It is a logical thought that, just as the sides of an arch lean over onto the capstone, so the spiritual building that God is constructing leans all its weight on the capstone, Christ Himself. Does the building of your life lean on Christ? Have you constructed this spiritual building that we call life on the Rock of Christ or on the sand of your own opinions? (Matthew 7:24). The leaders may have rejected the stone, but to us who believe, He is precious! Not only is He the Cornerstone of the spiritual building being built, but He is also the One holding the building together. He is the Alpha and the Omega (Revelation 22:13). Jesus is the beginning and the end! He is both the Cornerstone and the Capstone!

Peter the Apostle says a similar thing:

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone (1 Peter 2:7).

Jesus then went on to give just two options, "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust" (v. 18). We are to be broken or to be crushed by the stone (Verse 18). What could He be meaning? Why would God want us to have a broken spirit?

Question 4) In what ways can a broken spirit be a blessing? Can you think of a time that God visited you in your brokenness? Did the experience make you more open to spiritual things?

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:17).

Only in our brokenness will we begin to rely and lean on Christ. Like the chief priests and elders of Israel, our pride and self-confidence keep Him at arm's length. He will not force His way into our lives. He seeks that we come to Him broken of our selfish will. C.H. Spurgeon, the great English preacher, once said: "When God wants to do an impossible task, He takes an impossible man and breaks him. We are but men, frail, feeble, and apt to faint." Charles Swindoll comments on Spurgeon's thought in this way:

I am intrigued by the word 'broken.' 'It means, literally, 'shattered.' My sacrifice to God, according to Psalm 51:17, is a shattered spirit and a bruised heart. It is not until the pride of our heart is shattered that we will begin to understand the deep things of God."⁴

⁴ Chuck Swindoll, *Men of Action, What it Means to Be Broken*, Spring 1996.

We need to admit our weakness to be healed. It is better to let yourself be broken and humble yourself before God rather than letting life break us down because of painful choices. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (John 1:9). We can fall on the stone in repentance, brokenness, and adoration, or the stone will fall on us, crushing us in judgment. That was the choice before the leaders of Israel who were listening. Peter the Apostle wrote:

⁴As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame” (1 Peter 2:4-6).

When you are presented with the truth of Jesus’ words, you, too, must decide. Will you give His words room and let them enter your heart? Will you open the gate of your soul? We will all respond one way or another to the claims of Christ’s authority. In chapters 19 and 20 of Luke, we have glimpsed a different Jesus than the one, perhaps, that you have envisioned. We see His passion as He weeps in unrestrained, heaving sobs over Israel. We see His anger and courage as He cleanses the Temple and challenges the unjust authority there. We see His tenderness alongside remarkable bravery. What a wonderful Savior we have in our Lord Jesus!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I recognize Your authority as the Great I Am. Open my eyes to know You more. I want Your truth to flood my soul. I know that You have my best interests at heart and that there is nothing that I can hide from You. Give me fresh understanding of your Word and Your ways. Transform me through Your words of life. Amen.

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