

The Stone the Builders Rejected

A Sermon Brief by Jonathan Hill
Presented to Calvary Baptist Church
Pensacola, Florida
Sunday, June 6, 2010 (AM)

Luke 20:9-19 (ESV)

(9) And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. (10) When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. (11) And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. (12) And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. (13) Then 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 tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' (15) And 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 those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" (17) But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"? (18) Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." (19) The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people.

Introduction:

The setting for this parable takes place in the larger context of the Jesus' preaching and teaching ministry in the temple the week of his crucifixion. In the previous chapter Jesus cleansed the temple of money changers. This action immediately draws the attention of "the elders, chief priests and the scribes" often a designation for the ruling body known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin sends a delegation to ask Jesus, "under what authority are you doing these things" (Luke 20:2)? Jesus in return asks them about the baptism of John and where he got his authority. The refusal of the scribes and chief priests to acknowledge that John was acting as an agent of God ensures that they would not recognize his authority as their master.

Jesus then picks up with the parable of the wicked tenants in which the central issue is authority. The question arises in this parable, who has the authority? Is it the tenants or is it the land owner? The obvious answer is the land owner and the implications are clear for all who are involved.

The Son the Tenants Rejected

Many of Jesus' parables are set in the agricultural context of Palestine. Farmers generally filled one of three stations; Landowners, tenants, and day laborers. The difference between tenant farmers and day laborers, "Tenant farmers leased the land and sharecropped with the owner, while poorer people hired out as day laborers" (Brisco, 219).

The parable begins with a wealthy land owner who builds and cultivates a vineyard. Historically the vine has been a symbol for the nation of Israel. Indeed the temple in Jerusalem, where the whole dialogue was taking place between Jesus and his questioners, had a large golden grape vine displayed in a prominent location. Many wealthy families contributed great deals of money to add a grape or a cluster of grapes to the vine. Perhaps some of the men who stood there questioning Jesus had given money to purchase their own grape or cluster to add to the vine.

The scene of a wealthy land owner extending the use of his property to tenants and leaving for an extended period of time was common. "The upper Jordan Valley, the western and northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, and even a considerable portion of Galilee itself, contained vast estates owned by foreigners, men who lived far away from their holdings" (Hendrickson, 891). The financial aspect of the relationship between the land owner and tenants would be settled at harvest time when a percentage or set amount of the vineyards fruit would be given to the land owner as payment (Straus, 472).

The land owner had a right to expect a portion of fruit "when the time came" (Luke 20:10). However the tenants beat the servant sent to receive the fruit and they sent him away "empty handed" (Luke 20:10). There is no indication as to why the tenants treated the servants so harshly other than, "they simply rejected the messengers" (Morris, 311).

At this point in the parable the tenants are in violation of a contract and have added insult to injury by mistreating three servants who have come on the landowner's behalf. The master has every right to send a hit squad after the tenants. As the land owner he is operating out of a position of power, yet the tenants seem to think they can gain power over the master.

The sending of the son by the master is an exercise in self control and patience beyond the scope of expectation. The sending of the son causes the landowner to appear extremely kind and generous. "Rich or poor, all hearers at this point would agree that the land owner is in the right, and that he was benevolent-indeed, strikingly, foolishly benevolent" (Keener, 244).

When they see the son coming they plot to kill the son. The tenants murder the son, perhaps thinking they will gain the rights to the property (Luke 20:14). One commentator writes, "according to a then existing law, under certain conditions if the owner died, leaving no heir, whoever were the first to claim the estate, particularly the occupants, were allowed to have it" (Hendrickson, 892). The Talmud notes, "Tenants were known to claim possession of land they worked for absentee landlords" (Morris, 311-312). They simply presumed that either the landowner was dead or that with all the trouble they had caused, he would not press the issue. The covetousness and lust for full possession of the land that has led the tenants to mistreat the servants of the master comes to its climax in the murder of the heir. This is an insult to the master that cannot be overlooked.

At this point the story escalates as Luke records that the people respond in terror, recognizing the aim of Christ's parable. The team sent forth from the Sanhedrin is amazed at

the notion that the tenants will have to pay for what they have done to the master's son. They are quick to understand that this parable has been told against them and they are represented by the wicked tenants in this parable. The notion that these religious men who have labored for the betterment of national Israel would be punished for their rebellion against God must have been a foreign concept to them.

The tenant's motive for mistreatment and murder in the parable seems to be the prospect of gaining the property rights to the vineyard (Luke 20:14). In a sense they wanted sole control over who enjoyed the pleasures of the vine. Before this passage when Jesus cleanses out the temple he quotes a passage from Isaiah that mentions the prospect of the temple becoming a house of prayer for people from all nations (Luke 19:46, Isaiah 56:7). After the parable Jesus makes a symbolic switch from talking in terms of the vine (national Israel) to the corner stone or foundation of a great building which is associated with church (Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20, I Peter 2:6-7).

Just as the wealthy land owner is patient to send messenger after messenger to receive the fruit of the vineyard so God had been patient with the leaders of Israel. However, just as the wicked tenant reign of terror will be brought to an end by a vengeful father, so to was nation of Israel's leadership expelled from their position a few decades later in 70 A.D. when Rome sacked Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed. Israel ceased to exist and the vineyard had been handed over to a new group of tenants called the apostles.

The Stone the Builders Rejected

Jesus craftily turns the symbolism from a vine representing a national Israel to a stone representing the true temple of God. Jesus changes the picture from a vineyard to a cornerstone. He reminds the Sanhedrin that not only does he have the right as the founder but he also has the right of a judge. 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? (18) Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him" (Luke 20:17-18).

It is not the value to be placed on the stone that is in mind, but the destructive nature of the stone against flesh and blood. To fall on the stone or have the stone fall on one in either case means destruction. People may reject and oppose Jesus but it is they, not he, who will suffer. The second part of the saying will refer to the future judgment. IT will be their attitude to Jesus that will mean the final destruction of the people of his day. The imagery here is derived from Isaiah 8:14 (Morris, 313).

The stone is also a stone of judgment. It is not susceptible to destruction by its enemies. All efforts against the stone shatter to *pieces*. Furthermore, it falls in judgment on those who reject it. The verb rendered *crush* means primarily to winnow, but early versions support the RSV translation (Tolbert, 154).

Conclusion:

The theme for Luke 20:9-19 is the authority of Christ to save Israel and the whole world. The parable enters in context of the inability of the scribes and chief priests to recognize the authority of Christ. In the parable the vineyard will be taken away from the wicked tenants, who killed the son and given to other tenants. This represents Christ taking the light away from the nation Israel and temple worship and expanding it to the living temple of believers who place their faith in Christ.

Hear today the word's of Christ. Have you rejected the son? God has a right to your life. Are you glorifying God in your existence or have you rejected the authority of God in your life?

Bibliography

Brisco, Thomas V. *Holman Bible Atlas*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998.

Carson, D. A., Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.

Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987.

Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993.

Lea, Thomas D., *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996).

Morris, C. Leon., ed, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke*, vol.3, Revised Ed., Luke, by Leon Morris. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.