

The Cornerstone  
Luke 20:9-20  
March 13, 2016

*[Jesus] 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. 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. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' 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.' And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" 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'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." 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. So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.*

This parable is a tragedy. It's tragic on several levels. In the parable, the son dies at the hands of evil people. Also, the parable recounts the tragic history of Israel. Worse yet, the people who could learn the most from this parable reject it and, in so doing, they condemn themselves to carry out the prophesy of the parable.

Most likely, this parable was told on Tuesday of Holy Week; just two days after Jesus rode into Jerusalem to shouts of: "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*" (Mt 21:9). Jesus was teaching in the Temple. The Temple should have been the most holy place in Jerusalem, but, in reality, it was the headquarters of the corrupt religious leaders of the day.

Jesus' entry into the city and his cleansing of the merchants and moneychangers from the Temple had caught the attention of the common people. The people were coming to see what was happening and, at the same time, hear the truth of God's Word. In other words, Jesus was becoming a real problem for the Temple leaders.

The religious leaders would like to get rid of Jesus if they could just figure out a way to do it without exposing their own corruption. All they could do was debate with Jesus hoping he would slip up and say something worthy of turning him over to the Romans. The problem was that Jesus was always one step ahead of them and his arguments came from Scripture.

This parable prophesies the fate of everyone who dares to remain faithful to God's Word.

The groundwork of the parable is still with us today. It's not uncommon for a farmer to share crop; to rent land from someone and split the proceeds at harvest time. It also isn't uncommon for the landowner to operate through an agent, such as the servants in the story.

Hopefully, share croppers in the real world would know there would be legal consequences to breaking the contract with the landowner, not to mention physically abusing the landowner's agents. Also, there is no way these illegal actions would give them possession of the property. However, this does show how foolish people can be when they resort to evil plans.

The landowner in the parable does some unusual things. First, he sends multiple servants into a very dangerous, possible life-threatening situation. When the share croppers show they will stop at nothing to carry out their plans, the landowner sends his only son.

Jesus based this parable on a poem by Isaiah: *My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!* (Is 5:1-3, 7).

This was a well-known piece of Scripture, so those that heard the parable knew the vineyard represented Israel; God was the landowner; and the people of Israel were the share croppers. The servants, who came to collect the landowner's share, were God's prophets of old. The landowner's son was the Son of God.

Those who heard knew the history of Israel and God's prophets. Instead of listening to the prophets, the people threw them in prison, abused them, and even killed them. Only a small number of prophets died of natural causes. The rest were murdered by the people they were sent to help.

The people listening to Jesus had to feel shame for the actions of their ancestors. Beyond that, the parable foretold the murder of the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Their punishment would be severe. They would lose the land they held so dear. They would even lose their relationship with God.

This is one of the few times when Jesus' parable was crystal clear. No one had to ask Jesus what he was trying to say. They understood. They were horrified. "Surely not," they cried.

The Temple officials also caught Jesus' meaning. They, too, were rattled, but for a different reason. They weren't all that concerned with the things that bothered the

people, like most politicians, they were in fear of their positions. *So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation"* (Jn 11:47-48).

While the share croppers in the parable were totally out in left field thinking they could kill the landowner's son and take over the property, that is exactly what the chief priest and his people decided to do with Jesus. In just a few days, they would back Pilate into a corner and force him to crucify Jesus. They figured this would solve their problem and secure their positions.

Some things never change. There are many good pastors who are no longer preaching. They are making deliveries for UPS, working at Wal-Mart, Best Buy, and the like. Why? When they taught the pure Word of God their congregations rejected them and God's Word. Those people wanted to hear what they wanted to hear. Those people weren't all that concerned about truth. They wanted a politically correct message that sent them home feeling good about themselves.

C.F.W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod, once wrote: *As soon as my word is proclaimed, people will split into two camps. Some will receive it with joy; others will be offended by it and will begin to hate and persecute those who receive it ... the church is not a kingdom that can be built up in peace. It is located within the domain of the devil, the prince of this world. Accordingly, the church has no choice but to be at war. It is the Church Militant and will remain such until the blessed end. Whenever a church appears to be not a militant church but a church at ease, that is a false church. You can rely on it.*

Jesus ended his parable with the father coming in anger, destroying the evil share croppers, and giving the vineyard to others. There will come a day when those who abuse God's servants will have to face a very angry judge.

Happily, Jesus didn't stop at the end of the parable. He continued with a verse from Psalm 118: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone* (Ps 118:22). With these words Jesus declared he would be the cornerstone – the one on whom the church would be built and stand. However, before he could become the cornerstone, he must be rejected.

In just a couple of days, Jesus would live out the meaning of that verse. The Jewish leaders would reject him. They would have him tried, sentenced, abused, and handed over to Pilate for crucifixion.

Unlike the son in the parable, Jesus didn't stay dead. Despite the best efforts of the Jews and Pilate, God raised Jesus from the dead to become the cornerstone of his church on earth. Some of his friends put him in a tomb on Friday, but he left that tomb on Sunday.

Jesus rose victorious over sin, death, and Satan. He is now the living cornerstone for me, for you, and for all who believe.

Like the share croppers in the parable, we might have times when we turn our backs on God. We might have times when we neglect his Word and even abuse his people. But the parable shows us that God is a God of great patience. God wants all people to be saved, even the rebellious ones. God was even willing to send his own Son to seek and save the lost.

As long as the cornerstone stands, the church stands. As long as the church stands, God holds out the promise of salvation for all who believe.