

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 today's passage, the authority of Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus teaches us that his authority is not political in nature. It is the spiritual authority that comes from God. Jesus also tells the parable of the tenants to teach us who he is. He reminds us of the loving heart of God who sent his one and only Son to save sinful people like you and me. He teaches us how God wants to work with his people for world salvation.

I. BY WHAT AUTHORITY? (1-8)

Look at verse 1a. *One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel,...* Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem for the last time to suffer and die on a cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What did he do as he braced himself for his death on the cross? Amazingly, Jesus preached the word of God to the people in the temple courts. He planted the hope of the kingdom of God in their hearts. The impending ordeal must have been on his mind, because he was fully human. But he was more concerned with the people than himself.

If you knew that you had only a few days to live, what would you do? Most of us would be preoccupied with our impending death. I know a couple of UBF shepherds who studied the word of God with their Bible students on the morning of their wedding day, which impressed me a lot. Most of us would be preoccupied with our own wedding. But Jesus was different. He taught the word of God. Why? Because the word of God is the word of life and it has the power to save sinners from eternal condemnation. In Romans 1:16, St. 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." Jesus said in John 5:24, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life." This is the reason we should hear the word of God and believe in Jesus. This is the reason why we should study the word of God as a matter of life and death. Our salvation for eternity begins with hearing the word of God.

Sadly not everyone heard the word of God Jesus preached (19:47-48). Ordinary people in Jerusalem hung on his words, but the religious leaders were not happy that Jesus was in the temple, driving out the merchants, and preaching the word of God. They only thought about how to get rid of Jesus, because his popularity was rising among the people. They felt that their job was in jeopardy. Look at verses 1-2. The chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. *"Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?"* (2) It was the time of the Passover feast when the Jewish people commemorated the

saving grace of God in Egypt. The angel of death “passed over” their houses whose doorposts were smeared with the blood of lamb, while all the firstborn of Egypt were killed. It was the most important feast for them. However, the religious leaders were not focused on teaching the meaning of God’s grace to the children of Israel. Instead, they were only concerned about holding on to their political power. They came up to Jesus who was teaching the Bible in the temple, and asked, “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?” They were upset because Jesus had driven out those who were selling and buying in the temple area (19:45-48). A source of their side income was severely damaged. They felt that their authority was undermined by Jesus. Never mind what Jesus did was right in the eyes of God. Jesus told them that the house of God must be a house of prayer, not a flea market. But they did not see the event with spiritual eyes. Their pride was hurt. They were even more annoyed when they saw that Jesus came to the temple regularly, and taught the word of God to the crowd of people who came for the Passover festival.

Their authority came from King Herod and tradition. It was worldly authority. But the authority of Jesus was not given by men, but by God. It is spiritual authority. These religious leaders did not have to worry about Jesus undermining their political authority. But they did not know the shepherd heart of Jesus. So they asked, “Who gave you this authority?” By this question, they meant, “Do you have a permit for doing this?” They accused Jesus of preaching the gospel of salvation without a license. In this way, they tried to intimidate Jesus. They tried to stop the work of God.

What did Jesus say to them? Jesus did not answer them directly because he knew that they were not looking for truth. Instead, he asked them a question. Look at verses 3-4. *He replied, “I will also ask you a question. Tell me: John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin?”* Why did Jesus ask this question and how did the religious leaders respond? John the Baptist was a powerful preacher. He was empowered with the spirit of Elijah and preached a message of repentance. He even rebuked King Herod for his sin of adultery. John the Baptist preached with the authority of God. The religious leaders also knew that King Herod killed the righteous man of God, John the Baptist, for boldly speaking the truth.

So what was their reply to Jesus’ question? They knew the right answer. They knew the truth. But they would not speak the truth. Instead, they huddled to find a politically acceptable answer. Look at verses 5-6. *They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.” So they answered, “We don’t know where it was from.”* The religious leaders should have repented their pride. But they did not repent. Instead, they said, “We don’t know.” It was a cowardly answer. However, the work of God was not stopped by their intimidation. The work of God was going forward according to God’s will and purpose. How did Jesus help the religious leaders? *Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things”* (8). Then he went on to tell them an important truth about God.

II. THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS (9-19)

Look at verse 9. *He went on to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.”* The man in this parable is God. Who are the farmers? Narrowly speaking, they are the Israelites and broadly speaking, we the mankind. God created a beautiful world and put us in charge of it. He blessed us with all kinds of resources. He appointed us as the stewards of his creation. 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.”* The owner in the parable did not demand payment from the tenants by sending an invoice via certified mail, like some landlords do today. He sent his servant to them. He hoped the tenants would willingly give him some fruit out of their thankful hearts. This way they could acknowledge that the vineyard was not theirs, but the owner’s.

God is the Creator of this universe. He is the owner. Everything we have, including our lives, is from God. Our life is a gift from God. We are the tenants, not the owners. We also learn that God wants us to produce fruit for him. God created us in his own image and said, “Be fruitful ...” (Ge 1:28) We have a fruit-bearing relationship with God. We should not live our lives to satisfy our sinful desires and bear evil fruit. Instead, we should live a life that fulfills God’s purpose to bear good fruit.

A man named Levi followed his selfish desires. He decided to become a heartless tax collector. He betrayed his people, his country and his own conscience to make money. He was like a drug dealer of our time. He was a tenant who produced bad fruit. He followed money as his master. But one day, Jesus came to him and said, “Follow me.” Levi’s life was changed when he met Jesus. He decided to follow Jesus as his disciple. The selfish man became St. Matthew who wrote a gospel. He recorded Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” As a disciple of Jesus, he lived a life that produced good fruit for God.

How did the tenants in the parable respond? Look at verse 10b-12. *But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.* Wow! How could they be so ungrateful after receiving so many blessings? How could they be so evil? You know what? This is a description of the sinful mankind who rejected God. In other words, it is you and me who behaved in this way. God blessed us with many blessings, including the gift of life. He gave us many talents, such as intelligent mind, strong body, musical or artistic talents, and so on. God wanted us to bear good fruit in him, using those talents. But we were not thankful to him for his blessings. Instead, we ignored him. We became selfish. We used the talents for selfish purposes. We rebelled against him. We sinned before him by following our own desires, setting aside his word of truth. Jesus was talking about what the Israelites did to the prophets sent by God, but this applies to each of us as well.

The tenants’ act of rebellion was terrible. But I don’t think that is the real point of Jesus’ parable. The worldly landlord would have them evicted from the vineyard and

turn them over to a collection agency. He could have filed criminal charges against them. But what did the owner in this parable do? Let us read verse 13 together. *Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him."* This is amazing. After all the terrible things the tenants did to his servants, the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him." He decided to send his own son whom he loved. He wanted to show the tenants how much he loved them. He was willing to risk his son's life to restore a right relationship with them. Of course, Jesus is not talking about an ordinary land owner here. He is talking about God. He is talking about the unfailing love of God toward sinners like us. 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."

What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love. How amazing is the love of God! God demonstrated his love by sending his one and only Son Jesus Christ! Romans 5:8 says: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." What did Jesus do? Jesus paid the price of our sins with his own life. In Jerusalem, he was arrested and tried as if he were a criminal. He was beaten again and again with a metal-tipped whip. He was tortured. He was humiliated before his family and friends. Then he was crucified, with his naked body hung on the wooden cross. Huge nails were driven through his hands and feet. And what did he say as he hung on the cross? Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 24:34). Jesus prayed for sinners like you and me! God said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love." Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." If these words, if these acts of love do not melt our hearts, then there is something wrong with our hearts. Is your heart hardened like a paved highway? Or is it like rocky soil?

To truly appreciate the love of God, we must know that we are like the ungrateful, wicked tenants in this parable. We have to admit that we are sinners before God. But there are two kinds of sinners. The first would say, "I am a terrible sinner. I have done terrible things before God. It is amazing to know that God would forgive such terrible sinners like me!" The second would say, "Yes, I am a sinner. I am not perfect. But I am a pretty good sinner, compared to some other people. I have never done terrible things like killing servants of God." What kind of sinner are you? I know that I am a terrible sinner. I committed terrible sins out of my selfish and lustful desires. But the merciful God reached out to me with his merciful hands. He saved me! He forgave all my sins! Whenever I think about this amazing grace, I cannot but thank and praise the Lord. It is nothing short of a miracle for me.

God said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love." Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." What is your personal response to this love? What would you say to God? What would you say to Jesus? In the end, there will be only two kinds of sinners—the repentant sinners who receive the grace of forgiveness and the unrepentant sinners who remain in sin and death. May God help us to repent our sins and accept this love of God!

Now, knowing the love of God for each of us, how can we respond to his love? Going back to the parable, we learn that he wants us to live a fruitful life. What does this mean and how can we do so? This is a topic we need to explore more deeply sometime, but to put it simply, God wants us to bear spiritual fruit—fruit that will last (Jn 15:16). It is more than being successful in this world. It is to live a life of following our Lord Jesus, obeying his word faithfully. Jesus promised in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” If we remain in Jesus and if his words remain in us, we will bear fruit that will last. This is the reason why God created in his own image. This is the reason why God re-created us in his image again by sending his one and only Son Jesus and letting him die in our place.

Many people today live their lives in the way the tenants in this parable lived. They do not thank God everyday for the blessings they have. They consider their lives as their own, not to mention their possessions. They consider their children as their own. When things go well with their life, they forget the Lord and become proud and say, “I am very good; I achieved all this by myself.” When things go badly, they despair and become depressed. Some young people even commit suicide, thinking their life as their own. Such a life is not a blessed life. It is not a fruitful life, no matter how successful he or she may be. The tenants were wrong to think that a life ignoring God was a good life.

Do you want your life to be a blessed, fruitful life? Remain in Jesus our Lord. Walk with him everyday. Listen to his word and obey him. He promised that we will bear much fruit. We will have a joy in him. Not the kind of short-lived joy from the pleasures of this world, but a deep joy in your soul, knowing that God is with you and you are his child. Not the kind of joy from pursuing selfish things, but the joy when you serve the Lord and his people with love. Most of all, we have the assurance of eternal life and a true hope of being with Jesus in the kingdom of God. This is a blessed life. This is a fruitful life. This is the kind of life God wants us to have. He let his one and only Son die on the cross to give us this kind of life!

How did the tenants in the parable respond to the love of God? Look at verses 14-15a. *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 rejected God’s love. Sinful people rejected God’s hand of mercy stretched out to them. They rejected the amazing love of God. What would the owner of the vineyard do? Look at verse 16a. *“He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”* This was a warning to the Jewish leaders who were planning to eliminate Jesus out of their jealousy. But it is a warning to us as well. The Bible makes it very clear that this world as we know it will not continue indefinitely. The day will come when Jesus will return as the Judge of the living and the dead. On that day, there will be a separation between God’s people and God haters, between sheep and goats, between believers and pretenders. May God help us to accept the love of God in our hearts and live a life that bears good fruit!

III. JESUS, THE CAPSTONE (17-19)

What was the response of those who heard Jesus' warning? They said, "God forbid!" 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 to them. 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 cornerstone?'"* Who is the stone the builders rejected? Jesus 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 at a construction site. Jesus did not fit the image of the Messiah they were waiting for. They thought Jesus was too poor and humble. Jesus told them to repent their hypocrisy. Instead, they decided to kill Jesus. But God raised Jesus from the dead and made him the source of eternal salvation. Through the obedience of 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; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."* Jesus is God. No one can stand against Jesus. Those who reject his mercy and love condemn themselves. Their rejection of the Savior is like dashing their heads against a rock. 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."*

Praise God for teaching us the truth that God is the owner of the vineyard and we are his tenants. We thank God for choosing us as his children in this sinful generation. Most of all we learn that God loves us. He loves us so much that he sent Jesus to save us from sin and death, and to give us eternal life as his gift. May God help us know the heart of God and live a life that fulfills his purpose in us!