



Luke 20:1-20

“Teflon Jesus”
(12th in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 20:1-20 "TEFLON JESUS"

Longest Unit, 20:1-21:38

1) vv.1-8 CONTROVERSY DIALOG: ON JESUS' AUTHORITY? *Teach: 4:14-15, 43, 5:17, 13:10*
 //Matthew 21:23-27, Mark 11:27-33

a) vv.1-2 Question To Jesus From The Scribes And Elders. Revelatory Teaching/Temple Invaded!

The People (vv.1, 6, 16b, 19) Acknowledge His Authority

1 Q1 *One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel,* 1:16, 19:47-48/Continuity, 2:40-52
 the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up (2) and said to him, Jerusalem Sanhedrin
 "Tell us by what **authority** you do these things, Temple Leaders: Birthright, Education, Status/Wealth
 or who it is that gave you this **authority**." Assume Right To Interrogate Him (honor) → Exposed As Frauds

Act 4:7, Two Visions Collide In Warfare, God Gave Jesus Authority, 3:21-22

b) vv.3-4 Jesus' Counter-Question: Heaven Or Men? Spiritual Gift = Revelation Of Wisdom

Jesus Links Himself To John, Both Bypass Temple

3 Q2 He answered them, "I also will ask you a question; now tell me, Barometer Of Responsiveness To God
 4 Was the baptism of John from heaven (i.e. from God) or from men?" 1:76, 3:16, Was He Really A Prophet?
 ? = Can You See God's Presence Outside Religious Structures?

b') vv.5-7 Counter-Question Not Answered: Heaven Or Men.

Choices: Repent, Be Stoned, Quibble

5 A2 And they **discussed it (calculated)** with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' Variant In v.14
 he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' 7:30, John Was God's Challenge From Outside
 6 But if we say, 'From men,' The People Recognize God's Presence Outside Structures
 all the people will stone us; Stone: 20:6, 17, 18; Punishment For Blasphemy, 13:34
 7 for they are convinced that John was a prophet." Their Answer Incurs Shame
 So they answered that they did not know whence it was. 7:30, 19:44, Exposed! Utter Hypocrisy
 If Not Accept Precursor, Not Accept The Son

A1 **a') v.8 Initial Question Not Answered.** Leaders Can Be Blocks To Visitation

Do I Want To Know The Truth? Or Protect Status/Place?

8 And Jesus said to them, Jesus Said No To Some Questions
 "Neither will I tell you by what **authority** I do these things." 22:67-68, Jesus' Response Is Contingent On Honesty
 God Seeks A Responsive People! Institution + Charisma

2) vv.9-16a PARABLE/ALLEGORY OF THE MURDEROUS TENANTS. Jesus Told Stories

//Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12, Gospel Of Thomas 65

a) v.9 Initial Stewardship (Narrative Discourse). Isaiah 5:1-7, Ps. 80:8-13, Israel, Parable Of Warning

Parable = Attack On Current Religious Leadership

9 And he began to tell *the people* this parable: 3 Actions

"A man planted a vineyard (1), and let it out to tenants (2), and went into another country for a long while (3).

b) vv.10-12 Initial Rejection Of Servants (Allegory, Narrative Discourse).

Part I: Prophets Sent/ Rejected

10 When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, Time = Kairos (Fullness)
 that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard; 3:8, 6:43, God Wants Fruit: Witness/Ethics
 but the tenants beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Greed/Rebellion/Violence/Loss
 11 And he sent another servant; 13:34, Acts 7:52
 him also they *beat* and treated shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed.

12 And he sent *yet a third*; Beat/Sent; Beat/Shamefully Treated/Sent; Wounded/Cast Out; Cast Out/Kill
this one they wounded and cast out 11:47-51, Divine Patience, This Is Not Working!
 Who Owns The Vineyard? Church Is Not Ours

b') vv.13-15 Special Rejection Of Son (Direct Discourse). Not Relinquish Control

Part II: Son Sent/ Rejected

13 *Then the owner (Lord) of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do?* Isaiah 5:4, 7
I will send "my beloved son"; it may be they will respect him.' 3:22, 9:35, Gen. 22:2, 12, 26; Is. 5:1, 7
 14 But when the tenants *saw him, they said to themselves,* 4:18, Jesus Is God's Last Emisarry
 'This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.' No Way! Character Emisarry
 15 And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Son Crucified Outside Jerusalem
 Golgotha Outside Walls, Allegorical Detail, Heb. 13:12-13

a') v.16b Judgment And Replacement Stewardship (Direct Discourse). //19:47, Rejectors Rejected

Return + Judgment/Blessing, Broadened Israel Includes Gentiles

16a What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? God Prevails! James 3:1, Question + Answer

He will come (3), and destroy those tenants (2), and give the vineyard to others (1)." 3 Actions Reversed

2') vv.16b-20 RESPONSES TO THE PARABLE AND THE TELLER.

a) v.16b Pious Reaction Of Jesus' Hearers: Accept The Teaching And Its Call.

16b *When they (i.e. the people) heard this, they said, "God forbid!"* Literally "May it not be!"
Jesus Drove A Wedge Between The People And Their Leaders

b) v.17 Jesus Quotes Psalm 118:22.

17 *But he looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written:
'The very stone which the builders rejected
has become the head of the corner'?"* Self-Reference To Cross/Resurrection
Rejected Figure Is Foundation For New Community!
Gaze, 22:61,
Reject *The Beloved Son*, Ps. 118:22, LXX 177:22, Omits v.23
Father/Spirit Backs Jesus! Not Quoted As In Mark/Matthew
Prophecy Of Rejection/Vindication, Fits With God's Purposes

b') v.18 Jesus Issues Judgment Commentary (Falls) On Psalm 118:22.

18 *Every one who falls on that stone
will be broken to pieces;/
but when it falls on any one
it will crush him."* Allegorical Riddle, Ones Response To The Son Is Absolutely Decisive
(Now: Passive) 2:34, Is. 8:13-14, v.18 Only In Luke
If You Stumble At Him, You Will Eventually Be Crushed
(Judgment: Active) Dan. 2:34
Jesus Is The Agent Of God's Judgment On Non-Responsive Leaders
They Are To Accept The One The Leaders Reject

a') vv.19-20 Hostile Reaction Of Hearers: Reject The Teacher.

19 *The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour,
but they feared the people;
for they perceived that he had told this parable against them.* Elders Not Mentioned As In v.1
Immediate Plot!
Two Visions Of Life With God Clash Here
They Were Right!

20 *So they watched him,
and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere,
that they might take hold of what he said,
so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.* Hostility To God The Son, Agent Of God's Kingdom
Set Up Surveillance, Romans Would Have Ignored Him Without Major Incident
Recruit Agents, Their People Were Just Like Them As Disciples
Evil Caretakers: Use Judas, Arrange Arrest, Make Up Charges
Hostile Plot With Rome As Executioner
Key = Avoid Anti-Semitic Reading Of These Texts, Religion Would Rather Kill Jesus Than Follow Him!

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 20:1-20

This text is part of the longest thought unit in Luke (20:1-21:38). It concerns Jesus face-offs with various philosophical schools within Judaism, and in each he is revealed as superior. With a track record of embarrassing powerful people, his doom is sure. In three paragraphs (20:1-8, 9-16a, 16b-20) Luke moves us from the inquiry of the Sanhedrin to their coordinated plot to trap and deliver Jesus to Pilate for execution as a threat to good order. Jesus, God’s fearless truth-teller, is a dangerous and a marked man.

In the previous unit (19:28-48) Jesus confronts leaders with three symbols: 1) entering as peaceful king, 2) disturbing temple operations, 3) setting up lectures in Solomon’s porch. The Son comes to reclaim the Father’s house (2:40-52). Verses 47-48 are preview, “And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him; but they could not find anything they could do, for all the people hung on his words.” The same themes are in 20:19-20 as a frame (inclusion) around our text, “The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them. So they watched him, and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the *authority* and jurisdiction of the governor.” Trouble is brewing; Jesus picks fights.

The first scene (vv.1-8) is shaped as a 4:2 chiasm (four parts, double center: a-b//b’-a’) with the word *authority* (v.1//v.8) as the inclusion to mark off the paragraph. At the center (b. vv.3-4 // b’ vv.5-7) are Jesus’ counter-question and their revealing non-answer. Since Jesus is on temple turf, officials demand to know who sent him or gave permission. Knowing their hostility, Jesus- in good rabbinic fashion- proposes a counter-question, “Was John’s ministry *from above* (i.e. from God as a challenge and opportunity) or *from men* (i.e. self-promoted and therefore false)?” Jesus has access to divine wisdom through the Spirit and knows which issue to probe. Since neither answer suits their agenda, the leaders plead ignorance as a ploy. The enduring question is, Can we recognize God’s approach outside approved structures? Since the leaders lack integrity, Jesus refuses to answer their question. He is superior.

The stakes go up in vv.9-16a as Jesus moves from passive resistance to attack. The form is again a 4:2 concentric pattern (a-b//b’-a’). At the center is a contrast between generations of prophets (b. vv.10-12) and the only Son as final agent (b’ vv.13-15). Three actions in v.9 (plant, delegate, depart) are reversed in v.16a (return, destroy, give) as an inclusion. The text behind Jesus’s creative retelling is Isaiah’s song of the vineyard (5:1-7), only here Jesus writes himself into the plot. He is the *beloved son* (3:22, 9:35), *heir* of the vineyard, the one *cast out of the vineyard and killed* outside the walls. With each emissary, hostility increases. The first is beaten and dismissed with nothing; the second is beaten, shamefully treated, and sent away empty-handed; the third is wounded and cast out. This is a pithy summary of the plot of the Old Testament. The Son is then *cast out and killed*. What more can God do but bring judgment and switch leadership teams from the Sanhedrin to the apostles? God will have a people, a fruitful vineyard.

The third paragraph, vv.16b-20, has the same 4:2 format. At the center (b. v.17 // b’ v.18) are Jesus’ quotation and commentary on Ps. 118:2, Is. 8:13-14. The positive response of the people (a. v.16b) and the hostility of the Sanhedrin (a’ vv.19-20) form a frame of contrasts. Divisions deepen. That the people are horrified at the prospect of judgment is a good sign, but they do not have power to stop their leaders. Jesus is soon to be the rejected-and-restored-stone who will crush many. Sad, sad, sad. The God who offers life and then responds to our responses is just and true. Remember whose vineyard we are!

TEFLON JESUS

“And he began to tell the people this parable.”

Jesus told stories to arouse curiosity and stir insight.

LUKE 20:9a

Once upon a time a grape vine lived at the edge of the road. Travelers plucked luscious purple fruit without a word of gratitude- no thanks, no nothing, sometimes a cluster at a time.

One day a priest happened by and- tired as he was- lay down in the shade. Scarcely were his eyes shut when the vine spoke up, “As you can see, Father, I am a grape vine. Young and old take my fruit without so much as a hello. Photosynthesis is hard work. How can they do this?”

The priest was lost in thought, then spoke, “Perhaps people are callous. It’s as likely, however, that their lack of gratitude comes from another reason. Just as people expect the sun to shine and the wind to blow and priests to listen, they expect grapes from a vine. They may be under the impression providing grapes is your duty. Did not Saint Augustine say, “In doing what we ought we deserve no praise, it is our duty.”¹ The priest nodded off; the vine had much to ponder.²

Ought, must, and should are duty words, imperatives with heavy moral weight. There is good news hidden in duty words. *I ought* is rooted in *I may*, and *I must* is grounded in *I can*, and *I should* is planted in the rich soil of *opportunity*. Duty is not about the impossible or far way; duty is as close as the next right thing required of me. William Barclay echoed John Wesley when he wrote, “In the time we have it is surely our duty to do all the good we can to all the people we can in all the ways we

¹ Augustine quote from Martin Manser, editor, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2001), 83.

² William R. White, *Stories For Telling* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986), 75.

can.” As a son of the South, I remember having Robert E. Lee quoted by my father: “Duty is the sublimest work in our language. Do your duty in all things.... You cannot do more; you should never wish to do less.”³ I did not understand, but I knew it was deep, so out I went to mow the lawn like a good soldier. Procrastination is the postponement of duty and the loss of opportunity. My deepest regrets have to do with missed duties and the options to which they might have led.

When the Lord God made provision for his chosen ones to carry out their witness in a complicated world, the Jews were provided over time with multiple structures and institutions to guard their common life. Tribal elders and national kings, priestly families and prophets, the mobile tabernacle in the wilderness and eventually a grand temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem. As Scripture was written and received, professional scribes and scholars arose to interpret the holy scrolls in the synagogues that dotted the towns and villages. In Jesus’ day religious affairs were guided by the Sanhedrin, a group of seventy priests, elders, and scholars who convened in Jerusalem as a high court. Final authority was with the Roman government of occupation, but much was left to this body. It was their duty to guard and teach the truths of their God, *Yahweh the Lord*- the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob- and to do it in the midst of a loss of political power. Preserve the faith and the temple, guard against false prophets and upstart Messiahs. Compromises had to be made; just where the lines were drawn was much debated.

Every church lives between the twin poles of the institutional and the charismatic.⁴ Stability at one end, innovation and surprise at the other. At one end are the structures and procedures and buildings and budgets and politics and Books of Discipline and the professional privileges of being a temple insider where everyone needs a union card stamped by the bishop after attending an approved graduate school and being fully vetted. We call them *elders*, and I am a full member of the union. But if the only way to get in is to be born into it, as with the temple priests who were all Levites, so much the better; to keep it in one of the clans was Jewish practice.

³ Albert Wells, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 60.

⁴ The classic is Max Weber, *On Charisma And Institution Building* (Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press, 1968). For an appreciative article by a Christian psychologist (and U.M.!), see Newton Malony, “1 + 1 Organization: Some thought on the nature of persons and the organization of the church,” *JASA* 30 (March 1978): 32-36, available at www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1978/JASA3-78Malony.

It's easy to make a mockery of all this and complain about *institutional religion*, but there is simply no religious community that exists over time and across multiple generations without all the apparatus we have just listed. A long journey through time requires provisions and logistics. As with the early Methodists, one generation's revival becomes the next generation's new denomination. So to say, as many do, that they like Jesus but not his church, may have merit; is also naive in the extreme. We live within history. New wine needs a durable container.⁵ To say with pride, "We are a non-denominational church!" is a simplistic fiction when what you are in fact is the first church of a new denomination, which is just fine.

At the other end is the charismatic side of the house. It is more spontaneous and unpredictable. God raises up a fresh voice to critique institutions that have grown unresponsive. Credentialed leaders forget it's God organization, not their own for prestige and profit, career and status. Prophets are called, some of whom have no credentials except their meeting with God and the convincing nature of their own message, "Thus says the Lord." They are outsiders who give insiders a hard time. This is one way to understand the conflict Jesus- and John the Baptist before him-brought to Jerusalem leadership. John the Baptist was an insider become an outsider. His father Zechariah was a priest serving his rotation in the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to announce John's miracle conception and prophetic destiny.⁶ John was from a priestly family but called to be a wilderness prophet.

Jesus, on the other hand, was not of priestly lineage but from the tribe of Judah, the clan of the Messiah. John and Jesus were charismatics in the sense they were Jewish laymen who rocketed to prominence outside the normal credentialing process. They were called by God through vivid encounters, Jesus at his baptism; for John all we have is a cryptic comment at the end of Luke chapter 1 that "he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel."⁷ Both were radical young reformers and cousins, preached the fresh inbreaking of God's kingdom and called fellow Jews to turn and enter it, John by anticipation and Jesus by words accompanied by powerful signs and wonders. John prepared the way in preaching the kingdom before Jesus; he also charted the course for Jesus by dying as a martyr at the hands

⁵ Mark 3:22.

⁶ 1:5-25.

⁷ 1:80.

of King Herod. The destinies of John and Jesus were closely coordinated. That Jesus was more than a prophet does not lessen his status as an outsider; it only makes it worse. Prophets can be silenced, but what do you do with one who uses the language of *Son* for himself as God’s chief agent?

The last week of Jesus’ life is a confrontation between the institutional concerns of the chief priests and elders and scribes and the prophetic and charismatic concerns of Jesus. New guy against the old guys; the courageous One against the entrenched many; outsider versus insiders; the fresh voice of God’s demand against a highly resistant religious bureaucracy. In Jesus’ reading of the situation they have not been doing their duty; they have enriched themselves and not fed the flock. This is why Jesus sets up his teaching ministry under their noses in the temple. They ignored God’s prophet John and labeled Jesus as in league with the devil himself, “It is only by Be-elzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”⁸

In their reading- and they are right- Jesus is radical, dangerous troublemaker who could upset the delicate balance of power and bring down the whole system they had so carefully worked out. Jesus has a divine duty to confront them on their home turf, so two kinds of power face off that week in a genuine collision, and whether you believe in the resurrection of Jesus determines who you think won the war. Did it end on Friday, or did it all restart on Sunday and continue even to our day?

God wants a responsive people, and while institutions and systems are necessary, the question is, Will we recognize when God acts outside them in order to offer those inside fresh life? Left to themselves and apart from the fresh challenges of God’s grace, religious institutions like ours slowly turn in on themselves, forget their mission, and go sour and brittle. Is this not where we are? Several years ago I had a first class church historian and Episcopal bishop confess to me with tears in his living room, “Phil, my sin is that I have loved the church more than I have loved the Lord.” There it is. Sin is not just deliberately doing this or that rotten deed; it is an insidious engulfing power that- despite our intentions- bends us away from mission to maintenance and from passion to passivity and from his vineyard to our institution. Without fresh visitations from outside, decline is inevitable, and even with them there is no guarantee they will be welcomed; such is the sad tale of church history.

One temptation of ordained ministry is to wear the holy halo and think you are

⁸ 11:14-15.

in control. Another is to forget it's the Lord's vineyard you are tending. Another is to be a people-pleaser rather than a God-pleaser. Another is to use the office to advance yourself at the cost of the people. Another is to coast on the work of others and not do your own study and reflection; many become brain dead and full of platitudes. Another is to forget you are a sinner in need of constant forgiveness and correction. Another is to forget that God's word not only comes *from* the church but *to* the church. Another failing is to become a family chaplain to the well-connected and influential because of the status and security it brings. Another is to forget it was the religious leaders in Jerusalem that Jesus had the most trouble with and who conspired with the Roman authorities to have him killed.

Official religion was a partner in the murder of Jesus. This is what religion does when God shows up; it kills him! So deceptive had the Jerusalem religious leaders become, not the Jewish people but their religious leaders- the chief priests and scribes and elders- that Jesus would not answer their questions, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." So corrupt were they that Jesus threatened them in a parable, "He will come, and *destroy those tenants*, and give the vineyard to others." So blind were they spiritually that they spent their time trying to trap him with spies and schemes rather than listening to him. On the fundamental issues of who Jesus was, the pew was right and the pulpit and priests dead wrong. We ministers have an inside line, but not as laity think and joke about; it's not an inside line of prayer or protection; it's an inside to the judgment of God because of our solemn responsibilities. Jesus brother James said it best, "Let not many of you become teachers, brethren, knowing we shall receive the greater condemnation."⁹ It's dangerous work; I do not recommend it as a career choice. Do something safe; join the Green Berets or transport nuclear waste.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Issue Of Authority (vv.1-8)

As I said earlier, and it bears repeating, it is the nature of all religious bodies to develop rules and procedures and policies and credentials and training programs. It's what happens when a spiritual movement becomes a religious institution and settles down for the long haul of sustaining itself and caring for its spiritual treasures. Remember that in Jesus' parable the vineyard owner is away *for a long while*. You

⁹ James 3:1.

simply can't avoid sociological law. First century Judaism couldn't, and neither can the church. In itself it's not sinful. The question is, however, Once all this stuff is in place, can you stay flexible and open to discern the divine presence when it comes to you from *outside* official channels? The word of God not only comes *through the church* to the world but also *to the church* from irregular channels. God raised up John Wesley as a prophet to the moribund Church of England; God raised up the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in our day to challenge the internal secularism of the mainline church in America with a dose of the supernatural. We largely ignored them because they were loud and expected God not to keep himself at a polite distance. Renewal rarely comes from the center and most often from the edges, and it's always messy. Prophets aren't often polite; they may not have good manners and good grammar; what they have is a word from God that burns in their bones. It's why Israel and the church keep running them off. God sent a servant, then another and another who one-by-one were beaten up and sent away empty handed. God wants fruit from his vineyard; what he gets is a fight from his own people. Could it be that they and we don't want a visit, that we like things just as they are?

Jesus did not have accepted credentials. He was not a priest or a scribe or an elder. He was an itinerant, charismatic rabbi without Jerusalem pedigree. He had not paid his dues to the guild and had no union card. His authority as Son was directly from God through the Spirit, certified by signs and wonders. No ordination certificate on his wall from the University of Jerusalem. But many blind people now saw, and the demonized had been set free in droves. To make it worse, he was from a nowhere town in redneck Galilee. So when Jesus took up residence in the premier symbol of Jewish identity- the temple- and began to teach daily to large crowds, it made the official custodians of the nerve center of Jewish life nervous. He had not asked permission when he showed up to turn over the tables and scatter the animals; he acted as if he owned the place, as if it was his to rearrange around a new set of priorities. He was doing what they neglected; he fed the flock of God divine revelation, and when he announced God's kingdom was near enough to be touched, miracles happened as people reached out in faith to the new reality Jesus embodied.¹⁰

In Jesus the presence of God returned to the temple of God. The Holy of Holies was no longer behind a heavy curtain but standing in front of them. Jesus

¹⁰ For a contemporary treatment of the signs of the kingdom from a pastor and practitioner, see Gary Best, *Naturally Supernatural: God May Be Closer Than You Think* (Capetown, SA: Vineyard International Publishing, 2008).

invaded their turf with love and power and truth and miracles- all of which were an in-your-face challenge to business as usual- so they wanted to know, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority?” It’s not a bad question, and it does have an answer, albeit a disturbing one. Jesus’ authority is not mediated through tradition-bound hierarchies but direct; it comes from above. He is making up for their neglect. His very presence and growing popularity among ordinary people is a threat to their control. Jesus lives by a reality and a relationship they have long forgotten was present and might show up at their doorstep. They will change and join him, or they will have to do him in, and it is a crisis and a confrontation he initiated. They are caught in forces of sin and evil they do not comprehend, and when we find ourselves resisting whatever God has on the agenda, so do we. A blind church is a mean place and intolerant.

“Jesus answered, ‘I will ask you a question; now tell me, Was the baptism of John from heaven (that is, *from God*) or from men?’” Was John sent, or was he self-appointed and thus a fraud? Jesus refuses to answer their question until he finds whether they are men of integrity or not. Are they interested in truth of God and a fresh visitation or just politics and public relations? Verses 5 through 7 give the answer. They took a poll, weighed the options and lied, “So they answered that they did not know whence it was. We can neither confirm nor deny....” If they can’t deal with John who brought a word from outside approved channels, then Jesus does not intend to answer their question about where his authority comes from since it comes from the same source. They wouldn’t believe him anyway, “And Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.’” Quality control matters, but here, even with all the evidence Jesus brings, they hate him; he is their judgment. It was a bad day to be an esteemed member of the current Sanhedrin and to be so exposed. Much prestige, but no kingdom. Much heritage, but no future. There may have a few responsive souls left in the bunch- say Nicodemus- but when they voted, it was decided; the chief institution of Judaism with all its resources was now officially against Jesus and his agenda. You think it can’t happen in a local church or in a denomination? It can; it’s happening all across the land. Churches and their leaders are being sifted. It’s God vineyard, and God wants fruit. It scares me!

Here is the tragedy. Not one broke rank; no one came to Jesus’ side; no one was converted. It was group-think and party loyalty down the line. When pastors and bishops are silent when they should speak, when we make decisions on what is popular and self-serving rather than risky and true, we join ranks with those Jesus refuses to talk to. And when a religious institution is given the silent treatment by its

owner, judgment is near. The machinery keeps running on tradition and residual giving, but the blessing is gone. Nostalgia reigns. It looks the same, but it's not. Large sections of the Episcopal and Presbyterian and Lutheran and United Methodist Churches have already defected from anything that resembles the vitality of classic Christian faith and morality. And if we go this way, God will do what God's always done: judge us unfit and give the vineyard to others, not all at once but maybe a bit at a time just to see if we notice. New groups will be raised up to do the work of God, verse 16a, "He will come, and destroy those tenants, *and give the vineyard to others.*" Say New Spring? Perhaps some new movement not yet born? In our day the leadership of the Methodist vineyard is up for grabs. I love our church; I've taken vows and given it my life; I intend to hang with it, but our future as a people capable of being used by the Holy Spirit to attract and make new disciples of Jesus Christ is uncertain.¹¹ No new program or organization scheme can save us. I know because we have tried them all. But if we fasted and prayed and confess our sin and sought God and listened to the disturbing words of Scripture with a heart to obey, there might be hope. What if we here at Main Street became a signpost? What if God revived us as a living laboratory and a sign of hope to other churches, simply because we were so needy, and on one could claim the credit?

An Allegory Of Judgment And Response (vv.9-16a)

The value of the parable or allegory of the Vineyard in verses 9 through 16 is that it takes the long history of God's people and cuts to the chase. It gives the plot line for the grand sweep of salvation history. God wants a vineyard, a people who produce a steady crop of worship and holiness and service so that the whole world could see a living example of what God wants for all people. Israel was God's display case, God's private garden. Verse 9, "A man planted a vineyard, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country *for a long while.*"

God owns the vineyard; it's entrusted to leaders; God welcomes the messy processes of history; the plot unfolds over a long time. But accountability is not neglected, and so a servant, a prophet, a fruit inspector is sent without warning to evaluate how the vineyard's doing. How are God's people doing under current

¹¹ For description and prescription, see Gil Rendle, *Back to Zero: The Search to Rediscover the Methodist Movement* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2011), also his *Journey In The Wilderness* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2010); Lovett Weems, Jr., *focus: The Real Challenges That Face The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2012).

leadership? Are the preachers modeling and teaching the truth? Is there a steady crop of justice and love? While the people sometimes listened to the prophets, the overall report was not good. They were beaten and dismissed. But God was patient. He sent another and another. Same treatment, even worse. Something's wrong here. Tenants act like owners. Have they forgotten whose vineyard it is?

It is for dramatic effect that we have the question of verse 13, "Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do?'" It gives us a pause between the ministry of the prophets and the arrival of the only son, the tipping point. One more try, not a servant this time but a beloved, only Son; not a prophet but the one who fully represents the owner, Jesus Christ. How he is treated will determine how God ultimately treats the tenants. The others they beat and then cast out. But with Jesus the order is reversed; he is first cast out, then killed. That is Luke's way of making a clear reference to the fact that Jesus was crucified *outside* the city walls of Jerusalem. It's not an encouraging story. What God wants God does not get because leaders will not listen. My professor Charles Talbert made this summary comment, "One's place in the religious establishment hinges on one's acquiescence to the claims of the beloved Son as owner of the vineyard. This is the criterion by which every religious establishment is judged by God."¹² Local churches are not owned by pastors or denominations or members; you remain the Lord's vineyard, and the Lord is always testing to see if we are responsive to his approach.

Are the preachers listening to the Lord? Is it *his* church or *theirs*? The people of God, Israel and Church, are meant to be the hope of the world, but more often than not we grow resistant to God who has to keep sifting us for a people who will tend to his business. This is not a hopeful story Jesus told. It ends with a slaughter, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come, and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others." The leadership of God's people then passed from the Jewish leaders to the Jewish apostles of Jesus. And when the great church needed correction, God raised up the Protestant Reformation, and when the English Reformation grew staid and respectable, God raised up the Methodists under John Wesley to preach Christ in the streets and to the poor, and when the Methodists in American lost their fire and moved up the social scale, God raised up the Pentecostals and the Holiness Churches, and on the story goes on. I wonder who's next? God is always looking for tenants to whom the vineyard can be trusted; and the big lesson of church history is that all of us are faithful for a while, then indifferent, then

¹² *Luke* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1984), 189.

unfaithful, then stubborn, then rejected or at least shoved aside till we wake up and turn back. The good news is God’s faithfulness and patience. Methodism was once a sharp sword in the hand of God; now it has a dulled edge and hangs on the wall.

Even the people were shocked with the severity and finality of Jesus’ story. It took their breath away. “When they heard this, they said, ‘God forbid. May it never be.’” You see, even though *the people* heard Jesus and even enjoyed his deflating their leaders in public, they still had hopes Judaism could be reinvented. It was still their city and their temple and their traditions, even if they had grown hard and brittle.

But it was not to be. A new center would be established. Not a holy city or a holy temple but a living and risen Lord who would raise up a new people out of the old and scatter them across the face of the earth. The stone rejected in crucifixion would become the cornerstone rescued in resurrection. Psalm 118:22 was an ancient hint of this great reversal. The judicial and religious murder of the Son of God is not the end of the story; it is the start of a new beginning that reached beyond Judaism out to the Gentiles. God is going to get his harvest, and it will come from followers of Jesus who seek to stay faithful in spite of the up-and-downs and ins-and-outs of church history. Even when leaders defect, a remnant remains. The *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful, the deep and intuitive Yes of the church to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ endures. Six times Luke highlights this group:

- verse 1, “One day, as he was teaching *the people*;
- verse 6, “But if we say from men, *the people* will stone us;
- verse 9, “And he began to tell *the people* this parable;
- verse 16, “But when *the people* heard this, they said, ‘God forbid!’”
- verse 19, “but they feared *the people*;
- verse 26, “And they were not able in the presence of *the people* to catch him by what he said.”

In the end I have to reluctantly admit this is a very anti-clergy and pro-laity passage of Scripture. So do not put too much hope in your pastors; even the most faithful and zealous are prone to corruption and fatigue and the compromise of becoming company-men. It’s hard to keep your spiritual edge running a local religious franchise. We forget whose vineyard it is and what kind of high-quality produce the owner wants. So trust the Lord and his faithfulness; take hope in the truth that there will always be *a people* who listen to Jesus and do what they can to remain faithful in spite of their leaders. Pray that church leaders will notice and

Luke 20:1-20 15

welcome the Lord’s fresh approach. This is more than simply an appeal to empty populism; it is a sign of the faithfulness of God that he can always find an audience.

Sin is not a theoretical concept; it is historical and particular. And nowhere is its sheer ugliness more revealed than in verses 19 and 20. What Jesus predicted in his parable, that the beloved son would be cast out and killed, is here put into motion by the religious leaders, not the Jewish people mind you, but their leaders. This is not an anti-Semitic passage but an anti-corrupt-leaders passages applied to ancient Judaism and the church across the ages. The streak of ugly anti-Judaism which has haunted the church is a misreading of who was responsible:

“The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them. So they watched him, and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.”

CONCLUSION

I leave you with two quotes. I don’t know who wrote either, but together they sum up the impact of this disturbing passage of Scripture. First the downside:

“Someone once said that Christianity has a way of beginning in the catacombs with nothing but a message and ending up in a cathedral with nothing but money.”

I agree. Then the up side: “The world at its worst needs the church at its best.”¹³I also agree, and may it be so here. May we recover our vision and our edge and our deep hunger to be the church at its best by the grace of God. We are his vineyard, and for a season of his choosing I am a sharecropper on this little farm. God help us all!

**Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC, February 17, 2013**

¹³ Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book Of Stories, Illustrations, & Quotes* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2000), 119-120.

Insights For The Church

1. God is looking for, expects, and will have a responsive people. The question is, Will it be us?
2. God is continually probing his people to test their responsiveness, e.g. John the Baptist.
3. Honesty, humility, and repentance are the door to fresh revelation and new life.
4. Those with leadership and authority over the reigning structures (e.g. bishops, superintendents, professors, pastors, full-time laity, bureaucrats) are often the most threatened by Jesus and his agenda. For them the key issues are institutional loyalty and control, not serving and enabling creative response to God. There will always, on the other hand, be *a people* who are responsive to Jesus because he is true and loving and powerful.
5. Jesus sends clear warnings in story-form to those who will listen. Judgment is never a surprise.
6. At some point, when leaders are fixed in their resistance, the process of judgment begins in earnest.
7. The alternative to following Jesus is not neutrality; it is hostility towards him which eventually leads to disaster, in this case for Israel as a nation in the 70AD destruction of Jerusalem.
8. How is it that leaders serve and lead, yet recognize the Vineyard belongs to someone else? How do we make room for Jesus to function at the head of the table of his church?
9. That Jesus has ultimate authority from God is shown in the vindication of his resurrection!

MUTUAL BLESSING, COMMON PRAYER

Based on Luke 20:1-20

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**You will not be trapped, O Lord, in our religious boxes.
Even our truest doctrines do not capture or control your mystery.
You are ever free to disrupt our comfortable compromises
and set your severe and wonderful mercies in our midst.
How desperately we need to worship you, to dwell in you,
to let your teaching change the way we think and live.
We want to be more than the big, old church on the corner.
Move us past our love affair with predictability and respectability
and into the holy passion
that lives eternally between you, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
We declare that the church belong to you, O God, and not to any of us.
Come and reign over us today in the power and light of your Spirit.
Amen.** (All listen for the voice of the Lord.)
