

Jesus had entered Jerusalem on Sunday with robes and branches laid before Him and shouts of praise for “the King who comes in the name of the Lord” (Lk. 19:28 ff.). He then left the city and returned the following day (Monday) when He cleansed the temple (Lk. 19:45-48). The events in 20:1-21:36 occur on Tuesday. In the controversies that follow, we see that Jesus is in control of the events surrounding His final visit to Jerusalem.

20:1 On one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders confronted Him,

20:2 and they spoke, saying to Him, "Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?"

20:3 Jesus answered and said to them, "I will also ask you a question, and you tell Me:

20:4 "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?"

20:5 They reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why did you not believe him?'

20:6 "But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet."

20:7 So they answered that they did not know where it came from.

20:8 And Jesus said to them, "Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Luke 20:1-8 centers on Jesus' authority. Authority is the power or right to act, make decisions, and enforce obedience. Jesus was His own authority. He perfectly submitted to the Father but never asked people for permission to do anything. He spoke prophetically. He spoke truly. He went after the heart of the Jew's entire religious system. He attacked their doctrine, their prayer, their fasting, and their righteousness. He often quoted the OT, but He never quoted a rabbi. He healed on the Sabbath. He forgave sin. He cleared the buyers and sellers out of the temple, but never asked permission from the Sanhedrin or any religious council to do so. He didn't answer to anyone.

While Jesus was in the temple teaching the gospel and healing people, He was approached by three groups of people: the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. These were the religious leadership in Israel and represented the groups that constituted the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the body that would eventually determine Jesus' fate (Lk. 22:66ff.).

The leadership did not believe that Jesus had the right to say or do the things that He was doing, so they asked Him to tell them the source of His authority. Their question has two parts; it asks what authority does Jesus have, and who gave Him that authority.

Jesus replied to their question with a question of His own, “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?” Jesus' question had only two possible answers; either the baptism of John was from heaven, or it was not.

The leadership understood the dilemma they were in. If they said that John was from God, they would be asked why they didn't follow him. Furthermore, their question regarding Jesus' authority would be answered, for John had testified who Jesus was. If they said that John was *not* from God, they would immediately lose the support of the populace who believed that he was a prophet. This of course would

reveal their unbelief, so they deliberated and decided to say that they didn't know if the baptism of John was from heaven or not. Their answer reveals their hypocrisy. In essence, it was the political “no comment.” “Ironically, they will soon sit in judgment against Jesus when the circumstances are more to their liking. As seemingly uncertain as they were about John, they will be quite dogmatic about Jesus. The evasion is a ruse, and Luke wishes to expose their hypocrisy” (Bock, 1588).

For people entrusted with the spiritual care and guidance of the nation, their answer was less than satisfactory. It was an indictment against their integrity. “The need for Jesus to answer was lifted when the question about John went unanswered. He will raise the issue from Psalm 110:1 in Luke 20:41–44 and will answer it in 22:69, setting the stage for condemning himself to death” (Bock, 1589).

20:9 And 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.

The wording of verse 9 suggests that there was a break between 20:1-8 and 20:9-19.

From an agrarian perspective, Israel is divided into two kinds of land - hillsides and flat land. Flat land is used to plant the grain. Hillsides are terraced and used to plant vineyards. Vineyards were everywhere and vineyard imagery has a rich background in the Old Testament (Ps. 80:8 -13; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2; Jer. 2:21; Ezek.19:10–14; Hos. 10:1).

In Matthew and Mark more details are given regarding the owner's activities; there it says that he plants a vineyard, sets a hedge around it, digs a place for a wine press, builds a tower, lets it out to the tenants, and goes to another country (Bock, 1597).

In those days many estates were leased by landlords who weren't present, and at times the tenants attempted to gain ownership of the land during the owners' absence. The scenario in the parable is therefore not far-fetched.

20:10 "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.

20:11 "And he proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed.

20:12 "And he proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out.

In verse 10 Jesus states that it was the harvest season; it was the appropriate time for the owner to come and get his share of the crop as payment for allowing the tenants to use the land. So the landowner sent his servant to receive payment.

When the servant arrived he was beaten and sent back to the owner empty-handed. Therefore, the owner sent another servant who fared no better. In fact, the level of hostility increased; “they beat him also *and* treated him shamefully.” A third servant received the same.

Those hearing the story would likely think that the tenants' behavior was outrageous, shameful, and punishable.

20:13 "The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.'

20:14 "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.'

20:15 "So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them?"

20:16 "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!"

With great patience and kindness, yet with some uncertainty, the owner decided to send his *beloved* son. He was thinking that he needed to send someone with sufficient authority to be heard by the tenants.

The son is treated with more contempt than them all. The tenants may have thought the owner had died and the son was the new heir. They concluded that if they killed the son they could claim that the land was theirs. In other words, the renters premeditated the son's murder so they could possess the vineyard that wasn't theirs. They then followed through with their plans, "threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."

The Parable Explained

The parable is allegorical in that it has many features that correspond to Israel's history. It starts from the nation's inception and spans to the time of Christ. The owner of the vineyard is God; however, the uncertainty of the owner and his lack of knowledge of what would happen to his son shows that the parable is not intended to be an exact explanation of reality; God is never uncertain about what to do, nor was He ignorant about what would happen to the Son.

The servants depict the numerous prophets that had been sent to the nation by God (1 Ki. 18:13; 22:24–27; 2 Ki. 6:31; 21:16; 2 Chron. 24:19–22; 36:15–16; Neh. 9:26; Jer. 37:15; 44:4 etc.). The owner's Son is Jesus. Although in many OT passages Israel is pictured as a vineyard, in this parable the vineyard is the place of promise or blessing, and the tenants are the people of Israel, especially the leadership.

The parable highlights the fact that Israel's history is marred by their continual rejection of God's prophets and ultimately the murder of the Son.

One writer says, "The uniform hostility of kings, priests, and people to the prophets is one of the most remarkable features in the history of the Jews. The amount of hostility varied, and it expressed itself in different ways on the whole, increasing in intensity, but it was always there. As deeply as the Jews lamented the cessation of prophets after the death of Malachi, they generally opposed them as long as they were granted to them. Until the gift was withdrawn, they seemed to have little pride in this exceptional grace shown to the nation and little appreciation of it or thankfulness for it."

Israel's rejection of the prophets can be found everywhere in the Bible. For example, before Christ, in Jeremiah 7:25-26, God said, "From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their forefathers." (cf. Jer. 25:4, 7). In Matthew 23:29-37, Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. . . . "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!" After Jesus had risen, Stephen, in Acts 7:51-52 said, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him"

In this parable the length of the master's absence reminds the reader of Israel's long history, but it also exhibits God's patience and grace. The owner had every right to severely judge the tenants who beat his servant, but instead he sent more servants and eventually his son to give them opportunity to repent and pay what was expected.

Lastly, the parable predicted what was about to happen. God had done everything to reach out to Israel but they did not respond; in the end they would even reject the Son of God. Therefore, it was inevitable that judgement would come and the vineyard given to new tenants. This portrays the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's kingdom purposes and blessings.

The story ends with a rhetorical question: "What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them?"

The answer was obvious; the landowner would come and destroy the vine-growers and give the vineyard to others. Matthew 21:41 records the same account and gives the initial response of the crowd: "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." But then it dawned on them what the parable was saying. They had just condemned their own religion and their own nation! They could not bear to hear of it so they cried out, "May it never be!" (Lk. 20:16).

As Edwards says, "Although the conclusion was unavoidable, it was unacceptable. That Israel's inheritance not only be extended to Gentiles, but withdrawn from Israel, is abhorrent to Jesus' audience. Those who have been granted God's favor often think that no offense on their part could cause God to withdraw it" (Edwards, 570).

20:17 But Jesus looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone'?

20:18 "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."

Jesus responded with a number of OT texts proving that what He had said in the parable must come to pass. Psalm 118:22 states that the stone that becomes the cornerstone was rejected. Of course, the stone is Jesus. In the terms of the parable this means that the tenants *must* reject the Son for the Scriptures to be fulfilled. As a result they would be judged, and the vineyard given to others. That which humanly speaking could not happen, did! The Jews stumbled over Christ, the Rock, who is the foundation of true faith and life.

Psalm 118 has already appeared in Luke 13:35 (Ps. 118:26). It is a psalm of joy that includes both the prediction of the reign of the Messiah (Ps. 118:25-26 cf. Matt. 21:9; Jn. 12:13) and His rejection (Ps. 118:22). It was well known by the people of Israel, and was sung by the Levites at Passover during the sacrifice of the lambs and at the Passover meal to celebrate the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage (Carson, 1027). It also looked forward to the future hope of God delivering Israel through the Anointed One (Beal / Carson, Commentary of NT Use of the OT, 338). This Psalm was being sung the week that the Lamb of God was crucified (Jn. 12:1; 13:1; 18:28). But the parallelism goes even deeper. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt pointed to the greater reality of deliverance from the bondage to sin. It was through the rejection of Jesus (the stone) that the true meaning of the exodus and Passover were realized.

In verse 18 Jesus links the rejected stone of Psalm 118 with Isaiah 8 and alludes to Daniel 2: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls (Isa. 8:14-15), it will scatter him like dust (Daniel 2:34, 44-45)." People cannot withstand the impact of a stone; whoever the stone falls upon will be crushed.

If the stone was not rejected, how could Psalm 118 be fulfilled? The Jews' blindness to this psalm is hard to understand. We know a messianic interpretation of the "foundation stone" in Isaiah existed before the writing of the NT; nevertheless, the scribes and priests could not see that the stone of Isaiah was the same stone that was rejected in Psalm 118.

Jesus then concluded that the kingdom of God shall be taken from the Jews and given to a nation yielding its fruits (Matt. 21:43).

"We too readily overlook how fundamentally divisive Jesus Christ is, even though the point is repeatedly made not only in the NT but in the OT prophecies concerning Him" (Carson, Commentary of the NT use of the OT, 1026). In encountering Christ, people are changed. Some respond positively; others do not. Those who reject the Stone do not find salvation, but will instead find that the stone they rejected will crush them. Those who accept Him are not disappointed. The Lord provided a foundation stone (Jesus) for the nation of Israel and placed it in Zion (Jerusalem), but Israel completely missed it. The same stone exists today and all who reject it, whether Jew or Gentile, do so at their own peril.

The passage has a somber mood. The nation's opportunity is slipping through its fingers.

20:19 The 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.

Jesus' confrontation of the leadership rose to a new level. He was on the offensive. In the parable of the wicked tenants He compared the leader's treatment of Him to those who had killed the prophets. He announced that they would be judged by God. Although they would kill Him they could not stop God's plan, for the stone that was rejected would become the very corner stone.

The leaders reacted hostilely and their resolve to kill Jesus intensified. However, they couldn't act because they feared the crowd. If the crowd rioted, no one could predict what would happen. If Rome had to intervene, the privileged might lose their status (Morris, 313).

20:20 So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some statement, so that they could deliver Him to the rule and the authority of the governor.

Jesus' opposition to the leadership forced them to move into the background. The crowds made it hard for them to dispose of Jesus so they came up with a scheme that would allow Rome to do their dirty work for them. Rome was hypersensitive about insurrection. They prided themselves in the pax Romana (the peace of Rome) and in quelling rebellions. If Jesus could be caught in a political trap where He openly opposed Rome, Rome could act and the leaders would avoid the crowd's displeasure. They didn't need to have Jesus dead, all they needed to do was have Rome arrest Him and His influence would be gone. In order to catch Him speaking against Rome they had to be there at the right moment, so they constantly watched Him and sent spies pretending to be honest seekers of truth to trap Jesus and deliver Him to the governor.

The hypocrisy is blatant. The Jews hated Rome and being taxed by Rome. Under any other circumstance they would have agreed with anyone who rejected the notion of paying taxes to a foreign power. But this time they were hoping Jesus would oppose Rome so that they could turn Him in and see Him punished. Jesus had become their enemy to the point that they were willing to be bedfellows with the idolatrous Roman Empire to get rid of Him.

20:21 They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, we know that You speak and teach correctly, and You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth.

20:22 "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

20:23 But He detected their trickery and said to them,

20:24 "Show Me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's."

20:25 And He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

The “spies” started the conversation with flattery in an effort to appear sincere and cause Jesus to let His guard down. They wanted Jesus to elevate Himself in His own mind so that He would try to act in a way that was consistent with what they had said. All they said about Jesus was true, but they didn’t believe it themselves. “The problem with hypocrisy is not that it does not tell the truth, but that it tells the truth without sincerity” (Edwards, 572).

They were pretending to be righteous by asking a question related to obedience to the law of God. "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" To read between the lines, they were asking, “Is it lawful for us who desire to live righteously to pay taxes to a pagan government that promotes the worship of false gods, deifies the emperor, and blasphemes the name of our God? Should we support this evil government?” The trap has been set. If Jesus said that they should pay taxes to Caesar, He would lose the popular support of the people who looked at Him as the Messiah, the one who would come and overpower Rome. If He said that the Jews shouldn’t pay tax to Rome, then He would be opposing Roman authority and they could deliver Him over to the Roman governor for speaking against the will of Rome.

But Jesus detected their deceitfulness (v. 23) and asked them to show Him a denarius (v. 24). A denarius was a Roman coin that was worth an average day’s wage. The Jews refused to put any images on their coins because they viewed it as idolatrous (in contravention of the second commandment, Exo. 20:4). Pious Jews refused to carry any Roman coins at all. The denarius not only had the bust of Tiberius Caesar on it, it also had the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the divine Augustus, Augustus” written on it in an abbreviated form; this was a violation of the first commandment (Exo. 20:3). By producing the coin, Jesus’ questioners proved that they were willing to accommodate the paganism around them and compromise their “high moral standards” to the degree that they had no qualms about carrying coins that many Jews believed violated the first and second commandments. “The question’s edge is lost in their daily practice; they live in the state and freely use its currency (Bock, 1612)”. “If they were using the emperor’s (idolatrous) coinage, they could hardly object to paying his tax (France, The Gospel of Matthew, NICNT, 830)”.

Jesus asked them, “Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They said, “Caesar's.” He then replied, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

Jesus’ answer was brilliant and was totally unexpected. He showed no disloyalty to the governing authorities, nor did He demonstrate disloyalty to God. He clearly delineated between the things of God and the things of the world. He recognized that the people of God lived in the world and that loyalty to God did not necessitate the rejection of government. Paul said, “There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves” (Rom. 13:1-2). Peter also said, “Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:13-17).

Jesus does not address what to do if the will of God and the will of the government collide, but one thing is clear; Jesus' kingdom does not necessitate insubordination to human government.

20:26 And they were unable to catch Him in a saying in the presence of the people; and being amazed at His answer, they became silent.

The leaders' trap had failed. Jesus left His detractors amazed. They had nothing more to say.