

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast : 7/8 November 2020

No.: T1171

Speaker: Ken Wood

Luke's Gospel - Chapter 20: 9-26

The Vineyard Parable and the Question of Tax

[Please note : The English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction and background

Today we continue our journey through the Gospel by Luke. We are going to look at two separate but connected sections of chapter 20, in verses 9 to 26. These are the parable the Lord told about the vineyard and its tenants, and the incident that followed on from it, the sting operation set up by the scribes and the chief priests which backfired on them so spectacularly, when they tried to trap the Lord with a question about paying tax to Caesar.

What a privilege it must have been to be one of those four divinely inspired Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, charged with the responsibility of writing down an account of the words and deeds of this totally unique Man!

Here, walking through this world for some thirty odd years, was Israel's true but unacknowledged King, the true son of David, as particularly seen in Matthew's account. Here too was the Servant of Jehovah that the prophet Isaiah had looked forward to, as particularly shown by Mark. Here - and this we have to say, as it were, with bated breath, with awe and wonder - here was the eternal Son, God over all blessed for ever, the One without whom nothing was created, as John particularly emphasises. And in the verses we are looking at today, in Luke's so very human account, is the Man – **the** Man, the Man who stands unique and supreme, the Man above all men.

For that brief period in the history of this planet there was a Man here who did only the will of God. How many thousands of lives did He transform in those short years of His itinerant ministry? How many enslaved souls were released from demonic oppression, how many suffering ones felt the touch of His healing power freeing them from crippling diseases, how many sinners were forgiven, how many sad and mourning hearts made to rejoice!

And yet, in the verses we are looking at today, storm clouds are gathering around Him. We are swiftly moving towards the closing scenes of that brief period of sunshine in this world's sad history. Over the next few days, the religious world, the political world and finally the voice of the people are all going to combine to jointly authorise the greatest crime in history. The world is shortly going to deliver its final verdict on Him who was, if it had but known, its only hope.

The vineyard

Let's now look at the first of the two sections of today's passage, the parable of the vineyard. Let's read verses 9 to 18 of Luke 20:

“And he began to tell the people this parable: ‘A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. 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."

What a simply shocking tale of brazen villainy this is! How could those tenants have imagined they would get away with it, we may think? But of course what matters is not so much the ins and outs of the story itself, but its real or hidden meaning. The Lord Jesus constantly spoke in parables. The idea of a parable is that it is a story about everyday events, readily understood by the audience, but designed to have a symbolic meaning which conveys profound truths.

In most cases, in the Gospels, the Lord's hearers did not seem to readily grasp the hidden meaning. What is remarkable about this parable is how instantly the enemies of the Lord **did** grasp its meaning – and very clearly did **not** like what they heard.

We'll come back later to consider the jaw dropping blindness that their reaction, seen in their indignant cry of "Surely not!", betrays. But first, we'll look at why it was so obvious, to a Jewish audience listening to this parable in first century Israel, that the vineyard in the parable was symbolic of their nation.

The vineyard as a picture of Israel

In the book of Isaiah, chapter 5, is a much earlier parable about a vineyard, another vineyard which disappointed its owner in that he did not receive the expected return on all the time and money he had invested in buying it, stocking it and cultivating it. The reasons in the two cases are different, but in Isaiah 5 verse 7 there occurs a very plain statement:

"The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel."

The readiness with which the hearers of the Lord's parable on this day got the point, and saw that He was speaking about "the vineyard of the LORD of hosts", His favoured earthly people, the Jewish nation, indicates that the symbolism of Isaiah chapter 5 was very well known indeed.

Details of the parable

The owner of the vineyard, then, is clearly a picture of God Himself, and the tenants His people Israel, or, perhaps more accurately, their leaders. The three servants, each sent in turn, with the authority of their master, to face the tender mercies of the rebellious tenants, are representative of that long line of Old Testament servants of God, in particular perhaps the prophets such as Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha and Jeremiah.

The letter to the Hebrews chapter 11 verses 36 to 38 summarises the kind of treatment which was meted out to these faithful ones through the centuries of Israel's history:

“Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

The amazing grace of God

It seems to me that there is a hint in the details of how each servant was treated that the inexcusable behaviour of the tenants was actually ramping up (or down) from bad to worse as time went on. One wonders how each of those servants must have felt when he learned that it was his turn next to undertake the perilous journey to his master's vineyard. I think if this were today, the Foreign Office would be strongly advising travellers to steer clear of that vineyard! But the treatment of the servants pales into insignificance in comparison with what happened next.

I always marvel at the attitude of the master here when he decides to send his beloved son. It is the “perhaps they will respect him” that gets to me. We might suppose that the master was failing to learn the lessons of history, of how every servant had been mistreated. But that's not what it is. This act of the master, the father, and of course the ready obedience of the son, are in fact a striking portrayal of the heart of God towards rebellious man.

First Corinthians chapter 13, that famous eulogy on love, is rightly applied in order to challenge ourselves as to how far our love for others measures up to God's standard of love, as described so beautifully there. But of course it is also a description of how God loves, and the father here is a picture of God.

In verse 7 of that chapter we read that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Here we see in the owner of the vineyard that same delightful attitude – call it naivety if you will – innocence, perhaps, in which he refuses to think the worst of the tenants, preferring to believe that they would not go so far as to harm his beloved son. I think this is a wonderful portrayal of what God is really like.

The rest, as they say, is history. We know what happened to the son in the story, and we know what happened to the Son of God. Notice, too, that in this parable the Lord seems very pointedly to be speaking of Himself, and predicting His own final rejection and crucifixion. It is He of course who is the son, the one who was sent last of all, and at whose expense the tenants' rebellion was to come to its terrible climax.

Judgement, of course, must finally come upon the tenants. The landlord will indeed come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others (verse 16). This indeed happened historically in AD 70, when the Roman legions devastated Jerusalem, razing it to the ground, and finally dispersing the Jewish nation.

The reaction

As I commented earlier, those listening to this story do indeed make the connection. They understand exactly what He is saying. And their angry response is “Surely not!” (verse 16).

Is it not astounding that they should oppose so violently what was very plainly the execution of justice? What did they expect the landlord to do? Starting with the initial offence against his property (refusing him the returns which were rightfully his) they had gone on to greatly aggravate

the seriousness of their crimes by persistent and mounting violence against his servants, finally stooping to the utterly unthinkable, the murder of his dear son.

Yet they cannot see it. Applying it all, rightly, to themselves, they seem to see the tenants as the ones offended against. This is a degree of blindness that beggars belief.

The stone

Of course their reaction didn't take the Lord by surprise. He knew all that was in their hearts. Here, as so often, He does what we should do when the enemy engages us in battle. He draws the sword of the Spirit¹ and quotes scripture.

The Lord Jesus refers here to two scriptures about a stone, one from Psalm 118 and the other from Isaiah chapter 8. Now Psalm 118 was the final Psalm in a sequence of Psalms, known collectively as "Hallel", meaning "Praise", and traditionally recited on special religious occasions. One of those occasions was the Passover, which was imminent. The words of this Psalm would be very well known to the Lord's hearers on this day. They would all be singing them in the next few days.

"Look", He is saying to them, "You're used to singing that the stone that was rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone. Don't you understand what you're singing about?" Prophetic scriptures like this one were shouting out a warning to them. They were on the point of rejecting the very one whom God had sent, the one who fulfils all of His promises. Yet the one they reject and cast out is ultimately going to have the central place in God's universe.

What the Lord goes on to say about people falling on a stone is an allusion to Isaiah chapter 8, where the prophet warns that many of the people are going to stumble, or be tripped up, by the stone, which is actually the Lord Himself.

The Lord, their mighty Redeemer, had called their father Abraham at the beginning. He had brought the nation out of Egypt with His outstretched arm and delivered them from their enemies countless times. Yet they were going to take offence at Him. They were going to reject Him totally by crucifying His one and only Son, and judgment would indeed finally come upon them for it (the stone would crush those it fell upon).

The Sting that backfired

Let's now read the second part of the passage, starting at verse 19 which refers back to the parable and provides the link to what follows, and ending with verse 26.

"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. So they asked him, 'Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?' But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?' They said 'Caesar's'. He said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marvelling at his answer they became silent."

The strategy employed here by the scribes (the experts in the Law) and the chief priests was masterful in its concept. Those who flocked to hear the Lord as He journeyed from place to place were the common people. As the leaders saw it, that was His support base. And to the common people, the Romans were an occupying power, feared and hated. To connive with them was treachery.

In particular those who so far lowered themselves as to work for the Romans as tax collectors, were considered the scum of society. You have only to read through the gospels to see how despised they were. This was in part because they were notorious for feathering their own nests by exacting more than they were supposed to and pocketing the difference. But just to work for the Roman authorities was enough in itself to brand you as a traitor to your country.

The plan therefore was to send along several agents (so that they could corroborate each other's accounts) and get them to ask Him a simple question. Should we or shouldn't we pay taxes to Caesar? How can He possibly say we **should** pay, they reasoned, without throwing away at a stroke all the support He has from the common people? He will have to say we should refuse to pay. But here's the clever bit – if we can get witnesses who will testify that they have heard Him say we shouldn't pay taxes, then we've got Him! We can go straight to the Roman authorities and report Him for stirring up civil disobedience, and He'll be arrested and dealt with by the power of Rome.

The plan seems fool proof, and the agents approach the Lord with supreme confidence. They open the interview with flattery, addressing Him as the one who speaks and teaches rightly, one who truly teaches the way of God.

It is a fine speech, intended as a softening up for the question that is to follow, but of course they don't mean it for one moment. It's always dangerous to say things you don't mean. How much more so when you're speaking to the Son of God! Little do they suspect that they are about to be spectacularly outmanoeuvred. They are about to be hit between the eyes with an utterly devastating response which leaves their carefully crafted plan in shreds and leaves them with no option but to fall silent, "marvelling" at His answer (verse 26).

So, what is His response? He asks them to show Him a denarius, the standard silver coin used throughout most of the Roman Empire's history, the coin which was used for paying the taxes in question. Even at this point, they have no inkling of the bombshell that is coming. But the ground collapses from under their feet the moment they hear that totally unexpected question "Whose likeness and superscription does it have?"

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke doesn't give us any details about the composition of this group of undercover agents. We learn from the other gospel writers that they were a combination of Pharisees and Herodians. Experts differ as to who exactly the Herodians were, but we do know quite a lot about the Pharisees.

Paul, who had been a Pharisee himself before his conversion, in relating his own history later on in the Book of Acts, calls them "the strictest sect of our religion"². To these Pharisees, schooled as they were in sticking rigidly to every letter of the Mosaic Law, the devastating significance of that word "likeness" or "image" would be immediately apparent. Instantly, their minds would go to such scriptures as Deuteronomy 27:15, which reads,

"Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD."

To make matters worse, not only did the coin bear an image, but it also carried an inscription proclaiming Caesar to be God, something unutterably blasphemous in the eyes of these ultra-

religious Jews. You can almost see them avoiding His gaze and shifting from foot to foot as they sheepishly answer the question. “They’re Caesar’s” they reply.

“Well then,” in effect, replies the One who **does** indeed truly teach the way of God, “What are you doing carrying around this abomination to the LORD? Surely no Godfearing Jew would want to be found in possession of something so offensive to God! As you rightly say, these things are Caesar’s. You’d better give them straight back to him, hadn’t you?”

Game, Set and Match

It is game, set and match. Utterly defeated, the agents have no comeback. They silently withdraw to report back to their masters.

Were the Jews actually obliged to use the Roman coinage? Probably they had no choice about that, and in a sense all the Lord had said was that they should pay their taxes, the same instruction as is given to us as Christians today. We are to respect and submit to the authorities and be law abiding citizens³ (the only exception being when the authorities forbid us to fulfil our responsibilities to God, such as to preach the gospel⁴).

But He had also said, “and render to God the things that are God’s.” The fact that the obnoxiousness of the coinage had not even entered their thinking shows how far they were from understanding that. If their hearts had been in any way right towards God, they would have recognised and submitted to the Roman occupation as evidence of God’s hand upon them in discipline, and been only too ready to offload the blasphemous tribute money back onto their Roman masters.

Neither of course would they have persisted in their determination, by fair means or foul, to persecute to the death their long promised Messiah, the cornerstone, or “head of the corner” whom they, the builders, were about to finally cast aside.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on the Vineyard Parable and the Question of Tax in Luke chapter 20, in our series on Luke’s Gospel, talk number T1171.

¹Ephesians 6 : 17 ²Acts 26 : 5 (NIV) ³Romans 13 : 1 – 7 ⁴Acts 5 : 29

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.