

THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

Luke 20:1–19

Key Verse: 20:17

“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?”’”

Do you ever think about your life’s foundation? What even is that? Many people live in the moment, just go with the flow, and spend everything on the now, doing whatever feels good. But such a life can really get us into trouble, and end up making us look pretty foolish. In today’s passage Jesus is challenged by the religious leaders in Israel. In response, he gives his famous parable of the tenants. This passage shows us soberly what our life will look like if we’re not grounded on some foundational truths. Especially, Jesus is inviting us to respond to him, the cornerstone, so that our lives can have a rock solid foundation. May God speak to us through his word today.

First, the foundation of Jesus’ authority. Look at verses 1–2 (ESV). Though his life is in danger, Jesus is a diligent Bible teacher. He’s teaching the people and preaching the gospel with such passion and focus. But the religious leaders are upset. They don’t like it that he’s entered Jerusalem during Passover with this boisterous crowd of followers (19:37). Even more infuriating, he had the gall to cleanse the temple they are in charge of, and to rebuke them for turning it into a den of robbers (19:45–46). Now they really want to destroy him (19:47), but he’s too popular with the people. So they come up to him to question his authority. They especially want to discredit his authority to teach. To them, he doesn’t have any. They’re confident he’ll fail to answer their question. What does he say? Look at verses 3–4. He turns the tables on them and puts his finger on the real problem. It’s not that he doesn’t have authority, but that they can’t see it. Why are they so blind? God sent John to help them repent, but they were too proud to listen (7:29–30). Now, as Jesus calls them to repent, they again refuse.

Though the religious establishment despised them, John the Baptist and Jesus both had God’s authority. All the ordinary people could see it. Luke tells us that before they were born, both John and Jesus were called “great” (1:15,32). They both had God’s authority because God himself sent them.¹ And they both obeyed God’s will for them, at the cost of their lives. Jesus had God’s authority when he was filled with the Holy Spirit.² Through the Spirit, his words had God’s authority in them (4:32,36). He had God’s authority because he sought God’s glory, not his own (John 7:17–18). He used his authority on earth to forgive sins and to heal those who were powerless (Luke 5:24). He called his disciples and gave them authority over all demons and to cure diseases (9:1). And he gave the 72 authority over all the power of the enemy (10:19). Ultimately, after his death and resurrection, Jesus was given all authority in heaven and on earth, and he sent his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt.28:18–19). So, his authority is meant to be

¹ 1:13–17,30–33; 3:2–6; 4:18,43.

² 3:22; 4:1.

passed on. Who gets his authority today? It's not the knowledgeable, those authorized by people, who hold a position or have the most charisma. Spiritual authority comes from God. Anyone who spends time with Jesus and learns to live in obedience to him gains the authority to do what he did. We base our life and ministry on his authority, not some human form of it.

How do the religious leaders respond to his question? Look at verses 5–7. They know everything. They know what the people think. They know what Jesus will say. They know that when they encounter someone with spiritual authority, they should believe. But they refuse to believe John or Jesus. Outwardly, they're religious leaders. Inwardly, they're calculative, afraid of people, and worst of all, ignoring God. Mainly, they don't want to be shamed or lose the chance to regain the people's respect. So instead of taking a stand and speaking for truth, they give a safe answer. It exposes their lack of spiritual authority. Jesus has no more to say to them (8).

Second, the foundation of creation faith. According to verse 1, the people are all still there, listening. After the religious leaders are silenced, Jesus continues to teach the people, using a parable (9a). His parable of the tenants is a veiled answer to this question about his authority. He wants the people to see this question in the larger context of God's history. His parable is a brilliant summary of the whole Old Testament.³ Look at verses 9–10. The man who planted the vineyard represents God; the vineyard is Israel, as well as the whole world; and the tenants are the people of Israel, and in a broader sense, all human beings. It reveals God's ultimate purpose in creating us. God wants us to be close to him, to grow in his character and in stewardship of his world. We need to live based on this foundational life truth. And just as the owner of the vineyard sends servants to collect his fruit, one day "each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Rom.14:12). It's another foundational creation truth. The servants represent the prophets (13:34), whom God sent mainly to call his people to repent. For Luke, the fruit refers to deeds done in repentance (3:8a; Acts 26:20). It also refers to the fruit of righteousness: a right relationship with God, and growth in godly character.⁴ When we accept God as my Owner, my life as his gift, and my life's mission as bearing spiritual fruit for him, we start building on a rock solid life foundation.

Third, the foundation of the love of God. When the owner's servants show up, how do the tenants respond? Look at verses 10–12. It's shocking. How could these tenants end up behaving so badly? Over time, they fell into the delusion that they were the owners of the vineyard. They wanted to hoard it all to themselves. To them, the owner and his servants were a joke. As tenants, they're supposed to be good stewards. But they became insolent toward the owner, violent, and reckless, thinking they'd get away with such vicious abuse. They may seem like an extreme case. But these tenants are not so bizarre; they represent the sinful nature innately in all of us. In this nature we ignore God, put self at the center, and frankly become like a spoiled brat. We may not think so, but if we leave God out, we eventually grow "foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom.1:31). The sinful nature is real, with more power over us than we know. It's why we need Jesus.

³ See also Ps.80:8–13; Isa.5:1–7; 27:2; Jer.2:21; Ezek.19:10–14; Hos.10:1.

⁴ Phil.1:11; Gal.5:22–23.

Something even more shocking happens. Read verse 13. “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’” Wait. What’s wrong with this owner? Doesn’t he get it, that these people are too dangerous? Is he too weak to deal with them? Verses 16 and 18 show that the owner is capable of a swift response. But Jesus’ point is more than the owner getting fruit from his vineyard or meting out justice. More than anything, the owner wants to restore a relationship with his tenants. His question, “What shall I do?” is less the sigh of a frustrated landowner and more like the cry of a father, brokenhearted for his wayward children. Despite their wickedness, he still loves and respects them. They still matter to him. He still hopes they’ll realize his love and respect and love him back. It’s hard to understand. But the owner sending his beloved son to such wicked tenants depicts God sending his only Son to this sinful world that does not love him (1 John 4:9–10). God sent him out of “the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience,” to lead us to repentance (Rom.2:4).

Jesus’ coming to Jerusalem is not about his authority to gain control and force rebellious people to submit. It’s not about a power struggle with religious leaders. It’s the expression of God’s love for sinners rejecting and rebelling against him, even now. God, who gave us freedom to choose to love and obey him, is offering us the chance to respond to his love for us in Jesus. We need to build our lives not on the flimsy foundation of us trying to follow many rules, but on this unshakeable foundation of God’s love for us.

Fourth, the foundation of God’s sovereignty. In the parable, what happens next? Look at verses 14–15a. The tenants’ motives for such a plot seem to be jealousy of the son, and sheer greed. Jesus knows the religious leaders will do this to him soon. Yet his parable turns our eyes to the rule of the Sovereign God, and to how foolish our rebellion against him is. Look at verses 15b–16. This is the third time in Luke’s Gospel that Jesus predicts God will turn from the Jews to the Gentiles.⁵ The people respond, “Surely not!” because nobody wants to hear that God will dump them and turn to others. But this is how our Sovereign God works. When we persistently have no interest in Jesus, in listening to his words, God eventually moves on to those who will listen.⁶

And despite human rebellion, the Sovereign God accomplishes his own will. Read verse 17. “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”?’” Jesus is the stone the builders rejected. He was the best stone they could have to build their lives on. But in their blindness and pride they rejected him. It looked like a great failure. But by “the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23), this rejected stone already “has become” the cornerstone of the building. It means it’s a foregone conclusion. God’s sovereign plan was not diminished in the least by his people’s rejection. It’s telling us that it’s best to make God’s sovereign will our life’s foundation.

Fifth, the foundation of the gospel. This verse, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” summarizes the gospel. It points to the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. “Rejected by the builders” means his people crucified him. But his becoming the

⁵ 13:28–29; 14:23–24.

⁶ Acts 13:46; 18:6; 28:28.

“cornerstone” means God raised him from the dead and exalted him as the Head of his Church (e.g. Eph.1:22; 5:23). To human eyes, Jesus’ death, then his resurrection, is hard to understand. But these two events truly are the good news of God. After his resurrection, the Risen Jesus says to two of his despaired disciples, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (24:25–26). Soon after, he tells the others, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations...” (24:46–47). Later, Peter will rebuke these religious leaders who killed Jesus: “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11–12). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus, the rejected stone, the cornerstone, became the only way of salvation. When we repent, we receive the forgiveness and salvation found only in him. The Bible calls it the “eternal gospel” (Rev.14:6). We preach and believe this gospel, because it’s still “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom.1:16).

The “cornerstone” means Jesus is our rock solid foundation, not just for eternal salvation later but for spiritual life right now. In one of his letters to the early Christians Peter describes Jesus as “a living stone” rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him, and he urges us to come to him and let him build us into a spiritual house (1 Pet.2:4–5). Apostle Paul writes, “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor.3:11). We need the eyes of faith to see Jesus as the cornerstone of my life, my family, and our church. Not my abilities, my sincerity, my efforts, or whatever group I belong to, but Jesus.

Whether we realize it or not, we’re all building our lives on something. For some, it’s just their immediate desires and feelings. For others, it’s their dreams or ambitions. Many build their lives on wisdom according to worldly standards (1 Cor.1:26) or on the futile ways inherited from their forefathers (1 Pet.1:18). Our Lord Jesus taught us that this is like building on no foundation at all. He said that to have our life’s foundation on the rock, which is himself, we need to come to him, hear his word and do it (6:46–49). As we do, we learn to stand by faith in his grace as the foundation of our lives (Rom.5:1–2). Grace may sound weak, vague, or not so secure for a life’s foundation. But only God’s grace to us in Jesus, our cornerstone, is the rock solid foundation for living.

Sixth, the foundation of faith in God’s victory. The key idea in today’s passage is this quote from Psalm 118:22.⁷ In Israel’s history, people sang this wonderful psalm whenever God delivered them from their enemies. This psalm can still give us the courage to face all kinds of enemies, because it has this promise of ultimate victory: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (22).⁸ Jesus is in Jerusalem for the last time, surrounded by enemies.⁹ He’s

⁷ The people had just used a verse from this psalm to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem (Luke 19:38; Ps.118:26).

⁸ It’s an important verse in the Bible, quoted in all three Synoptic Gospels and three more times in the New Testament (Matt.21:42; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Eph.2:20; 1 Pet.2:7).

⁹ 19:39,47; 20:1,19.

already predicted what they'll do to him.¹⁰ But despite their evil hearts and violent humiliation of him, he's depending on God, sure of his final victory.¹¹ Like him, we need to make faith in God's victory our life's foundation.

Today we learned how to have a rock solid spiritual life foundation. So, what's your life's foundation? This Easter season, may God bless us to receive the gospel personally and build our life on the solid rock of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ 9:22,44; 13:33; 17:25; 18:31–33.

¹¹ We all need to learn Jesus' faith to depend on the living God to fight for us (Ex.14:25; Neh.4:20).