**THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS**

April 3, 2016

Luke 20:9-19

Key Verse 20:17 “Jesus looked directly at them and asked, ‘Then what is the meaning of that which is written: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’?”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ demands a choice, one that reduces all other religions to mere philosophies. It proves that Jesus is the Son of God and our Lord. We have a choice to submit to his rule or to be rebellious. There is no middle ground. Paul was in Athens. The Athenians loved to discuss religion. They loved to hear about the religious experiences of people from all over the world. They wanted to learn something to incorporate into their own life to help them get along better. What if Paul shared religious experience only? Suppose he said, “I worship Jesus Christ. He was a Jewish teacher and miracle-worker. He taught a way of love and truth. His wisdom was unsurpassed. Even in his dying he never gave in to anger and revenge. His teachings linger on in his followers. His example can have a tremendous influence in your life if you meditate on what he did and said.” What would the response have been? Tolerance. Curious interest, perhaps. Nods and smiles of respect. Paul has his guru. The Athenians have their gurus. If it works for you, fine. You have your inner experience. I have mine. But that is not what Paul said. He said, “The God who made the world and everything in it . . . commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:24-31) That is not acceptable in a polite, respectful dialogue about religious experience. Discussions about the relative value of religious experience and declarations about someone’s resurrection from the dead are just not in the same category. That is why the Athenians mocked. That is why Christianity is offensively unique in a pluralistic age.

In today’s passage Jesus teaches us that he is the cornerstone of history. He will be rejected and be killed in a few days, but he will be raised from the dead and become the cornerstone of the new life. It is truly marvelous in our eyes. Everything including our lives have to be built upon the cornerstone Jesus. Any building not built on the cornerstone Jesus will collapse.

Look at verse 9. “He went on to tell the people this parable. A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.” The story was based on a common practice of landowners hiring out their land to tenant farmers. The owner of the land rented out his property to tenants who were to give him an agreed upon portion of his property’s yield. He often lived far way.

Verse 10 reveals the outcome of the owner’s request for his portion of the land’s production. “At the harvest time 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.” At harvest those who tended the vineyard would get a certain share of the crop and the owner would get another portion. The servant went to gather that portion. He went to speak the words of the owner. The return was fair and what they agreed on. But the property’s tenants revolted refusing to pay the owner’s share of the income then even mistreated his servant or messenger.

This pictures God and Israel’s covenant relationship. God blessed the nation of Israel abundantly and invested them with great productive potential. All he asked was that they obey his word and return to him a spiritual harvest out of their lives. Instead of being grateful for their blessing and joyfully returning to the Lord his due, they proceeded to rob God and reject his messengers. Our noble and enduring God continued to send servant after servant to them as verse 11 depicts. “He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent him away empty-handed.” Jesus likened the prophets to a series of servants sent to collect fruit from the vineyard. They were rejected, beaten and treated shamefully.

The amazingly long-suffering owner continues to send more servants as verse 12 indicates. “He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.” The first messenger was beaten. The second messenger was not only beaten but also treated shamefully. The third messenger was permanently wounded. What would be the vineyard’s owner’s response to these ungrateful tenants? In verse 13 the vineyard owner, who represents the Lord God, decides to send them His beloved son hoping the tenants would respect him. “The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.” We can see here God’s willingness to make himself totally vulnerable by sending his Son in order to win his people back to himself. Verse 14 reveals the plot to murder the landowner’s Son and take the vineyard by force. “But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said, ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’”

Now, there is the danger when we read a parable like this. It is to see what Jesus is saying in the original context, that is, that the Jewish leaders have rejected God’s rule over them, and are about to reject God’s Son as well; and to leave it there. We think what terrible people these hypocritical chief priests and religious leaders were, and we think that is all there is to learn from this parable. But that misses a very important point. Because what Jesus is describing here is the condition of every fallen human being. The vineyard is a picture not just of Israel, but of the whole world. All of us have been put on this earth as tenants in God’s vineyard. And what is our response? We don’t want to be tenants, paying rent. We want to be the owners. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden in the first place and given the task of tending it and what happened? They decided that it would be good to be like God, knowing the difference between good and evil. And human beings have been doing the same thing ever since. The people of Israel from the moment God liberated them from Egypt, kept on turning away from the true worship of God to idols, until, eventually, God expelled them from the promised land and sent them into exile. The Kings of Israel present a long line of failure after failure to do what was right, with the odd exception. And it’s continued right through to our own day.

A hundred years ago, humanist philosophers were predicting a golden age, where God would be irrelevant, when poverty, disease, war, would all be done away with. Human advances in science and medicine and sociology would solve all our problems for us. Well, 100 years later we look around our world and see incurable diseases still rife, wars happening with an increasing regularity, relationships breaking down at an alarming rate and we wonder how could things have got so bad? What’s gone wrong in God’s vineyard? The answer is clear: People are still wanting to run the vineyard themselves, rather than follow God’s direction. We want to be the owners not the tenants.

As you listen to this story, you notice two things. First, the insane insolence of the tenants. This is a rebellion that’s doomed to failure. Yet they seem to think they can get away with it. How can we feeble creatures think we can shake our fists at God and not suffer any consequences? How can we go on rejecting anything and anyone that God sends to remind us of the debt we owe him and think we can get away with it? That is an illusion. There is no way God will put up with that sort of thing! Here is the second interesting thing you discover. The amazing thing about this story is that the owner, that is God, tolerates their rebellion for so long. Here is the amazing thing about the Biblical story: God’s incomprehensible concern for us: The lengths to which God will go to keep us on track, to maintain contact with us, despite our stubbornness and blind ignorance. And of course the length to which God will go is to send his own Son on a rescue mission. You see the response of the owner to the repeated refusal to listen to his servants is to decide to send his own son in a last attempt to talk reason to them. But God is not mocked. He doesn’t ignore us. Divine patience is not the same as divine indifference. His patience is merely to give us more time to repent. But a time will come when time will have run out. When he will come to judge the world. The end of history will see God finally losing patience with those who continue to rebel against him. God will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

When the people heard this, they said, “God forbid!” Then Jesus looked straight at them, as if to make his point even stronger, and asked: “Then what is the meaning of that which is written: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” (17-18) ‘The stone that the builders rejected’ is a quote from Psalm 118, a psalm about the Messiah. It is a psalm that tells how the Messiah appears defeated, perhaps even dead, yet God lifts him up and makes him King. It is the most often quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament. It refers to the construction of the temple under Solomon’s reign when the massive stones were chiseled miles away from the building site in order that no sound be heard upon the temple mount. When the stones arrived, one stone didn’t fit and was thrown down the hill into the Kidron Valley. When it became evident that the cornerstone was missing, the stone that had been rejected turned out to be the one that fit perfectly. Jesus applies this to Himself. Jesus says, “You are trying to build your salvation apart from Me, but you are going to see that I am the Cornerstone. Without Me, nothing stands.”

Jesus is the stone which does not fit the preconceived notion of messiahship. His resurrection from the dead proves that He is the one upon whom all eternity is built. Though the leaders of the political world and the religious world may reject Jesus, God has made Him the centerpiece of His plan. Though people, even all people reject Him and refuse to build their life upon Him and His Word, there is no replacement of or for God’s precious and chosen cornerstone. The cornerstone or foundational stone was placed at the corner of the building. It born the weight of the walls that intersected at corner and gave direction to where those walls were built. It could be said that it shaped and supported the building.

Verse 18 states that those who will not fall upon this stone in the brokenness of repentance will have that stone fall upon them in judgment. “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” Jesus is pointing to himself as the issue on which people will stand or fall. He is the stone on which they will stumble. And the bit about the stone falling on those who oppose him reminds me of the end of the story of Samson when Samson pushed the pillars apart and the whole building fell down, killing all the Philistines inside. It is as though Jesus is saying, if you push me out of the structure, the structure will fall. If we don’t want Jesus at the centre, what will hold up the religion? Nothing! And the end result will be that we will be crushed in the collapse of whatever it is we have built up.

The basis on which God will judge the world will be the way people have responded to his Son. The basis on which God will judge me, and you, will be on our response to Jesus. Have you believed in him as God’s only Son? Have you called on him in repentance and faith to forgive your rebellion? It is as though Jesus turns now to look straight at each one of us, just as he did to those in the crowd that day and asks, “Will you believe in me? Will you put your trust in me? Will you pay me the honour and obedience that I am due?” Our eternal future depends on our response to that question. I pray that for every one of us the answer would be “Yes, Lord, I will!”

Rejecting God’s beloved Son by failing to cast your life upon Him has grave consequences. You see, those who aren’t broken before him will one day be broken by him. Every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10). The only question is when will your life be broken by God’s precious chosen stone? Will you cast your life upon him now to be broken before him in repentance and be saved? Or will you wait too long and be broken or crushed by him when he returns to judge the world?

The story of the wicked tenants is an analogy about Israel to whom God gave life and land that they might go and bear fruit. God wants spiritual fruits, fruits of righteousness and new life, the fruits of love, joy, and peace. God gave a proof this by raising Jesus from the dead and made him the cornerstone of the new life.