

Luke 20:1-26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 20 verses 1 to 26. One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.

He answered them, I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? And they discussed it with one another, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say, Why did you not believe him?

But if we say from man, all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet. So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

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 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.

[1 : 1 2] 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. 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.

[2 : 1 6] 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. Luke chapter 20 comes after Jesus has entered the city of Jerusalem like a king, and declared judgment upon the temple.

There are people gathering around him and behind him. He's the head of a movement. And we have the privilege of knowing how the story ends, and so we anticipate the direction it's taking. But imagine what it was like for people there at that time.

They're thinking that the kingdom's about to come imminently. They're asking Jesus about this. Jesus has to teach them concerning it. Teaching them things they do not yet understand. That like a nobleman, he will have to go away and receive a kingdom and then come back.

[3 : 27] Seeing the growing popularity of Jesus and the movement around him, the leaders of the people are threatened, and they immediately try and trap him. They do this by asking the source of his authority.

If his authority is from man, it can be dismissed. If he claims it is from God, they have other grounds by which they could move against him. And Jesus answers their question with a question.

Yet the answer to the question that Jesus asks is the answer to the question that the chief priests and the elders have asked him. John the Baptist was sent by God, and his prophetic ministry was one through which God authorized and bore witness to his son.

Jesus traps those seeking to trap him, as he does on several occasions. The parable of the tenants that follows is important to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard.

Jesus introduces the parable in a way that highlights the background of Isaiah chapter 5 and Psalm 80. Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7 read, Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

[4 : 27] My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes.

But it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?

When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds, that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

And he looked for justice. But behold, bloodshed. For righteousness. But behold, an outcry. Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit.

[5 : 31] Jesus' focus is upon the wickedness of those working within it. The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious. In his ministry, Jesus talks about the fields white to harvest, and the desire that labourers would go out and harvest it.

And yet the workers in God's field are not faithful. Likewise, there is a flock, and the shepherds are abusing the flock. The distinction between Israel and its leaders is important here.

It's part of the meaning of the parable. The master sends his servants, the prophets, and finally his own son, and all are being rejected. Jesus is foretelling his own death within this parable, and people who are involved in his death are hearing it.

In Genesis chapter 37, verses 18 to 20, I think we see part of the background that Jesus is alluding to here. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him.

They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.

[6 : 38] Joseph, in that case, is the threat to his brothers. They believe he's the one that's going to inherit, and they want to destroy him. Likewise, driven by envy, the wicked tenants seek to destroy the son.

The tenants will be deprived of their position. This isn't a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes. Their places will be taken by the twelve and others, who are the true tenants now of the vineyard of Israel.

This looks forward to fruit from Israel. The vineyard isn't abandoned. It's given into different hands. Jesus quotes as an interpretation of much of his teaching in this parable, Psalm 118, verse 22.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And this quotation interprets the parable. It shows something of the necessity that Christ must die, that he must be rejected by the wicked tenants.

This was also a verse used for apologetic purposes by the early church. We see it in 1 Peter 2, verses 4 and 7, and also in Acts 4, verse 11. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.

[7 : 46] This is one of the texts that looks forward to Christ's rejection by his people and his resurrection. The parable reveals that the Davidic Messiah had to die, and the verse confirms this.

The rejected son is the rejected stone, and the builders are associated with the religious leaders, as they were associated with the wicked tenants. Note also the way that this brings temple themes to the forefront.

There is a cornerstone being set up. A new building is going to be erected. Christ is the rejected stone, but becomes the cornerstone of a new temple that the Lord is building. There are also allusions here to Isaiah chapter 8, verses 14 to 15, and Daniel chapter 2, verses 44 to 45.

Isaiah chapter 8. And then in Daniel chapter 2.

And in the days of those kings, The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.

[9 : 16] The chief priests and the scribes now send spies to try and trap Jesus. Tax to Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question. To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy, and the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land.

The denarius itself likely had blasphemous statements of Caesar's being the son of God. One way or another, Jesus is caught, it seems. Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and the revolutions against Rome, and can easily be handed over to the governor and put to death for that.

Or he will seem to be like a compromiser with Rome, and he will lose credibility with the crowd. And his answer is a profoundly shrewd one. First of all, he asks them to produce a coin.

They must reveal that they have one of the coins in their possession. The Jews could have their own coinage, the temple coin for instance, but they clearly had such coins in their possession.

The answer, rent to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, is an ambiguous one. To some it might be saying, give Caesar what is coming to him.

[10:22] And to others it might be seeming to say, pay your taxes. But there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There's a willingness to be dispossessed of such an item.

That's part of it. There are also dues to be paid both to Caesar and to God. The claims of God put limits upon the claims of Caesar. The reasoning of Jesus is that the coin is Caesar's, and so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, but something for services given.

All the different ways in which Caesar provides security for the land, and resources and services within the land. Those things do give a reason to pay taxes to him. Also, God has established him as the ruler, and for that reason they must acknowledge that he is the bearer of the sword.

Even an occupying force could be a legitimate authority under certain conditions. Jesus makes an important point here. He's not just escaping a trap. He treads the line between compliance and resistance.

Rendering to God what is God's limits what Caesar gets. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. A question to consider. Can you think of any ways in which Jesus' teaching concerning paying taxes to Caesar, and the way to treat authorities like Caesar, is developed in other parts of the New Testament, concerning the authority of rulers?

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