

# **To Seek and to Save the Lost**

## **The Authority of Jesus Challenged**

*Luke 20:1-18*

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# The Authority of Jesus Challenged

## Scripture

The final section in *The Gospel of Luke* begins at Luke 19:28.

Luke described Jesus' final week on earth, and began with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (19:28-40). As Jesus drew near the city of Jerusalem he burst into tears and wept over the city because of the coming judgment on people who refused to repent of their sin and believe in him (19:41-44). The following day, Monday, Jesus returned to the temple and physically drove out the merchants who were selling their wares and obscuring people's access to God (19:45-48). Jesus' action enraged the religious rulers, who challenged his authority to do what he did.

Let's read about the challenge to Jesus' authority in Luke 20:1-18:

**<sup>1</sup> 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 <sup>2</sup> and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." <sup>3</sup> He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, <sup>4</sup> was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" <sup>5</sup> And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' <sup>6</sup> But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." <sup>7</sup> So they answered that they did not know where it came from. <sup>8</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."**

**<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>12</sup> And**

he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out.  
<sup>13</sup> Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' <sup>14</sup> 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.' <sup>15</sup> And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? <sup>16</sup> He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" <sup>17</sup> 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?"**

<sup>18</sup> Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." (Luke 20:1-18)

## **Introduction**

When I was a student at the University of Cape Town several friends and I went on a summer vacation from Cape Town to Durban, a distance of about 1,500 miles. Most travelers avoided driving through a province known as the Transkei because it was dangerous. There were no fences around properties, and animals would roam onto the highways. That was not what one wanted to see while driving down the highway at 70 miles per hour! Moreover, the locals took to policing the roads themselves. At one point my friends and I were stopped at a check point by several heavily armed men. The problem was that they were wearing civilian clothes, and we had no idea whether they were rogues or legitimate authorities. We wanted to know by what authority they were stopping us.

As Jesus' ministry and mission was coming to its climactic end in Jerusalem, the religious rulers did not believe that Jesus was sent by God. They thought that he was a rogue masquerading as a spokesman for God. And so they challenged his authority to speak for God.

## Lesson

The challenge to Jesus' authority in Luke 20:1-18 shows us that Jesus' authority comes from God.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Ensnaring Question of the Rulers (20:1-2)
2. The Counter Question of Jesus (20:3-4)
3. The Dishonest Answer of the Rulers (20:5-7)
4. The Concluding Response of Jesus (20:8)
5. The Pointed Parable of Jesus (20:9-18)

### I. The Ensnaring Question of the Rulers (20:1-2)

First, note the ensnaring question of the rulers.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus probably drove the merchants out of the temple precincts on Monday. Luke's note in verse 1a that **one day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel**, probably refers to Tuesday. Jesus went back to the temple to teach the people and, while he was doing so, **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"** (20:1b-2).

The religious rulers wanted to know who authorized Jesus to cleanse the temple and to teach the people. After all, Jesus had not been to any of their approved seminaries, had not been ordained by them, and did not have any approved credentials to do what he did. So, the rulers wanted to know by what authority he did these things.

Now, it is helpful to know that the religious rulers in Jesus' day constantly quoted authorities to back up their teaching. Their teaching was typically a citation of other authorities to substantiate their point. They would say, "Rabbi Dan says. . . and Rabbi Judah acknowledges. . . but Rabbi Simeon also permits. . ." and so on.

But Jesus did not teach this way. He often said something like this, "You have heard that it was said. . . . *But I say to you*" (Matthew

5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44, Luke 6:27). Jesus' authority did not rest on other human teachers; his authority came directly from God himself.

The rulers, of course, were trying to trap Jesus. They wanted him to affirm that he was not authorized by one of their approved institutions to do what he was doing. If he affirmed that, then he would be discredited in the eyes of the people. But Jesus saw through their trap, and posed a brilliant counter question to them.

## II. The Counter Question of Jesus (20:3-4)

Second, look at the counter question of Jesus.

**He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" (20:3-4).** This was so clever! Jesus wanted them to affirm to the people what they thought about John the Baptist. Jesus wanted them to say who authorized John's ministry. Was John self-appointed? Or was he authorized by God to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3)?

## III. The Dishonest Answer of the Rulers (20:5-7)

Third, note the dishonest answer of the rulers.

**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" (20:5-6).**

The problem for the rulers was that John was extremely popular with the people. Enormous crowds of people were baptized by John for the forgiveness of their sins. But the religious rulers refused to do so. Luke explained this earlier, in Luke 7:29-30, "When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him." So, now, in the midst of the crowds in the temple, it

would be foolish to say that John's authority was self-derived.

On the other hand, if the religious leaders affirmed that John's authority was from God, then they would admit that they were wrong in rejecting John's baptism.

**So they answered that they did not know where it came from** (20:7). The religious rulers were such cowards! If they truly believed that John's authority was self-derived, they should have said so, regardless of the personal cost. But they would not do so.

#### **IV. The Concluding Response of Jesus (20:8)**

Fourth, look at the concluding response of Jesus.

**And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"** (20:8). Jesus knew that the religious rulers were trying to trap and destroy him. But he also knew that his time had not arrived quite yet. And so he would not answer them, and they would have to wait for another time to try and trap him.

#### **V. The Pointed Parable of Jesus (20:9-18)**

And fifth, observe the pointed parable of Jesus.

The rulers were about to hear a parable about rejected authority. Jesus used an image in this parable (usually called "The Parable of the Wicked Tenants") that was readily understood by everyone. Jesus used a vineyard, which represented the nation of Israel. The vineyard was so well understood by the people; it was like the eagle representing the United States of America. The people of Israel thought of themselves as God's vineyard, and a number of Scriptures allude to this (Psalm 80:8-16; Isaiah 5:1-7, 27:2-5, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 19:10-14, Hosea 10:1). Commentator Kent Hughes tells us how important the vineyard motif was to Israelites. He says:

The vineyard/Israel connection was so much a part of their national consciousness that the very temple in which Jesus was standing

sported a richly carved grapevine, seventy cubits high [which is about 105 feet high], sculpted around the door that led from the porch to the Holy Place. The branches, tendrils, and leaves were of finest gold. The bunches of grapes hanging upon the golden limbs were costly jewels. Herod first placed the golden vine there, and rich and patriotic Jews would from time to time add to its embellishment. One contributed a new jeweled grape, another a leaf, and still another a cluster of the same precious materials. This vine had immense sacred meaning in the eyes of the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

So, as Jesus started telling the people a parable about a vineyard, the people listened with rapt attention. And to make sure that the people understood the parable, Jesus made it an allegorized parable. That is, every part of the parable symbolized something or someone. Therefore, the man = God, the Father; the vineyard = Israel; the tenants = Israel's leaders; the servants = the prophets; and, finally, the son = Jesus.

A. *The Work Agreement Between the Man and the Tenants (20:9)*

First, notice the work agreement the man and the tenants.

**And Jesus began to tell the people this parable (20:9a).** Although Luke says that Jesus told **the people this parable**, it is clear that Jesus also intended for the rulers also to hear the parable, **“A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while” (20:9b).**

It was apparently not uncommon for a man to plant a vineyard and then rent it to tenants while he went back to his own country. I am told that it takes about 5 years for a vineyard to produce a useful harvest. So, presumably, the owner was gone for many years. The rent that was to be paid was usually a percentage of the crops themselves.

Jesus' point is that God established Israel as his vineyard. The tenants he put in charge of the vineyard were the religious rulers. And

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 256.

then God did not show himself for a long time. And as Kent Hughes said, “The longer God was gone, the more remote and powerless he seemed, and the tenant leaders began to assume that his absence was permanent. An abusive attitude festered in the leaders that the vineyard/Israel was, in effect, their possession.”<sup>2</sup>

*B. The Wickedness of the Tenants (20:10-15a)*

Second, observe the wickedness of the tenants.

Jesus said, **“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”** (20:10-12). Each servant was treated worse than the previous one.

Jesus was saying that God sent prophets to his people, and they treated them wickedly. For example, we know that the prophet Elijah was driven into the wilderness by the king (1 Kings 19:1-5). According to tradition, the prophet Isaiah was sawn in two. The prophet Zechariah was stoned to death near the altar (2 Chronicles 24:21). And John the Baptist, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, was beheaded (Mark 6:14-29). So, it is no surprise that Stephen said to the religious rulers just before his stoning, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” (Acts 7:51-52a).

Jesus’ point was that Israel’s leaders had become successful from the fruit of the vineyard, and they wanted to keep the bounty for themselves. However, God’s prophets were a threat to their profitable status, and so they constantly got rid of the prophets.

Eventually, after many servants had been sent and wickedly

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<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 256.



mistreated, Jesus said, **“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”** (20:13-15a).

The tenants may have thought that the man was dead, and that the son was coming to claim his inheritance. In those days the tenant farmers could claim the land for themselves if the owner had died. So, the tenants believed that if they killed the son, they would be able to keep the vineyard for themselves.

Jesus’ point in the parable is that the leaders would go as far as murder in order to maintain their position, status, and authority.

And that is exactly what the leaders of Israel did in just a few days. They killed the Son of God! They put him to death because he was a threat to their position, status, and authority.

One aspect of this parable that we should not miss is the persevering love of the Father. Even though Israel turned its back on God, he persisted in love. One prophet after another was wickedly mistreated. But, God still loved his people. Rebuffs, insults, and beatings to his servants did not stop him. Finally, he sent his very own Son to turn his people back to himself. Charles Spurgeon said, “If you reject him, he answers you with tears; if you wound him, he bleeds out cleansing; if you kill him, he dies to redeem; if you bury him, he rises again to bring resurrection. Jesus is love made manifest.”<sup>3</sup>

### *C. The Wrath of the Man (20:15b-16)*

Third, notice the wrath of the man.

Continuing his parable, Jesus said, **“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them [that is, the tenants]?”** (20:15b). That is the question his listeners were asking themselves as well. What

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<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 33, sermon 1, 951, “The Pleading of the Last Messenger” (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1975), 137.

would the owner do to the tenants?

Jesus' answer was simple, **"He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others"** (20:16a). The people listening to Jesus were stunned. Luke said that **when they heard this, they said, "Surely not!"** (20:16b). They could not fathom that God would destroy them. But, of course, that did happen. That took place when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD.

*D. The Warning to All (20:17-18)*

And finally, look at the warning to all.

**But Jesus looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?"** (20:17). Jesus took his listeners to Scripture by quoting Psalm 118:22, **"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."** Jesus was switching the illustration from tenants to builders. Both tenants and builders refers to Israel. A **cornerstone** is the most important stone in the building. Every other stone and element in a building must be in alignment with the cornerstone. The entire building is built in relationship to the cornerstone. However, the builders rejected the cornerstone.

Of course, Jesus was saying that he is the cornerstone. And Israel was rejecting him. And there is great peril in doing so. As he went on to say in verse 18, **"Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."** Here is how commentator Norval Geldenhuys explains this verse:

As a blind man who stumbles and falls over a stone and injures himself against it, so those who through their unbelief and falseness of heart are spiritually blind will find Jesus, as it were, a stumbling-block in their path and so in a spiritual sense they will fall and come to grief. Even in the ordinary course of life this will happen to those who do not believe in Jesus. But whosoever persists in the state of unbelief until the time of grace is expired will be completely crushed by the judgment of God, carried out by the Son – and be pulverized like one on

whom a tremendous rock crashes down.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the challenge to Jesus' authority in Luke 20:1-18, we should respond to Jesus in repentance and faith.

Commentator William Barclay says that this parable teaches us several truths about Jesus.

*First, the parable teaches us that Jesus knew what was coming.* He did not come to Jerusalem hugging a dream that even yet he might escape the cross. Open-eyed and unafraid, he went on. When Achilles, the great Greek hero, was warned by the prophetess Cassandra that if he went out to battle he would surely die, he answered, "Nevertheless I am for going on." For Jesus there was to be no turning back.

*Second, the parable teaches us that Jesus never doubted God's ultimate triumph.* Beyond the power of the wicked stood the undefeatable majesty of God. Wickedness may seem for a time to prevail, but it cannot in the end escape its punishment.

*And third, the parable teaches us most unmistakably Jesus' claim to be the Son of God.* Jesus deliberately removes himself from the succession of the prophets. They were servants; he is *the Son*. In this parable he made a claim – that none could fail to see – to be God's chosen king.<sup>5</sup>

The only proper response is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he is the only Savior of sinners, and to repent of sin. I urge you to do so today, before it is too late and you are crushed by the stone. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 499.

<sup>5</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 292–293.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

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**PRAYER:**

Our Father, in today's lesson we learned about the challenge to Jesus' authority to be the Son of God.

In characteristically skillful terms he shows that he is indeed the Son of God. And further, he shows that anyone he rejects his authority will ultimately suffer destruction.

O God, I pray that no-one hearing this message will ultimately suffer destruction. Will you enable every one of us to believe in Jesus and turn from our sin?

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!