

STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

Study 11

The Ultimate Crime (Luke 20:9-19)

This is a remarkable parable. Please remember that despite his predictions, Jesus' followers did not think he would be executed (Mark 8:27-33; Luke 24:19-21). This is not hard to understand. There was an air of invincibility about him. The religious establishment tried to trap him but he won every verbal battle hands down (Mt 15:1-9; 19:3-9; cf. 22:15-46). Certainly there were those who wanted him dead, but their attempts to arrest him had come to naught (Luke 4:28-30; John 7: 30, 45-46). He had entered Jerusalem amid great acclaim (Luke 19:28-40).

He, of course, knew why he had come (Mark 10:45; John 10:11, 17-18). He also knew that the time had now come (John 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). On the Mount of Transfiguration he had discussed his departure with Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:28-31). Now he announces this fact to the people in story form.

WHAT?

1. The Setting

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus goes to the temple (Mark 11:11). He then retreats to Bethany. The following day, he again enters the temple and cleanses it (Mark 11:15). This is not a random act of righteous indignation. It constitutes an important claim. The gloves are now off. The next day he again enters the temple and teaches the people. But the members of the Sanhedrin (the chief priest, the teachers of the law and the leaders of the people) are also present. They are in an angry mood and they are set on killing him, but the people are hanging on his words and they cannot find a way to do it without causing an upheaval (Luke 19:47-48; John 11:45-48, 57).

Eventually they ask him for his credentials: "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?" In his usual masterful way, he turns the question back upon them by asking them about John's baptism and placing them

in a quandary. If they can't answer the question about the validity of John's authority, neither are they in a position to accurately assess the validity of his credentials. (By the way, he had repeatedly spoken about the source of his authority - e.g. John 8:13-18). So the 'battle lines' are clearly drawn. Into this situation Jesus injects his most telling parable.¹

2. The Parable

In the Jordan Valley there were vast estates owned by foreigners who lived far from their holdings. They committed the care of their farms and vineyards to tenants, who enjoyed a large measure of independence. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, providing a livelihood for the tenants who could otherwise not have afforded an estate and producing 'dividends' for the distant owners.

At harvest time, one of these owners followed the usual practice, sending a servant to collect the portion of the vintage which, according to contract, belonged to him. So far, so good! This was usual practice. Shock # 1: The unheard-of happens. The tenants not only refuse to pay up but beat the servant and send him away empty-handed. Shock #2: The owner sends another servant and the tenants do exactly the same to him. Shock #3: He sends yet another servant and they treat him even more shamefully.

This is a pretty persistent owner and clearly the tenants are not getting the message: the owner will not be denied. But he's a long way off and intends to be gone for a long time and they can overpower any servant he happens to send. (The brazenness and sheer impertinence of the tenants must have seemed outrageous to the hearers. They would have gasped at such disgraceful behaviour).

Shock #4: The owner does the unthinkable. He sends his (only) son, whom he loves, reasoning that perhaps they will respect him. (We may well question the wisdom of such action--that's part of the power of the parable). True to type, the tenants decide on a course of action. Perhaps they assume that the father has died. One way or the other, they reason that if they eliminate the son, who is the heir (hence the conclusion that he is an *only* son), the vineyard will be theirs. So they throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. Incredible!

¹ Here we have a clear instance of the validity of Roy Clements' observation: "In reality (Jesus' parables are) a kind of Stealth bomber, specially designed to evade our psychological defences, insinuating themselves inside our mind in spite of every barricade we may seek to erect, and then dropping a highly explosive charge." Roy Clements, *Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 7, 8.

But the parable is not over. Jesus asks: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?" The answer is clear: "He will come, kill them and give the vineyard to others."

3. The Response

Apparently, the people sensed that the story was about the forfeiture of their privilege, God's judgment of those who had been entrusted with the vineyard and, worst of all, the handing over of the vineyard to others. So they protested: "May this never be!"² Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "What then is the meaning of that which is written, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone (or cornerstone)? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.'" He is quoting a passage with which he hearers would be familiar. Psalm 118, which contains the first part of his reference, was recited on feast days (Ps 118:22). The second part is an allusion to Isaiah 8:14, 15 (See also Isa 28:16; Acts 4:11; Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:6-8). So incensed were the members of the Sanhedrin that they looked for a way to arrest him immediately. They knew that he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. The tension mounts.

4. The Interpretation

What makes this parable easier to interpret than most is the clear identification of the vineyard with Israel (Isa 5:1-7). The picture is slightly different; in Isaiah, it is the vineyard that does not produce good fruit and in the parable, it is the tenants that do the damage. But the hearers would have realised that he was speaking about more than a physical vineyard. We are in a position to identify the players. The owner of the vineyard is God, the servants that he sent are the prophets (Mt 23:29-37; Luke 6:23; 11:49-51; 13:31-35; Acts 7:52). The son is unquestionably Jesus (John 3:16; Rom 8:32). He was sent first to Israel (Mt 10:5-6; 15:24) and rejected by his own (Mark 15:12-13; John 1:10-12; Acts 2:23; 4:10). The tenants represent, especially, Israel's leaders but the nation as a whole is also included (Acts 2:22-24; Rom 10:1, 16-21).

5. Points of Interest

- We are struck by *the persistence of this owner*. His patience is amazing. He did not give up on his vineyard.

² "May this never be," could refer to the entire parable but is more likely to be a response especially to the last statement: "He will come and kill those tenants *and give their vineyard to others*." There was sensitivity about any notion of an extension of God's kingdom to Gentiles (Mt 8:10-12; Acts 13:46-52; 22:1-2, 21-22).

- Despite resistance, *it is the owner who triumphs in the end*. His purpose may be temporarily frustrated, but it cannot be thwarted. In respect of the gospel, the Son is not only murdered but also raised and exalted (Luke 24:26; Acts 2: 22-24, 36; 3:17-18; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Cor 15:24-25).
- The inversion in the order of the treatment meted out to the son as compared with the servants *may* be intentional. Each of the servants was mistreated and *then* thrown out of the vineyard. The son was thrown out and *then* killed (20: 10-12, 15). This makes one think of Hebrews 13:12-14, "And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we have no enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." Possible, but I wouldn't put my head on a block.

It is easy for us, in retrospect, to understand how accurately this parable was fulfilled in the rejection of and murder of Jesus. Of course, it should never lead to anti-Semitism of any kind. We should always remember that, as sad as Israel's blindness was, it has led to the inclusion of us Gentiles into God's covenant on a footing of equality. To change the metaphor, the fact that we are like a wild olive shoot grafted into the olive tree of Israel should fill us with humility and gratitude (Rom 11:17-24; Eph 2:11-22).

SO WHAT?

1. Can you identify the parallels?

The Vineyard	The Owner	The Servants	The Son	The Tenants

2. Why do you think the religious establishment was so opposed to Jesus? (There could be several reasons; Matthew 27:18; John 3:19-21; 11: 47-53; 15:18-25; Acts 2:23; cf. Isa 53:10-12).
3. Why did Jesus tell this particular parable at this point?

NOW WHAT?

1. Is there a danger that we could mistreat prophets without realising it?
2. The 'insiders' were the ones who resisted Jesus. This sometimes happens in the church. Renewals in the church's life are opposed by those (including pastors) who should be supporting them. How should we, as 'insiders,' guard against this danger?