

The Vineyard and the Stone: Making the Most Critical Decision of Our Lives

Introduction

The Text

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ ¹⁴ 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.’ ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Surely not!”

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’?”

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” (Luke 20:9–18)

The Most Critical Decision of Our Lives

- A. In our text for this morning, we are given both a parable and an image to consider—a vineyard and a stone. Both it seems to me are leveraged by Jesus to get at the same basic reality.
 - 1. And I suppose that reality is just simply this: We must all decide what we are to make of Jesus? What are we going to do with His claim on our life? What are we going to do with His offer of amnesty in the face of our sin? What are we going to make of Him?
- B. In our text, the matter of this decision is being escalated to a crisis point. Jesus in many ways sees Himself as God’s last appeal to a people who have long resisted and rejected Him.
 - 1. As one commentator puts it: These people in our text here “face the most critical decision of their lives” (TNTC). I’m inclined to agree.
- C. And, obviously, I think you can tell by the title of this sermon, that I think the same could be said for us as well. Luke doesn’t mean for us to read these words and think merely of the Jews here. He means for us to be pressed on the very same issue ourselves. We too face the most critical decision of our lives.
 - 1. What will we make of Jesus?

- a. Will we receive Him, serve Him, and build our lives upon Him?
- b. Or will we reject Him and ultimately be undone by Him?
 - i. That's the fork in the road. That's the matter laid before us this morning and clearly it is a matter of magnificent import. Simply put: here lay the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

D. So now we shall simply divide this text along the broad lines with which Luke divides them. We shall consider: (1) The Vineyard (vv. 9-16); and (2) The Stone (vv. 17-18).

(1) The Vineyard (vv. 9-16)

Two Opening Remarks

A. I have just a couple opening remarks I wanted to make here in order to position us to understand this parable aright.

Opening Remark #1: The Audience

A. The first concerns the issue of audience.

- 1. We're told there in v. 9 that Jesus is telling this parable to "the people" in general.
- 2. But, I do think, given the content of this parable, we are to understand that He is speaking in a more pointed fashion to those same leaders we encountered last time in particular. You remember, don't you—[Luke 20:1-8](#)? The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Those men of stature, likely members of the Sanhedrin, the highest court in all of Israel.
 - a. These are the men who, as we noted there, are not honestly pursuing the truth about Christ at all, whatever it may look like to the outside observer. Truly they are looking for ways to trip Jesus up in His words, condemn Him, and even kill Him. They see Him as a threat to the current place of prominence they enjoy.

- i. Again, mark that: not a Savior . . . but a threat.

B. And this, of course, accounts for why Jesus goes on to tell the parable that He does—about a man who owns a vineyard and lets it out to tenants who, instead of properly stewarding it for Him, attempt to usurp His rightful ownership of it and make a go at claiming it for themselves.

- 1. Isn't that precisely what these religious men are here doing? Jesus knows it. And He goes right at it!
 - a. And so while, last time, we saw that Jesus was not willing to engage the discussion on their terms, here we see that He still does have a few choice things to say to them after all.

Opening Remark #2: The Vineyard

- A. The second thing I should point out is that this image of a vineyard is rich with symbolic import in the Scriptures.
 - 1. More specifically, biblical scholars understand that, since the time of the prophet Isaiah, really, the vineyard was recognized as a symbol of Israel herself.
- B. This stems in particular from texts like [Isa 5:1-7](#) where, interestingly, we see striking parallels between it and our text back in Luke. In fact, it would seem Jesus is clearly crafting this parable here in such a way that His Jewish audience would recall these words of Isaiah.
 - 1. We don't have time to look at it all, but [v. 7](#) is most explicit: [“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!”](#)
- C. [Psa 80:8-13](#), drawing on this same tradition portrays the exodus as God's bringing [“a vine out of Egypt”](#) ([v. 8](#)) which He then later plants in Canaan.
 - 1. Israel was to be God's vineyard from which sweet wine should flow forth for His glory to the nations. But there's no fruit. There's no wine. So what now?!

A Descending and Ascending Staircase

- A. Now, with these introductory matters behind us, we are ready to engage the parable in a bit more detail.
- B. My approach to this may seem a bit strange at first, but I see these words of Jesus taking us on a journey of sorts—both downward and upward, both into the darkness and the light, at one and the same time.
 - 1. With each subsequent line in the story it is if we are at once taken both deeper down into dark heart of man in his fallen nature and higher up into the radiant heart of God in His steadfast love and abundant mercy.
 - a. It is as if we are traveling two staircases at once. The one descending the other ascending but both traveled together in a single step . . . step by step.
 - i. Each subsequent step takes us both down and up, revealing something more of darkness and of light, of ugliness and of beauty, of hardness and of tenderness, of hatred and of love . . . of man and of God!
- C. I suppose we could say that, in this parable, Jesus outlines four steps along this strange dual staircase, as it were.
 - 1. The first three can really be conceived together.
 - 2. But the fourth clearly stands out on its own. Let me show you what I mean . . .

Steps 1-3: The Three Servants

Explanation

- A. If it's not clear by now, what I am identifying as steps here really corresponds with these people the owner of the vineyard sends as his representatives to the tenants.
1. The understanding is that the vineyard belongs to him and there is, therefore, rent to be paid.
 - a. But these rebellious tenants refuse. In the words of C. H. Dodd, they “pay their rent in blows.”
- B. The first three of these representatives sent are identified as the owner of the vineyard's “servants.” And, with each subsequent servant, we notice that the way they are treated by these tenants gets worse and worse.
1. So the first servant is beaten and sent away empty-handed (v. 10).
 2. The second servant is also beaten, but now we are told that he is also treated “shamefully,” and then sent away empty-handed (v. 11).
 3. The third, this one is “wounded” (Gk. traumatizō, where we obviously derive our English word: “traumatize”) and then he is “cast out” (Gk. ekballō, a bit stronger of a term, as we'll later see, then merely sending someone away) (v. 12).
 - a. The point: Man is hardening, but God is still coming.
- C. The servants here represent in particular the way that God throughout redemptive history has sent his prophets to warn and turn Israel back to Himself. There are countless places where this connection is made plain. Let me read to you just a few:
1. God says through the prophet Jeremiah: “²⁵ From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. ²⁶ Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers” (Jer 7:21–26). “They just got worse. The more I kept coming, the worse they got!”
 2. 2 Chr 36:15-16, summing up the history of Israel leading up to the exile, the Chronicler writes: “¹⁵ The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy.”
 3. Neh 9:26, the Levites, leading the people of Israel in confession of sin, recount the whole history of God's goodness to them from Abraham through Egypt to Canaan, but go on to speak of the ways their forebears took all this for granted: “Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.”

- D. Note again the heart of man and the heart of God. The darkness and the light. We are going down those stairs here but we are also going up.
1. We are seeing things in our nature that we might wish not to see, but we are at the same time seeing things in God that we wouldn't have dared dream possible. Though we resist and reject and harden and push . . . He just keeps coming!

Application

- A. Now, for a quick point of application on this, let me take it from the side of these tenants here and encourage you to search your own heart.
1. Are you resisting? Are you rebelling? Are you hardening? Have you been paying your rent in blows. Have you been laying claim to that which is rightly His? Are you kicking and screaming against God? Why? What is stopping you from today turning towards Him and receiving?
 - a. You have not sinned yourself outside the scope of His affection. He's still coming. He's still knocking. He's still warning and inviting. Why would you go on like this? As the author of Hebrews writes: *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts"* (Heb 3:15).

Step 4: The Beloved Son

Explanation

- A. But, as we carry on in the parable, we take yet one more step deeper . . . and higher. We come to v. 13 and read this: *"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? . . .'"*
1. Oh I know that the verse carries on matter-of-factly, but we need sit on this question for a moment, feel the tension of it.
 - a. "What shall I do? I've sent servant after servant after servant. And they've only hardened in their response. They are squatting on my land, stealing my stuff, beating my representatives, taking me for a fool. What shall I do?"
- B. What would you do? Have you ever been taken advantage of, had your name trampled in the dirt, your stuff stolen, your heart wounded? Have you ever been rejected, hurt, despised, mocked, made fun of? How do you respond?
1. I mean this parable would be over after the first servant wouldn't it, if it were up to me? I sent my representative, you beat him and sent him back to me empty-handed. It's over. I come roll up on you with the full weight of my wrath. You guys are just tenants . . . get off of my land! What shall I do? Take vengeance. Get justice. That's what I shall do.
- C. But that's not what God does. That's not what God does. Read it: *"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him'"* (v. 13).

1. God's love, it seems to me, is teetering here on the brink of insanity. It's a maniacal mercy. No one in their right mind acts like this. But God does.
 - a. And here's what He's saying, relentless in His hope for reconciliation and reunion: "Ah, I know what's been off in all of this. I've only been sending to them my servants. Of course they wouldn't respect them. But if I send my beloved Son, surely it shall be different, right?!"
 - i. Wrong. Remember, we're not only going up the staircase here, we're going down . . . way down.
- D. So we read: "¹⁴ 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.' ^{15a} And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him" (vv. 14-15a).
1. If God's mercy is insane, man's rebellion is even more so! How could we ever think that we could pick a fight with God and win? And yet we do it every day!
 - a. One commentator writes: "Since the beginning of creation humanity has sought to be like God without obeying [Him] (Gen 3:5), to become lords of Eden rather than stewards of it. What is the sum total of human history if not the attempt to rid the universe of God so that humanity can rule supreme? The tenants of the vineyard are the ultimate expression of human rebellion: they kill the heir and seize the inheritance for themselves" (PNTC).
- E. Again notice the escalation of things. The servants they roughed up and sent home. The beloved son, they cast out and killed. God's highest treasure discarded like a piece of trash. Everything that the servants experienced the Son experiences infinitely more so:
1. Were the servants beaten? How much more Jesus!
 - a. "Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him" (Luke 22:63). "Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him" (John 19:1).
 2. Were the servants treated shamefully? How much more Jesus!
 - a. The author of Hebrews writes: "[He] endured the cross, despising [or disregarding] the shame [of it] . . ." (Heb 12:2). Crucifixion was how convicted criminals would be executed. It's not just a painful thing, it's a shameful thing. The visibility, the mocking, the jeering, the crowds, it was all a part of the total destruction of the human person. You were not privately put to death in some room behind closed doors, maintaining a bit of your dignity. You were strung up in your underwear and hung to a beam for all to see . . . and laugh at.
 3. Were the servants wounded? How much more Jesus!

- a. Thorns driven through His temples. Nails driven through His hands and feet. A spear thrust into His side.
4. Were the servants sent away empty-handed? How much more Jesus!
- a. They gambled for His garments. In the end He had no clothes, no water, no dignity, no friends, and, at the last, no Father. [“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” \(Matt 27:46\)](#). It’s the only time we have on record where Jesus doesn’t address God as Father. Why? Because the Father is forsaking Him, pouring out His wrath on His beloved Son for the sake of sinners like you and I. Empty-handed.
5. Were the servants cast out? How much more Jesus!
- a. I said ekballō is a strong word in the Greek. It’s used to describe what Jesus does with demons. He casts them out. And it’s even used to describe what happens to those who are unfaithful in the end, they are cast out by God [“into the outer darkness . . . \[where\] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” \(Matt 8:12\)](#). It can suggest the idea of divine judgment and reminds us that when Jesus was led outside the city and killed He was going through Hell for us . . . literally.
- F. We’re taking steps down, but we’re taking steps up. Darkness and light!
- 1. The love of God for us in Christ revealed at the cross is unfathomable: [“¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” \(John 3:16–17\)](#).

Application

- A. So for yet another quick point of application, let me take it this time from what we learn of God in all of this—His kindness and mercy heart. I know we’ve been discussing this subject quite a bit lately, but we can come at it from a different angle here this morning.
- 1. I do suspect that many of us, regardless of what texts like these say of God and His relentless, even maniacal, mercy—that when we slap Him, He wraps around for a hug; that when we puncture Him, He bleeds compassion—still there are plenty of times when we just feel like God is stingy, like He’s holding back, like He has to be wrangled into showing us kindness.
- B. Consider your experience in prayer and I think you’ll agree. Aren’t there many prayers that seem to go unanswered—at least they’re not answered in the way you were hoping? Aren’t you prone to think that God must take quite a bit of convincing to be good to you? Why else would you pray for one thing and then the opposite happens? Have you ever had that?
- 1. And you come away thinking: “I guess I didn’t pray enough. I didn’t fast. I didn’t flog myself and do a little dance to get you to respond. I didn’t have faith the size of a mustard seed. I can’t do it. God You’re hard, You’re tough to stir to compassion. I’m praying and praying and nothing. If anything, it gets worse. What do you want from me?”

- C. But this text is saying: “Not so fast!” He’s more compassionate and ready to bless than we can even imagine. Is it not possible, therefore, that His definition of compassion is different than ours?
1. Ours is usually: “I know You’re compassionate when You give me what I want here and now, and I’m kept from all trouble, life is easy, etc.”
 2. But His definition is often: “I’ll give you more of myself here and now and I’ll bless you beyond your wildest dreams in the age to come.”
- D. I love these words from Elisabeth Elliot: "God will not protect you from anything that will make you more like Jesus." Let that sink in.
1. I bring that up here because it seems to me we’re always praying for protection and then wondering why it feels God has not delivered—“Protect me from a lost job. Protect me from bad health. Protect me from these uncomfortable providences. Why aren’t you answering me?!”
 - a. Well, perhaps He’s protecting us from something far more dangerous. Perhaps He’s working towards something far more glorious.
 - i. If there is one thing we learn from watching God in this parable it is this: He doesn’t need to be prodded into showing compassion—that’s what He delights and is spring-loaded to do! Trust Him.

(2) The Stone (vv. 17-18)

Different Image, Same Essential Message

- A. As we transition now to this idea of The Stone, we actually need to read the last lines of the parable concerning The Vineyard, because they really serve as the hinge from one to the other.
- B. So, after outlining all that these tenants have done, Jesus turns to His audience and asks: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?” (v. 15b).
1. It’s virtually the same question God asked back up in v. 13, only now He has exhausted all options. “I sent my servants. I sent my only beloved Son. I gave you my heart and you gave me your fists in return.”
 - a. Therefore, if God is still to be righteous, still to be just, still to be holy, He must make an end of this evil. Judgment is His last resort: “‘He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.’ When they heard this, they said, ‘Surely not!’” (v. 16).
 - i. They could see what all this meant for them. And they object.
- C. But Jesus responds with this proof-text, as it were, about a stone: “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”?¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (vv. 17-18).

1. In v. 17, He quotes directly from [Psa 118:22](#).
 2. In v. 18, He is likely alluding to [Isa 8:14-15](#) and the visions of [Dan 2](#).
- D. There is so much we could do here. But I’ll have to keep it simple. Though the imagery here shifts from grapes and vineyards to stones and buildings, the essence of the matter is still the same.
1. Just as the vinedresser’s refuse to bring forth good fruit and reject the owner’s son, so the builders refuse to follow the divine blueprint and reject the Cornerstone.
 - a. The cornerstone likely refers to that foundation stone that joins two corners in a building. If you get that wrong, the whole thing is off. And God is building His kingdom, His people, His temple, upon and around Jesus and the gospel. And these leaders there in Israel are saying: “No thank you!”
 - i. They keep stumbling over Him and will eventually in the last judgment, if they don’t turn and repent, be crushed by Him.

Two Choices and the Most Critical Decision of Your Life

- A. For us, we could put the matter most pointedly like this: When it comes to what you will make of Jesus, what you will do with Him, you essentially have two choices: (1) Either you can stumble and fall over Him and ultimately be crushed by Him; or (2) you can stumble and fall upon Him and ultimately be built back up in Him.
1. Here’s what I mean. When we try to do life apart from Jesus, it may sound like a good idea, like freedom, we get to choose, we don’t have to follow these silly commandments or worry about what is or isn’t sin, we want it, we get it. I call the shots, I make the plans, I build my life how I want to build it.
 - a. Again, it sounds good, but you keep stumbling, don’t you? You might not even know why, but it’s not working. You’re not finding satisfaction in sex or money or success or whatever. You’re still dealing with anxiety and worry. You still feel like there’s more your missing out on. You keep stumbling over the cornerstone and you may not even know it.
 - i. Life doesn’t work apart from the Author of life.
- B. God’s trying to build our lives around Him, but we are busy trying to build our lives around something else. We’re resisting and refusing the divine architect.
1. He wants to make a temple of us but we are happy building our own little shanties . . . and then we bellyache when the wind and rain knock them down.

- a. We are stumbling and falling over the Son, the Cornerstone, and we will ultimately be crushed by Him, unless, instead of stumbling and falling over Him, we finally stumble and fall upon Him.
 - i. That's my testimony. "Let me try this, try that, try this, try that." Stumble, fall, stumble, fall . . . "Jesus, help!" And He's on it. A sure foundation, a steady hand, He starts rebuilding what's been destroyed, putting back together what's been broken. He saves us.

- C. So here we come again to the most critical decision of your life: What will you make of Jesus? Will He be a stone of stumbling and offense, or will He be the Cornerstone that He truly is?