

## ***The Authority of the Cornerstone***

**Luke 20:1-18**

We are continuing in our series through Luke's gospel. This morning we will start chapter 20. Just as a reminder, last week we walked through a scene at the beginning of the Passion Week, that is, Jesus' last week in Jerusalem before his crucifixion. And the end of chapter 19 tells us about Jesus cleansing the temple.

There we saw Jesus confront those at the temple who had turned it into a profitable marketplace and working in a way that excluded the nations from participating at the temple. He flips their tables, drives them out. And needless to say that is quite a way to start Passion Week.

Obviously, the confrontations will only escalate from here on out, and the next confrontation is in our next passage...

### **Luke 20:1-2**

**1** 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 **2** and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority."

Jesus is at the temple each day preaching the gospel, and the religious leaders are wanting to trap Jesus by getting him to say something that would be considered blasphemous.

So they ask, "What authority do you have? Who gave you this authority?" Again, he has been driving people out of the temple area and preaching at the temple, people hanging on every word.

And they want to know, "Who does this guy think he is? What gives him the right to walk in here and do the things he does and say the things he says?" They are questioning his authority. As the chief priests, scribes, and elders, they were the ones with the authority. And so, really, they are questioning this Teacher who is challenging their authority.

We've said this before, but when we read passages like this we typically look at the Pharisees or obvious bad guys and shake our head at them as if we aren't like them. But the truth is, they are simply giving voice to a question that our lives ask every day.

We, too, question the authority of Jesus, all the time. We are a culture and generation that is incredibly suspicious and skeptical of authority if not, at times, outright rejecting of authority.

We see this at our workplaces as we roll our eyes at our bosses. We see this at school as students rebel against teachers, principals, and rules. We see this in churches with people questioning the role or necessity for pastoral leadership. We certainly see this in our views of the government, believing that leaders are always corrupt and liars.

And, of course, we know there are corrupt governments, shady bosses, and immoral pastors and church leaders, so unwavering and unquestioning submission isn't what we are called to, but we have to be careful to not view all authority as bad, because it isn't.

But there is a reason we immediately scoff at the authority that exists in all of these smaller spheres of life. Since the fall of man in Eden, our heart's default position is rebellion. We rebel against authority in every lesser sphere of life, but all of that stems from us rejecting the authority of the One who claims authority over our entire lives.

We are the chief priests and scribes who read Scripture and look at Jesus and say, "What right do you have to tell me how to live my life? Who are you to lay claim over my work, money, hobbies, relationships, and desires?" Rather than submitting to the One with rightful authority, we often rebel against him every time he challenges ours.

So this passage is all about the authority of Christ and it questions whether or not we will acknowledge and embrace his authority or we will reject his authority.

So they ask him the question, "What authority do you have?"

**Luke 20:3-4**

**3** He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, **4** was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?"

Jesus responds to their question with a question of his own. He turns their attention to John the Baptist. And he does this not because he wants to turn attention away from himself. His question is actually about him.

He questions their views of John the Baptist because John's ministry and his ministry was linked. John was the messenger sent to prepare the way of the coming Messiah. And people questioned John if he was the Messiah, he said...

**Luke 3:16**

I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John was sent to prepare the way for him and when he showed up he said, “Here he is!”

So Jesus asks them, “Was John’s ministry approved of by heaven or man?” He is appealing to the authority of John’s ministry to prove his own authority.

**Luke 20:5-6**

**5** And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ **6** But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”

They huddle up and discuss their options before answering. And Jesus only gave them two options, either John’s baptism was from heaven or it was from man.

But they were smart guys so they knew that no matter how they answered there would be a consequence for them.

If they say that John was sent from heaven then they would have to admit they were wrong. They would have to repent of their rejection of Jesus and accept him for who he is. They would have to accept his authority.

If they say that John’s ministry was from man, everyone would turn on them because the crowds believed John was a prophet, that he was sent from God. They feared for their life.

Think of how brilliant this moment was. Here, they were challenging Jesus’ authority, but by a quick question in response, they were threatened with losing their own authority. They were trapped. Either they have to admit they were wrong, which they didn’t want to do, or they could possibly be killed by an angry mob, which, of course, isn’t an attractive option either. This was a lose/lose situation and they knew it.

So, look at how they answer...

**Luke 20:7**

**7** So they answered that they did not know where it came from.

They basically said, “No comment. I plead the 5th.”

They were too proud to admit John's authority, and, by extension, Jesus' authority. But they were too people-pleasing to say that he was from man.

Here we learn an important principle I think when it comes to questioning or rejecting Jesus and his teachings: **A denial of truth can be ignorance of truth, but often times it is just an evasion of truth.** They knew how to answer, but they didn't want to face the consequences.

We see this in so many different ways today as well:

Agnosticism, for example, which believes that there is a God or some kind of divine being but says we can't know him/her/it, can be a way of saying that I am unsure of the truth OR it can be a way to say I don't *want* to admit the truth. I don't want to submit my life to a God who has revealed Himself and his claim on my life.

One step further, full-blown atheism, which is just a little more confident, can be a way of saying I'm not convinced but in reality, because we understand what the Scriptures say about the unregenerate heart, is saying I don't *want* to be convinced. I don't want to submit my life to the authority of God.

Even theological liberalism or "progressive Christianity" follows the same pattern. It is denying the clear teachings of Scripture, at times because they are unconvinced of them, but oftentimes because they don't *like* the clear teachings of Scripture. But instead of saying, "We know what God says in His Word, but we don't like it," they say, "Well, we can't really know what God says and expects of us."

In fact, I saw this week on Twitter a self-proclaimed progressive pastor tweet something very much in line with our passage here in Luke 20. He tweeted, "We will not assume we have it all figured out. We won't bow down at the altar of certainty, orthodoxy, or doctrine. We will follow the Spirit in all of her wildness, beauty, and grace."

I have no idea what that last sentence means but the other part of the tweet was clear. We don't have it all figured out, and we won't try. Certainty, orthodoxy, doctrine are all false gods according to the religion of progressive Christianity, preferring terms like "journey" or "mystery." And suspiciously, they often deviate from Scripture on those issues that are most controversial to the rest of culture.

But to answer that tweet, we would say - we don't have to have it all figured out, but you do need to believe there is *something* to figure out. There are objective truths, things we call doctrines, that explain who God is, who we are, who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he expects of our lives. There is an authoritative word given by the authority over our lives - Jesus.

And, again, this rejection of an authoritative truth is driven by pride or people-pleasing, just like we saw in our text.

Either we will deny truth because *we* don't like it or we will deny truth because *others* don't like it - either way it is a rejection of the authority of Jesus. It is setting yourself or others as the true authority.

So, again, they say "no comment" to Jesus' question and he replies...

**Luke 20:8**

**8** And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Jesu replies to their "no comment" with a "no comment" of his own. His answer to their question of *his* authority challenges *their* authority. Jesus is not obligated to answer them.

However, though he won't give them an answer, he *will* give them a parable...

**PARABLE**

This is a parable often called the "Parable of the Wicked Tenants" or sometimes the "Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers." And in it, though it is a parable, we will see Jesus give a very direct warning concerning their rejection of his authority...

**Luke 20:9-12**

**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.

Anytime we read a parable we want to figure out who the main characters are referring to. That is often the teaching strategy in a parable.

So, first there is a "man" who planted a "vineyard."

And those who were familiar with the Old Testament, and those priests certainly would have been, would immediately recognize this to refer to God and Israel.

Throughout the Old Testament Israel is referred to as a "vineyard," commonly describing God's work in creating and cultivating them as a people...

**Psalm 80:8-9**

**8** You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. **9** You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.

**Isaiah 5:7a**

**7** For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting...

God had made a promise to create a people and through his creative and redemptive work did just that with the nation of Israel. They were planted, so to speak, in the land God had given them and were made to be fruitful.

But in the parable, this “man” rents out his vineyard to “tenants.” And this was common then. A landowner would rent out his land so that farmers could come in and grow their crops, however they were just renting so they obviously had pay something to use the land.

Again, in thinking of the context of this parable, Jesus is speaking to the chief priests, scribes, and elders. He was speaking to the “tenants” of God’s vineyard, the ones who were to labor among his people, to cultivate the hearts of the people that there would be fruit demonstrated by worship and holiness in lives of God’s people.

So, in the parable the owner of the vineyard sends “servants” to visit the tenants so they pay their rent with the fruits of their labors. However, when the servants come the tenants beat them and send them away with nothing.

And the servants here refer to the prophets. And it’s important to understand who the prophets were and what they did. The ministry of the prophets in the Old Testament were really two-fold:

1. They spoke God’s Word to God’s people. They came with an authoritative message on behalf of the Lord. They were the servants of the man who owns the vineyard. They would come to Israel and its leaders with God’s message.
2. And second, they were covenant enforcers. In other words, their message was typically one of warning. They would say, “Don’t forget the covenant we have with the Lord. Be faithful to it!” And when they weren’t faithful to the Lord, they would come and say, “You haven’t been faithful, repent and return to the Lord!”

But in Israel’s history the prophets were often treated just like the servants in the parable.

For example, Elijah in 1 Kings 19, was hated by the queen, Jezebel, and had to run for his life. She wanted to kill him.

Jeremiah was ridiculed and rejected, thrown into a pit and left for dead (Jer. 38:1-6).

Zechariah was murdered in the court of the temple (2 Chron. 24:20-22).

John the Baptist, the last great prophet, was beheaded (Mark 6:14-29).

Though not a prophet in the same sense, Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in Acts 7, is going to be stoned and says to the crowd...

**Acts 7:52**

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered

Throughout Israel's history, the tenants, the leaders of the nations, hated the the servants, the prophets of the Lord. They didn't want to hear the message of the Lord. They didn't want to submit to his authority, so they persecuted and even killed those who spoke on behalf of the authoritative One.

But throughout this period, God showed incredible patience. Despite their violence, despite their idolatry, despite their rejection of Him, he patiently waits giving them ample time to repent and return to Him.

Going on in the parable...

**Luke 20:13-14**

**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.'

So, the owner sends his "beloved Son" to deal with the tenants and here they come up with a plan. We can kill him and then we can lay claim to the inheritance.

Obviously, this "beloved son" refers to Jesus. Jesus called by God His "beloved Son" at his baptism and at the Transfiguration. This parable has been called a "prophetic autobiography." Jesus knew what awaited him at the end of that very week when he gives this parable: those whom he is confronting mistreated God's prophets and soon would kill God's Son, all with the hopes of retaining their authority over the people by taking away his authority.

He continues with the story...

**Luke 20:15-16**

**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!”

Jesus turns to the crowd and asks, “What do you think the owner will do? He will come back, destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others.”

They have a very strong response, “Surely not!” Or “God forbid!”

While Israel held the place as the people of God, God had a plan to include others. He would include Gentiles. And continuing in their prideful ethnic superiority they can't imagine the thought of God bringing that kind of judgment on rejecting Jews and including unclean Gentiles into the vineyard!

**Luke 20:17-18**

**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.”

He quotes Psalm 118:22 here, saying, this will be fulfilled. The Son will be rejected by men, but ultimately will be the foundation upon which the people of God are built.

And while the people of God are built on the cornerstone, the stone will prove to be crushing to those who reject him. And don't miss the irony here. Back in verse 6, the chief priests feared that the people would stone them, not realizing that their rejection of Him would bring a much greater stone of judgment on them. They feared public judgment, but there was another's judgment that should have been a much greater concern for them.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Let me leave a few concluding thoughts from our passage this morning...

**1. Acknowledge the Lordship of Christ.**

Understand that Scripture presents Jesus as much more than just a human being or a famous religious teacher. Jesus is the Lord of the universe.

**Matthew 28:18**

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

**Ephesians 1:22**

And he put *all things* under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church

**Colossians 1:15-18**

**15** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. **16** For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

**17** And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. **18** And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

The chief priests and elders didn't want to give an answer that day when Jesus questioned them. However, when Jesus asks you "Who do you say that I am?" "I don't know" is not an adequate answer.

Jesus is Lord over all things, and that includes your life.

**2. Even more than merely acknowledging the authority of Christ, repent and trust in the good news of Christ.**

Lay down your pride that scoffs at the authority of Christ and his word in your life. Lay down the people-pleasing that causes you to reject Christ and his word in your life simply because it is unpopular in culture.

Again, the warning must be clear here, just as it was from the lips of Jesus that day. If you reject Jesus, the cornerstone, the cornerstone will crush you.

However, it doesn't have to. The picture of God or Christ as a stone or rock is not always negative, it is incredibly positive as well.

Listen to what the psalmist sings in Psalm 62...

**Psalm 62:5-7**

**5** For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. **6** He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. **7** On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

Jesus will either be a rock of stumbling which leads to judgment or Jesus will be a rock of refuge which leads to salvation. He is both the rock which crushes those who reject him and the rock upon which the church is built.

If you never have, repent of your rebellion and turn to Christ in faith this morning. Set your life on the cornerstone rather than under it in judgment.

For those of us who have done that, who do have a faith in Christ, we need to be on guard from setting up ourselves as the authority of our lives and repenting when we realize we have. We need to submit our hearts anew to the authority of Scripture each time we open it, acknowledging it as the authoritative word of Christ. Let's repent of making ourselves as the authority over it, or making other's the authority over it.

Jesus is not a burden in the life of his people. Jesus is life and joy for his people. We joyfully and readily submit our lives to him, because he desires our good not our sorrow.

### **3. Rejoice that Jesus carried the burden of our rejection to the cross.**

We all rejected Jesus at one time. Interestingly, in the parable he gave, he presented the owner as someone who didn't know how his beloved son would be treated when he came to the tenants. However God did know. Jesus did know. He knew he would be rejected and yet he came any way.

And listen to how the prophet Isaiah describes the result of his undeterred arrival in the vineyard...

#### **Isaiah 53:3-6**

**3** He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. **4** Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. **5** But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. **6** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Though we rejected him, though we despised him, though we esteemed him not, Jesus, the cornerstone, was crushed for us. On the cross, Jesus took all of our rejection on himself and now through our repentant faith, by the grace of God, we are reconciled back to him. Our rejection completely forgiven, our rebellious hearts healed and being healed. And so, we rejoice, Jesus carried the burden of our rejection to the cross.

#### **VERSES**

Luke 20:1-2

Luke 20:3-4

Luke 3:16

Luke 20:5-6

Luke 20:7

Luke 20:8  
Luke 20:9-12  
Psalm 80:8-9  
Isaiah 5:7a  
Acts 7:52  
Luke 20:13-14  
Luke 20:15-16  
Luke 20:17-18  
Matthew 28:18  
Ephesians 1:22  
Colossians 1:15-18  
Psalm 62:5-7  
Isaiah 53:3-6

### **SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE**

1. In what ways do we question Jesus' authority?
2. Why did Jesus ask them about their view of John the Baptist?
3. Why was this a difficult question for them to answer?
4. Do you understand who the prophets were? What was their role in the life of Israel?
5. What does Scripture mean when it says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Psalm 118:22-23; 1 Peter 2:7).
6. What good news does the gospel offer us in spite of our rebellion and rejection of Jesus (Isaiah 53:3-6)?