

Parables of Jesus

Message 13

What Can You Lose by Ignoring God?

Luke 20:9-19

Introduction

Jesus has come to the end of His long journey. Jesus told all the parables we have studied this semester during His final trip to Jerusalem. Last week we studied the final one, the Parable of the Minas. Jesus told this parable as they drew near to Jerusalem, we are told, because the people thought the Kingdom of God was going to appear right away. Jesus wanted to alert them to the truth that certain things had to happen before His Kingdom would appear.

The Parable of the Minas is about a nobleman who is about to become a king. But in order to become king, he must go to a far country to be crowned. Last week we considered the servants of the nobleman and the citizens of the country who hated him and did not want him for their king. The central point, and the reason Jesus told the parable, was that just because a king has been chosen does not mean that he is reigning yet. However, the way you behave even before the coronation will have powerful ramifications when the king does take the throne. The parable illustrated a common political reality in the Mediterranean basin under the control of Rome. Local kings would go to Rome to be granted authority to rule in areas under Rome's administration. The application of this parable was to Jesus' own situation. He had been announced as king, but He had not yet taken the throne. He would need first to go to a far country, to a greater authority, to receive his throne. Then He would reign over His people.

So Jesus approached Jerusalem, and what happened? He was given a royal escort into the city! Did the people fail to grasp the meaning of the Parable of the Minas? Or did they refuse to accept its meaning? No, I think this royal welcome, what we call the Triumphal Entry, was simply the exuberant outpouring of the people's enthusiasm for Jesus. Of course they did praise Him by quoting Psalm 118, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord," but Jesus had been presenting Himself as king all along. He was acting the role of king-designate. There was no doubt that He would be king – He just had not been crowned yet. So the people were right to celebrate His arrival into the capital city.

But not everyone was pleased with Jesus' coming. When Jesus arrived, He went to the temple and found it full of merchants. There were moneychangers who converted the unclean trade currency into temple coins. There were stalls selling animals for sacrifice – pigeons, doves, sheep. There were so many salesmen and animals that you could hardly hear yourself. Furthermore, the merchants were dishonest. They had a monopoly on the temple trade and they took advantage of the people who came there to worship. The temple was such a riot of confusion, it was practically impossible to focus on prayer. Jesus saw all this, and He drove out the merchants. This was a real paradigm shift for the people. They were accustomed to seeing Jesus gently handling their children and patiently teaching the crowds. Here they saw a forceful, uncompromising side to Him. And the temple officials, of course they were livid. It says they wished to destroy Him, but they could not because the people loved it!

The Parable

It is in the context of the tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders that Jesus told the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers. As always, the story line is rather simple. Someone owned a piece of land, and to make some money from it, he planted grapes and leased the vineyard to farmers. The owner lived in another land, so when the grapes were being harvested, he sent a servant to collect the rent from the farmers. Now the farmers decided they would rather keep all the proceeds of the vineyard. But instead of merely ignoring

the servant, they beat him. The owner patiently sent several other servants, but the farmers beat these, too. Thinking that the farmers will respect his son, since he is the son of the owner, the owner sent his son to collect the rent. At this the farmers were joyful, because they saw a chance to seize, not just one year's crop, but the whole vineyard. So they killed the son.

Let's try to put this story into our context. My sons Daniel and Peter work at Kentucky Fried Chicken. The money they collect for the food they sell is put into the cash register, then transferred to a safe. Eventually it makes its way into the owner's bank account, from which their salary is paid. Suppose the employees decided to pocket the cash instead of handing it over to the owner. The manager would try to stop them, but they would overpower him, tie him up, and throw him out on the parking lot. Or take Chris. He works in the little store in Ulrich where they sell balloons. Suppose Chris decided to pocket the money for the balloons he sells. Chris is a pretty big guy, so if his supervisor tried to report him, Chris could knock him out and threaten worse if he did not collaborate.

Now what kind of men do these farmers appear to be? Certainly they are greedy. They have no right to the vineyard, and they have a clear obligation to pay their rent. They are nothing more than common thieves. Besides that, they are cruel. There was no profit in beating the servants. In addition, they are murderers. So they are immoral in the worst sort of way. But beyond that they are foolish. What real chance did they have of getting the land? None. Why did they think that by killing the son they would get the property? Of course the landlord will come and destroy them. But even if he died on the way, the courts will award the estate to rightful heirs, not to a murderous rabble. By every estimation, the tenants were thoroughly wicked and incredibly foolish.

Now what do we think of the landlord? Do his actions seem reasonable? How would you have acted in his place? Would you have sent multiple servants to collect the rent before you took more definitive action? Would you have sent your son? Think, suppose your father had sent several employees into a dangerous area where they had been mugged. Would he send you next? Would you want him to send you there? If you had a child, would you deliberately send him or her into a situation where all previous employees had been mugged? Why would the landlord do such a thing? Before we attempt to answer this question, let's look at how we should interpret this parable.

Israel, God's Vineyard

We already observed that the occasion of this parable was the increasing tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. A vineyard was a common image for Israel. For example, in Isaiah chapter 5 we find a whole parable in which God clearly describes Israel thus. If Israel is the vineyard, then Israel's leaders would be the greedy tenant farmers, which fits the image, because leaders are supposed to take care of the people as farmers take care of the land. Of course then the owner would be God. So who would the rent collectors be? They are the messengers whom God sent to Israel, the prophets. This fits also, for the history of Israel records the shameful treatment God's prophets received. The final element in the parable is the son. Who is the son? Is Jesus God's Son? If so, to attack Him would be very foolish – lethal, to be precise.

This parable is really a prophecy, for it faithfully presents what has happened and what will happen. The earth is the Lord's. He is the landlord in fullest sense of the word, and Israel was his special possession. Let's look at another scripture where God speaks of His people as a vineyard, Psalm 80:8-11.

You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it. You prepared room for it, And caused it to take deep root, And it filled the land. The hills were covered with its shadow, And the mighty cedars with its boughs. She sent out her boughs to the Sea, And her

branches to the River.

Notice how proprietary God appears here. It was His vine and His field. He took care of the vine and it prospered mightily. When Isaiah came to prophecy, he used this image and expanded it to deal with Israel's current sinful condition. Turn to Isaiah chapter 5.

Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done to My vineyard That I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes? And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, But there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds That they rain no rain on it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.

Here we read quite explicitly, "The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel." This passage also reveals God's insistence that Israel live according to His laws. Grapes are the fruit of a vine, and a good vine bears good grapes. Acts are the fruit of a life, and a good man does good deeds. This passage tells us that God will not overlook sin, but will remove it. Just because Israel was His own people did not mean they could get away with sin.

The Heir of the Vineyard

The element that Jesus added to these vine parables was the son, and this was the future aspect. As it turned out, the Jewish leaders did not respect the son any more than the wicked tenants. They recognized that Jesus was the legitimate heir to God's Kingdom, and they hated Him for it. They wanted to run things their way. They wanted to keep on selling (and cheating) in the temple. They loved the power and the wealth that came from their privileged position, and they had no intention of sharing it with anyone, not even the Son of God. So they killed Him. They did not believe that parable, that the Lord would come and destroy them – but in A.D. 70 God sent the Romans to Jerusalem and destroyed them and their temple.

Where do you fit into this parable? Do you respect the Son? Or are you determined to maintain your own life without His interference? The problem with Jesus is that He expects His due. For us that is not a portion of the grape harvest – it is our obedience. All during Jesus' ministry He taught the people how to live, how to be obedient to God's law. You do not think that you could claim to respect Him and disregard His word, do you? The Jewish leaders had to give up control of their own lives because the King had come to rule. If you are unwilling to let Jesus rule your life, you are like those leaders – you seek to kill Him. "No, no", you say. "I do not want to kill Jesus. He was a great prophet and a wonderful teacher. It's just that I cannot buy everything He says." So you want to ignore Him, don't you? That would be fine, but you can't. That is a non-existent option. There are only two choices here: respect or kill. Either you recognize Jesus as the Son of God and your King, and obey Him; or you seek to kill Him. Which describes your life?

The Rejected Stone

Jesus continued by providing an application for His parable. In verse 17 He quoted from Psalm 118:22, "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone." Then He followed with

His own comment, “Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.” The picture here is of a great building project. In the case of the Israelites, they probably had in mind the temple. All the stones used in the temple were shaped at the quarry. It was forbidden to strike the stones at the temple site, so they were measured and cut exactly at the quarry and then hauled to the building site. We can imagine the masons placing the stones one by one, until they come to one which is not the same shape as the others. It does not fit in to the wall they are building, so they set it aside. They reject it. Later the master builder comes around to place the stones for the corner. Now if you know anything about building, especially building with stone, the most critical aspect is the corner. If the corner is not right, the whole building will be out of shape. And the most important element of the building is the cornerstone. It is a large stone that supports and determines the shape of the rest of the building. So the master builder comes to set the corner, and he finds the reject stone. Ah ha! Just what He needs. The junior builders had no use for this unusual stone, but the master builder knows that it is essential to the sturdiness of the building. He takes the reject stone and places it in the most prominent position where it will support the whole building.

Is it hard to see that Jesus is the odd-shaped stone that the junior builders rejected? But the master builder will use Him in the most honored position. The Jewish leaders have no use for Him, but God will make Him the cornerstone of the temple.

At our fall retreat Joel, Chris, and I went up to the top of the mountain to see the first monument to George Washington. Then we wandered along the Appalachian Trail until we came to a field of huge, truck-sized rocks. We climbed all over and discussed geology and creation and had a good time. But if we had fallen on one, we would have seriously injured ourselves. Falling on a big stone is no picnic. But even worse is having a big rock fall on you. There is no doubt that one of those rocks would have crushed us. Jesus seems to be thinking of a millstone here. A mill housed a huge stone, a foot or more thick and five to 10 feet wide. The purpose of such a big stone was to grind the hard kernels of grain into flour. If you have ever tried to bite a grain of wheat or barley you know it is a real teeth-cracker. But when it has been ground the resulting flour is soft and fluffy. Again, the point is that such a rock will injure one who falls on it, but will pulverize anyone caught under it.

What does it mean to fall on the rock? Well, Jesus seems to be using the image of the stone for Himself. To fall on Him would be to beg for mercy. In fact, all through the gospels we find people falling at Jesus’ feet, begging Him to be merciful and help them. In the Old Testament, we find people falling on the altar, a figurative rock, when they begged for mercy. Again, Jesus is giving us two options: to seek mercy from Him, or to be destroyed.

The Choice: Repentance or Destruction

This was the choice to the Jewish leaders. Although they had opposed Jesus almost from the start of His ministry, there was still hope. If they would fall on the cornerstone they would be broken, but not destroyed. They would lose their pride, they might lose their position in society, they might lose their wealth, but they would survive. And now we can answer the question of why the landlord kept sending messengers and eventually sent his son to the delinquent tenants – he kept hoping for a change of heart. He kept hoping that they would repent of their evil ways and obey him. But even so, what landlord would do such a thing? None that I know. Only God would do such a thing. And the only love that would reach out to mere tenants is divine love. Human love is too weak to stretch this far. Even though the Jewish leaders kept trying to kill Him, Jesus still loved them and sought their repentance. So in the end, this parable is both a warning and a plea – a warning to cast themselves on the mercy of the Son, the cornerstone – or be destroyed.

This was the choice to the Jewish leaders, and it is also the choice to you. You must chose between repentance and destruction. Either give up control of your life and beg Christ for mercy, or you will be destroyed in the end.

The Choice for Your Friends

This is also the choice to your friends. Your roommates, classmates, fraternity brothers, and others will be destroyed unless they turn to Christ. Are they aware of this? Have you made an effort to tell them about Christ? Over Thanksgiving Daniel came downstairs last one night. He had been reading Slashdot and had found that the author of “ping”, the computer program used in setting up networks, had been killed in an auto accident. He read on and discovered that he was a Hopkins alumnus. Then he mentioned that he had an unusual name – Muuss – and my heart stopped. Mike Muuss – he had been my roommate for three semesters. Mike had introduced me to computing and had gotten me an account on the Electrical Engineering Department PDP 1145 computer. We went back to our computer and confirmed that it was all true – my former roommate was dead. And now where is he? Perhaps he turned to Christ sometime in this past year. But judging by his Christmas letter last year, he did not seem to be any closer to Christ than when I had lived with him.

Mike was a real nice guy – a computer genius. In high school he landed a contract with the school board to write the operating system for their IBM mainframe. He wrote ping one night because he needed to do something and there were no tools available to do it. Then when he found that Unix, the operating system, did not support his new program, he rewrote Unix. I went to church with Mike several times. We talked about spiritual things some. I could have done more, but at least I made some effort. Now I will never have another chance, and I dread the thought that he will perish.

Do not waste opportunities to speak with your friends about Jesus. You like your friends and do not want harm to come to them. We are talking about some very serious harm here.

Christ did eventually die at the hands of wicked men. But God used this for good – our salvation. This Christmas remember it wasn’t just the coming of Christ, but also his death, resurrection, and ascension that saved us.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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