



Sermon Preparatory Notes

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COMMENTARY 1:

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WICKED TENANTS (LUKE 20:9-18)

Aug 1, 2018 by [Dr. Joel McDurmon](#)

Probably none of the parables is as clear and explicit a prophetic denunciation of Israel as this parable of the wicked tenants. What Jesus has been teaching in different aspects and from different perspectives since He began this journey He now lays out fully and plainly to the people:

A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. 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. 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. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others" ([Luke 20:9–16](#)).

This parable encapsulates the whole history of Israel. First, God established Israel in the promised land, which was indeed a veritable garden:

And they came to the Valley of Eshcol and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them; they also brought some pomegranates and figs. That place was called the Valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster that the people of Israel cut down from there. . . . And they came to

Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit" ([Num. 13:23–27](#)).

"Valley of Eshcol" literally means "Valley of the Cluster," referring to the wonderful clusters of grapes growing there. The fruitfulness was God's blessing to them. The prophets would repeat this image when speaking of God's love, or sometimes forgiveness and renewal of the covenant ([Song 4:12–16](#); [5:1](#); [6:2](#); [8:13](#); [Isa. 51:3](#); [58:11](#); [Jer. 31:12](#); [Ezek. 36:35](#)). There is no doubt that the vineyard spoken of in the parable is a reference to the land of Israel. The owner is obviously God, and His tenants are therefore the people of old covenant Israel.

Second, God expected this land to bear fruit, and thus obviously expected the tenants to produce it. "Tenants" here translates the Greek *georgois*, which is literally "farmers," or "tenant farmers." These were not just renters, but agricultural tenants; they were put there just as Adam was put in the Garden of Eden, to till the soil and keep the garden. The fruit God expected was spiritual fruit. The expected produce, of course, was something we have discussed more than once now: Israel should have been a

witness to the nations, converting them to God's law. While God had gone far away, He was not uninterested in the produce of His property.

So, third, He sent agents periodically in season to inspect ("times of visitation") the produce. But the tenant farmers rejected these servants. They beat them, shamed them, and sent them packing. When Jesus tells this parable to the priests and elders in Matthew (21:33–46), He says that the tenants even killed and stoned some of the agents (we will discuss Matthew's account briefly later). For Israel, these are obviously references to the prophets. God had sent them to teach, warn, and condemn Israel on many occasions, and Israel ignored, mocked, rejected, and killed them all. This had been part of Jesus' lawsuit from early in this journey. He condemned the lawyers in [Luke 11:47–51](#):

Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute," so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar

and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.

Indeed, the blood of all the prophets from the foundation of the world would be charged against *this generation*—the generation to whom Jesus was speaking. Jesus repeats this exact charge against Jerusalem on His way there ([Luke 13:34–35](#)) and after He arrives in the temple ([Matt. 23:33–39](#)). It is also the exact charge, as we have noted already, for which the Great Whore of Revelation 17–18 is condemned: “I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. . . . And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth” ([Rev. 17:6](#), [18:24](#)). There is no doubt, then, what this part of the parable means. The worst was yet to come.

Fourth, when none of the servant-prophets availed, God resolved to send His beloved Son. “Perhaps they will respect him.” “Respect” here is the common translation, but I question it. The KJV says “reverence,” but this still does not capture it. The exact word form *entrapesontai* appears in this story in all three synoptic accounts ([Luke 20:13](#); [Matt. 21:37](#); [Mark 12:6](#)). In this form, it more literally means “will be ashamed.” The verse means that these wicked farmers should be ashamed of their actions, and the only thing that may, perhaps,

bring them to repentance is that instead of any mere servant, the Lord sent His actual Son as the agent. The Son would be a prophet to them, a priest-inspector, and a vicegerent of the Lord—a King. This is the last effort, indeed, the last *possibility*. If these tenants are not ashamed of their sins before this Man, they will not repent for anyone.

Fifth, even the manifestation of the Son Himself was not enough to bring them to repentance. In fact, as repentance was only given to elect Israel, the appearance of the Son only served to harden the rest of Israel's hearts further. In their rebellion, they schemed how they may steal the inheritance by their own works, for 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 ([Luke 20:14–15](#)).

They were willing to murder God's Son if they thought they could secure their inheritance without repenting. Of course, as Jesus spoke, this final act of murder was yet future. But it was a prophecy by Jesus of what would in fact happen, and it came to pass just as He predicted.

This, of course, is exactly how Paul condemns the unbelieving Jews: "For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own,

they did not submit to God's righteousness" ([Rom. 10:3](#)). Peter condemned that generation of Jews for this crime as well:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men ([Acts 2:22–23](#)).

This was Stephen's message as well, just before these same Jews killed him:

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? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it ([Acts 7:51–53](#)).

Sixth, Jesus then gives the sentencing for these rebellious farmers' crime, and it is twofold: the owner of the vineyard "will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others" ([Luke 20:16](#)). The meaning is clear: after the Jews kill Christ, the Father will 1) destroy that

generation of Jews, and 2) give the vineyard to others. This is obviously fulfilled in 1) the destruction of Jerusalem in ad 70, and 2) the transfer of the kingdom to the New Covenant era (made up of the remnant of faithful Jews with the in-grafting of millions of gentiles).

The people (to whom this particular telling of the parable is addressed, [Luke 20:9](#)) could not bear to hear this. From their reaction, we can deduce that they largely understood the meaning: “When they heard this, they said, ‘Surely not!’” ([Luke 20:16](#)). Jesus proved His lesson from prophetic tradition:

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’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” ([Luke 20:17–18](#)).

There is amazing irony in this exchange. The quotation is directly from [Psalm 118:22](#). The people had only the day before entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, and the people sang praises *from this very Psalm and few verses down:* “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ([Psa. 118:26](#); see [Luke 19:38](#); [Matt. 21:9](#)). Now they stood before Jesus as He quoted a few verses of the same tune back to

them. It foretold the rejection of the Son. Jesus then added [Isaiah 8:15](#) which foretold the destruction of those who stumbled at this cornerstone (see the [discussion on Luke 17:1–5](#)). “No, surely not us,” was the thought. But Jesus had said it: there was coming a great judgment and vengeance upon this city and these people, and it would entail a great transfer of sovereignty to a new people.

ESV Commentary

Luke 20:1–8 The Authority of Jesus Challenged. The question concerning Jesus’ authority ([vv. 1–2](#)) is closely associated with his cleansing of the temple ([19:45–48](#)). Jesus’ counter-question ([20:3–4](#)) confounds his opponents ([vv. 5–7](#)). **as Jesus was teaching.** Cf. [19:47](#). **Do these things** describes Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, but also his healing and teaching in the temple (and throughout his ministry), because he is neither an official priestly authority nor a scribal authority, according to his questioners’ sectarian standards. **Was the baptism**(i.e., the ministry) **of John ... from heaven** (that is, “from God”; [15:7](#), [18](#), [21](#)) **or from man**, i.e., did it have a merely human origin (cf. note on Matt. 21:25–27)? To avoid the dilemma posed by Jesus’ question ([Luke 20:4](#)), his opponents say they do **not know**, because they feared the consequences of speaking against John the Baptist whose divinely authorized ministry was also carried out apart from official Jewish authority. Their confession of ignorance, however, demonstrates that they have no basis upon which to assess Jesus’ ministry. If they do not know

whether John the Baptist was from God, they do not know whether Jesus is, either. Faced with such hostility, Jesus refuses to answer his opponents' question, and exposes their ignorance.

Luke 20:9–18 The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. This parable, while spoken to the people ([vv. 1, 9](#)), is directed to Jesus' opponents ([19:47](#); [20:1, 19](#)) and is intended as an analogy (with many referents) to show that God (the "owner," [v. 13](#)) is taking away the kingdom from Israel (see note on Mark 12:1–12).

Luke 20:10–12 he sent. The man sent three servants, probably representing the OT prophets, to check on the tenants. The second and third servants each received greater abuse than the one preceding him. Cf. the three servants in [19:15–25](#).

Luke 20:13 My beloved son recalls the words spoken by the Father to Jesus at his baptism ([3:22](#); cf. [Matt. 3:17](#)), and therefore here it surely alludes to God's sending of Jesus to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to Israel, and their widespread rejection of him (see [John 1:9–11](#)).

Luke 20:14–15a Let us kill him.

Cf. [19:47](#); [20:19](#). **they ... killed him.** A clear allusion to Jesus' approaching death.

Luke 20:15b What then will the owner ... do to them introduces Jesus' interpretation of the parable. The "owner" (lit., "lord") represents God.

Luke 20:16 God will **destroy those tenants**. In a preliminary sense this happened during the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d.70, but in a fuller sense it refers to the final judgment. **Surely not!** The hearers have some sense that the parable applies to the people of Israel, and they

are hoping that it does not mean that God will give the land of Israel or the kingdom to **others**.

Luke 20:17 The stone ... rejected has become the cornerstone (quoted from [Ps. 118:22](#); see note on Mark 12:10). The rejected Son will become the Head of the church, the people of God. [Psalm 118:22](#) is also quoted in [Acts 4:11](#) and [1 Pet. 2:7](#).

Luke 20:18 Everyone who falls(cf. [Isa. 8:14–15](#); [1 Pet. 2:8](#)) means everyone who stumbles at and rejects Jesus as the Messiah. **When it falls on anyone** refers to Christ coming back in judgment.

Luke 20:19–26 Paying Taxes to Caesar. Realizing that the parable of the wicked tenants ([vv. 9–18](#)) was spoken “against them” ([v. 19](#)), the Jewish leaders try to entrap Jesus in his words.