

LUKE 20:9–19. (EHV)

He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, leased it to some tenant farmers, and went away on a journey for a long time. When it was the right time, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenant farmers beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. The man went ahead and sent yet another servant, but they also beat him, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. He then sent yet a third. They also wounded him and threw him out. The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What should I do? I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenant farmers saw him, they talked it over with one another. They said, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, so that the inheritance will be ours.’ They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. So what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “May it never be!” But he looked at them and said, “Then what about this that is written:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? [Psalm 118:22]

“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush the one on whom it falls.” That very hour the chief priests and the experts in the law began looking for a way to lay hands on him, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

If we have made enemies, even if we only suspect we have made enemies, the last thing we’re inclined to do is go to where they are, right? And if we have to be in the same area or be a part of the same conversation they’re in, we just try to keep our mouths shut and say as little as possible, right? We want to stay out of trouble with our enemies.

This preference of ours should make us marvel all the more at the final steps our Savior took leading up to his crucifixion. Our Savior did not hide from his enemies. He went right into the lion’s den, right into the cobra’s lair. He went into the temple courts day after day and taught the crowds, and that included words like those in the parable I just read, words aimed squarely at the chief priests and experts in the law—the very same enemies who would orchestrate his trial and execution. Jesus’s final steps led to his enemies.

Jesus told this parable probably on Tuesday of Holy Week, right after he had caught the chief priests and experts in the law trying to catch him. As Jesus was teaching and preaching in the temple courts, they asked him, “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things.” Jesus had already made this very clear on multiple occasions and knew that this was a trap. So he told them he would answer their question if they answered one of his own: “Tell me: the baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men?” They knew that if they said from heaven, Jesus would rebuke them for not believing him, and that if they said from men, they would lose favor with the crowds who were convinced John was a prophet. So they said they didn’t know, and Jesus therefore didn’t answer their question either.

Jesus had clearly exposed the hardness of their hearts—their refusal to objectively weigh in the scales of God’s word whether a teaching was true or false, instead judging everything in a

way that would benefit themselves and their own authority. And it was after exposing this hardness that he told this parable.

“A man planted a vineyard, leased it to some tenant farmers, and went away on a journey for a long time.” This may have been a common enough scenario along the Jordan River and around the Sea of Galilee, that a wealthy man would purchase some fertile farmland, plant a vineyard, and then lease it out to other farmers while he went away on a journey. The farmers could make a good living off of the owner’s vineyard, as long as they shared with the owner the portion of the produce or profits agreed to in the contract.

“When it was the right time, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenant farmers beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. The man went ahead and sent yet another servant, but they also beat him, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. He then sent yet a third. They also wounded him and threw him out.” These farmers were not holding up their end of the contract by giving the owner the share of the produce they owed him. Instead they were acting shamefully, in spite of the fact that the owner was being extremely patient with them.

“The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What should I do? I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenant farmers saw him, they talked it over with one another. They said, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, so that the inheritance will be ours.’ They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” The tenant farmers unjustly wanted what belonged only to the owner and his son to belong to them.

“So what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others.”

Jesus’s audience didn’t miss the point. Luke tells us “that very hour the chief priests and the experts in the law began looking for a way to lay hands on him, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them.” Instead of avoiding his enemies, or keeping his mouth shut around them, Jesus publicly told a parable in the hearing of his enemies where he clearly put them in a long line of prophet-persecutors. Elijah had preached to the people to turn to the Lord and produce the fruit of righteousness. He was repeatedly persecuted by King Ahab. Isaiah had preached to the people to turn to the Lord and produce the fruit of righteousness. According to tradition, he was sawed in half. Jeremiah had done the same, and was persecuted by priests, false prophets, officials, and kings, before supposedly being stoned to death. John the Baptist had done the same, and was beheaded by King Herod. And now here was Jesus, God’s own Son, and all the religious leaders wanted to do was trap him and, Jesus knew, also do much worse than that.

But rather than hearing Jesus’s call to repentance, they once again judged his parable in a way advantageous to themselves and the preservation of their own authority and ideas. His parable only intensified their desire to do the very thing Jesus prophesied they would do in his parable.

Are we only judging Jesus’s parable in a way advantageous to us? Are we only using Jesus’s parable to shake our heads at the Jewish chief priests and experts in the law? Are we listening to the last line of Jesus’s parable? “He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others.”

Who are the “others”? Aren’t they the gentiles? Aren’t they us? How are we doing with the Lord’s vineyard, with his word and its ministry? Are we cherishing and protecting them? Are we putting them to good use in our lives? Are we daily turning to the Lord and producing the fruit of righteousness? Or are we just ho-hum about his kingdom? Or like the tenant farmers in Jesus’s parable, do we want what belongs to God and his Son alone? Do we want to be our own gods? Do we want our own will to be master, rather than submitting to his?

“Everyone who falls on that stone,” namely Christ, “will be broken to pieces, and it will crush the one on whom it falls.” Whether we trip and fall on Jesus and his word because we don’t like what he has to say, or if we ignore it completely and Jesus comes to crush us—either way, Jesus will not be the loser. We will not take his place. We will lose. Jesus will destroy us, and give his vineyard to others.

May that never be.

May we instead hear the good news that Jesus’s steps not only led to his Jewish enemies, to call them to repentance, but also to us. For we are all God’s enemies by nature. May we hear Paul when he writes that “when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10). Rather than going away grumbling about what Jesus has to say about us, may we repent and sigh to God, “Once that was true, but by your grace, no more!” Rather than rejecting and tripping and falling over Christ the cornerstone, let us build and anchor our lives on him, both our earthly lives and eternal lives. Let us, as the psalmist says, kiss the Son, lest he be angry (Psalm 2:12). In the parable, the vineyard owner said, “I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him.” Let us respect the Son the Father has sent. Let us listen to him and believe in him, and let us continually offer to him the fruit, not of vines, but of lips that confess his name. Amen.