



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 20:1-18

To understand more about Jesus' authority and why the chief priests and scribes still rejected Him.

What the Story Can't Overcome

Throughout Luke's Gospel (and the other Gospel accounts for that matter), you will encounter a number of purposeful parables from the Lord Jesus that illustrate something He was teaching to whichever crowd was listening to Him at the time. As it turns out (unsurprisingly), this is an exceptionally persuasive method. In a fascinating collaboration, literary scholars and neuroscientists have teamed up to explore the impact that stories have on the human brain. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article by Allison Gopnik entitled "Want a Mind Meld? Tell a Compelling Story," described a variety of brain scan studies that show that stories not only shape one's thoughts, but also foster a connection between a storyteller and listener. The closer the connection, the greater the understanding of the story. Gopnik concluded that "results suggest that we lowly humans are actually as good at mind-melding as *Star Trek's Vulcans* or the *Borg*. We just do it with stories." Other experiments have looked at how stories help develop neural pathways, and affect our relationships by altering how we order and understand information.

This is both an interesting finding and an equally sad reality; the parables unlock the truth for some and seem to prevent the truth for others (Matt. 13:11-13). This means that a story can be as effective as possible according to even the most advanced brain studies and still not connect with the listener if their hearts are hardened (Mk. 8:17).

A Question of Authority

Verses 1 and 2 begin the next scene: “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 and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.” We are not given an exact time marker for how much time has passed since Jesus cleansed the Temple (Lk. 19:45-48); it simply begins with “one day.” However, given the imminency of Jesus’ approach to Jerusalem, it’s reasonable to believe that not too much time had passed. Below are some key details in this passage.

CHIEF PRIESTS AND SCRIBES

Luke describes the audience as “the chief priests and the scribes with the elders” (Lk. 20:1). While all three are complicit in this ploy, the main underlying trouble makers in this bunch are the chief priests and the scribes. Remember, when Luke wrote this Gospel account, he did not break it down with chapters and verses. Just prior to this passage, in Luke 19:47-48, we are told following the cleansing of the Temple: “And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.” It is possible that the “principal men” are the same “elders” Luke mentions in Luke 20:1, but that would be an assumption. However, we do not need to assume anything concerning the chief priests and the scribes; they were explicitly intent on destroying Jesus. This is an important distinction to make for at least one contemporary reason. Often, the Pharisees are blamed for the persecution and death of Jesus more than anyone else, and yet it’s the chief priests and scribes that seem to be primarily behind the attack. While Jesus contends with the Pharisees a lot, it does seem that they are less hostile towards Him than the others.

THE TABLES TURNED

The question of authority is turned over onto themselves by Jesus in verses 3 and 4: “He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?” This was a tactically formed question, and they knew it: “And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet” (Lk. 20:5-6). Knowing they would not answer this question, Jesus answered their question: “And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

This entire exchange demonstrates not only the ill-intent of the chief priests and scribes but also how deficient they were in challenging the Lord. Jesus anticipated the schemes of the religious leaders; he knows the hearts of all men (Jn. 2:23-25).

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Following this exchange with the chief priests, scribes, and principal men, Jesus “began to tell the people this parable” (Lk. 20:9). The parable further develops the evil schemes of the religious leaders of Jesus’ time. Below is a breakdown of the different characters in the parable and who they represent.

THE VINEYARD OWNER

The owner of the vineyard represents God the Father. The vineyard is sometimes wrongly thought to be earth as the kingdom of God is established. This is incorrect. The vineyard is people of God, in this context Israel, as the privileged people of God who enjoy God’s covenant blessings. This is solidified by Jesus’ words in Matthew 21:43: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” These people to whom the kingdom will be given are the Gentiles.

THE SERVANTS

The servants are sent on behalf of the vineyard owner to collect the fruit produced from the vineyard, but each time they are sent they are beaten and treated horribly. They represent the prophets. The prophets are sent to call Israel to repent and bear fruit as the covenant people of God, and they repeatedly reject the prophets and treat them with disdain (Matt. 23:37).

THE OWNER'S SON

Given that the owner represents God the Father, it is obvious that the owner's son represents Jesus, the Son of God (Lk. 3:22). Jesus is speaking of Himself prophetically in this parable as He prophesies His own death at the hands of the evil tenants who are jealous of the son.

THE TENANTS

It was an established Palestinian practice in Jesus' day for vineyard owners to leave in place tenants to work the land while they journeyed for significant periods of time. This parable picks up on a well-known horticultural practice. The tenants in this parable are the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

This parable speaks to the previous question of authority, but addresses a much deeper issue. The issue the chief priests and scribes raise concerning authority is proven to be empty by this parable. The parable illustrates that even when someone (the son of the vineyard owner) comes with real authority (the authority of his father), the tenants will still reject him and kill him because their hearts are hard and full of jealousy. Jesus comes and teaches in the authority from heaven, but that doesn't matter to chief priests and scribes; they are jealous and will reject Him and kill Him because their hearts are hard.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the reality that a hard heart is impenetrable. Great storytellings (parables) and divine authority are important, but without divine grace to soften the heart it will make no real impact. Another takeaway is the devastating effects of jealousy. Jealousy leads the wicked tenants to murder the vineyard owner's son. Christians would do well to guard their hearts against jealousy of any kind lest they face the devastating effects of it on their lives and relationships.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 20:1-2. Who approached Jesus and asked Him questions while he was teaching? What question did they ask him?

2. Read Luke 20:3-4. How did Jesus respond to this question? What was the question He asked them?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 20:5-8. How did they discuss this question before answering it? What did they ultimately decide to do instead of answering the question? How did Jesus respond to them?

2. Read Luke 20:9. What does Jesus begin to tell the people? Who are the characters in the parable in this verse?
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Day Three

1. Read Luke 20:10-12. Who did the vineyard owner send in succession to gather the fruit from his vineyard from the tenants? How did the tenants respond to the servants?
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2. Read Luke 20:13-15. Who did the vineyard send after the three servants? What did the tenants do to him, and why?
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Day Four

1. Read Luke 20:16. What did the vineyard owner do to the tenants for their crimes?
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2. Read Luke 20:17-18. What was the crowd's reaction to this parable? How does Jesus assure them that the parable is true? Read Psalm 118:22, Acts 4:11, and 1 Peter 2:7. Who are these verses about?
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Week 72 Discussion: Jealousy Kills

In Luke 20:1-18, Jesus is challenged by the chief priests and scribes concerning His authority, and in response He tells the parable of the wicked tenants. In the parable, the tenants kill the vineyard owner's son out of Jealousy. Talk as a group about the sin of jealousy and the devastating effects it can have on your life.

1. Icebreaker: What is one way jealousy has negatively effected you in the last couple of years?
2. Are you a jealous person? Why or why not?
3. Would other people close to you in your life describe you as jealous? Why or why not?
4. Read James 3:16. What does jealousy lead to?
5. Read Galatians 5:19-21. What are the works of the flesh? How do these all work together?
6. What is the most effective way someone can help you fight feelings of jealousy?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus is questioned by the chief priests and scribes concerning His authority.
2. Jesus responds to them by telling the parable of the wicked tenants.