

Jesus Christ the Cornerstone (Luke 20:1-19, c.f. Isaiah 56)



A. The Den of Thieves

1. Just a day before, Jesus cleansed the temple with a whip. He overturned the money changers' tables and called the temple *'a den of thieves'*, the hideout for thieves in between jobs. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was dotted with the caves of bandits. The pilgrims finally make it safely to Jerusalem to worship God, only to find the real thieves hiding in the temple, out to rob them.
2. How did they rob the worshippers? (a) They forced the pilgrims to buy the 'temple-certified animals' at jacked-up prices but the law allowed the worshippers to offer their own animals. (b) They only allowed the special 'temple coins' to be used as the exchange medium. Worshippers exchanged their currency with the 'temple coins' at high exchange rates, so they could make monetary offerings to the Lord or buy the sacrificial animals. It was double-dipping! (c) This was all were done in the name of religion. They used religion as a 'cloak' for their 'corrupt business' and a 'safe hideout' as thieves. Instead of being dressed as bandits, they were dressed in liturgical robes!

But none of them were legitimate authority! Herod was an illegitimate king, an Edomite. Caiaphas was an illegitimate High Priest, not of Aaronic bloodline but a Roman puppet. The illegitimate temple regulations departed far from the law of Moses.

3. Jesus ruffled the feathers of the powerful religious people who profited from the temple business. His words and actions were the worst kind of insults to them! After Jesus cleared out the temple and took back its ground, He made it a 'place of revelation' by daily teaching there right up to the end, fulfilling God's original intention for the temple. Now the temple ground, the Father's house, the House of Prayer, becomes the battleground between the 'temple authorities' and Jesus the prophet from Galilee. This was only Round One.

B. The Question of Authority (20:1-8)

1. The temple authorities were the 'chief priests, the scribes together with the elders.' They confronted Jesus, *'Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?'* (20:2) 'Who do you think you are? This is our temple. Who gave you the authority to rearrange the temple ground?' Despite Jesus' enormous popularity with the common people, He was still only a country town preacher from Galilee with poor connections in religious circles, whereas the temple authorities had the 'political connection' and the 'religious power' behind them. They probably hoped Jesus would say, 'I am the Messiah,' as the crowd hailed (C.f. 19:38), so they could destroy Him through the hands of the political powers behind them.
2. However, Jesus answered them a question, *'I also will ask you one thing and answer Me. The baptism of John – was it from heaven or from men?'* (20:3-4) 'You tell me your position on John the Baptist, and I will tell you from whom comes My authority. Was John a self-appointed preacher? Or was he a God-appointed prophet? Did God authorise John to baptise people into repentance? Or was it just a man's idea?' Jesus put them on the spot. John the Baptist had no title. He was no 'Reverend'. He was not associated with their theological education from the 'temple institute'. He was not one of them. So, they did not endorse him. But if they said John was not sent by God, there will be a riot and they will be stoned by the Passover crowd (20:6). Many were baptised by John and believed him to be a prophet. And the memory of John's beheading by Herod Antipas and the deep grief it caused was still fresh among the Jews. So, the temple authorities were forced to stay neutral, *'We do not know.'* (20:7)
3. Jesus also refused to answer them, *'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'* (20:8) Why not? Because they were not interested in the truth, only in retaining their power. But the answer to the question on John's authority to baptise, was the answer to the question on Jesus' authority to cleanse the temple. Jesus' authority and John's authority came from the same source – God. In fact, John pointed Jesus out of the crowd and revealed who He was, *'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the*

world! I did not know Him but He who sent me to baptise with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, this is He who baptises with the Holy Spirit.' (Jn 1:29-33)

Those who received John also received Jesus. Those who rejected John also rejected Jesus. For John's mission from God was to prepare the way of the Lord, and make people ready for Him.

C. Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (20:9-16)

1. Jesus now tells them a parable about an absentee landlord of a vineyard. He is quoting from Isaiah 5:2 (C.f. Mark 12:1 & Matt 21:33), who portrayed the people of Israel as God's beloved vineyard (Is 5:1ff). (a) The owner of the vineyard is God. (b) The vineyard is Israel. (c) The tenants are religious leaders. (c) The servants are the prophets who were sent to collect the fruit for God. (d) The beloved son of the vineyard owner is Jesus. Now every time the prophets were sent to Israel, they were rejected like Jeremiah, and some were killed like Isaiah. God the patient landlord said, *'These tenants are trying to take over the vineyard. What shall I do? I will send my beloved son. They will respect my son.'* (20:13) However, when He sent His beloved son Jesus, they cast Him out and killed Him (20:15). Why? If they get rid of the heir to the vineyard, there will be no one to inherit it, then they can claim the vineyard as theirs.

2. In those days with no public recording and accounting system for title deeds, tenants would sometimes claim the land of the absentee landlords (Talmud, Baba Bathra 35b, 40b). Anyone who used the land for 3 years could presume ownership over it in the absence of an alternative claim (Mishna, Baba Bathra 3:1).

In Australia, there is a similar law, but it takes 12 years. A Sydney man, Bill Gertos used this law to claim an abandoned house worth \$1.3M in 1998 when the owner died. He changed the locks and rented it out for 12 years, then claimed it as his own.

However, these tenants in this parable wanted to claim the vineyard while the owner and his son were alive and well! Every time the landlord's servants came to collect the fruit, they beat them away from the vineyard, so they leave no record of rent payment to the owner. In the end, the tenants became so brazen, they even killed the landlord's heir, so they could take the vineyard as theirs.

Jesus asks them, *'Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those vinedressers and give the vineyard to others.'* (20:15-16) What would you do?

3. Jesus is making three assertions to the temple authorities here:

a) God will not allow you, the deluded tenants, to get away with your evil. *'What do you think God would do to you, priests, scribes and elders? You will be utterly destroyed, and the vineyard will be handed over to those worthier than you.'* This is why GI is not a synagogue today although we are worshipping the God of the Jews. Israel had a personal relationship with the living God for 2000 years before the Church. But God took the vineyard and gave it to the Gentiles during the last 2000 years. It was the greatest tragedy in history (and an 'unintended blessing to the world') that for the past 2000 years God's vineyard has been looked after primarily by the Gentile Christians, and not the Jews who were the original custodians.

b) I am the Son and the Heir. My authority comes from My Father who owns the vineyard. *This is why I overturned the money changers' tables and drove out the merchants out of the temple, which is My Father's house, that has been taken over by the religious bandits and thieves.'* As a boy of twelve, Jesus stood in that temple courtyard and said, *'This is My Father's house. I must do My Father's business.'* Now at the age of thirty-three, Jesus stands in the temple, *'You have turned My Father's house into a den of thieves when My Father's dream for it was to be the House of Prayer for all nations! I have the authority as the Son and Heir to cleanse My Father's house and take it back from you, a bunch of thieves. I came looking for fruit and I found none.'* (C.f. Matt 21:21-22; Mark 11:20 - Jesus cursed the fig tree and it immediately withered.)

c) Furthermore, I know what you will do to me. You will kill Me for the same reason these tenants killed the son. *I know you don't want me here because you don't want My Father here. You just want this*

temple for yourself. But you will be judged, and My Father's vineyard will be given to others worthier than you.

The temple authorities reacted in horror, 'Certainly not!' (v16), in Greek '*mē genoito*', i.e. 'Heaven forbid!' (i) They had no trouble understanding the parable. They knew perfectly what Jesus was saying. (ii) Their hearts were already identified with the wicked tenants. They were already planning to kill Jesus (19:47).

D. The Rejected Stone (20:9-16)

1. Jesus then switched the subject from vineyard to building, and asked them, 'What does this text mean to you?' (v17): 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone' (Ps 118:22). Jesus was quoting from the same Psalm from which the crowd shouted, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD!' (Ps 118:26 c.f. Luke 19:38) Incidentally, Ps 118:22 is one of the favourite Bible verses in the early church. (c.f. Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7) It foretells that the Messiah would not immediately take over when He comes initially, but he will be rejected by the builders in charge of the building, i.e. the temple.

The chief cornerstone ('head of the corner', capstone, foundation stone, headstone) is the most important stone in the building. It joins the two walls and holds them together as the foundation stone. It holds everything from the ground up, so that if this stone were to be pulled out from its position, the whole building would collapse. But that would be an impossible feat. Imagine the sheer weight on this stone!

2. The builders in charge decided this stone doesn't fit their plan for the building, so they tried to pull it out of its place. But God the rightful owner of the building declared, 'No, that is the right cornerstone for the building. That stone will decide the width and breadth of My House.' The religious leaders would kill Jesus out of greed, envy and jealousy, but they still would not be able to pull Him out of His place. God planned to build from the ground up with His Son as the chief cornerstone, and everything must be built on this stone. (C.f. Is 8:14-15 & Dan 2:34-35) So Jesus, the very stone the builders didn't want, became the chief cornerstone that decides the very boundary of the new temple, fulfilling God's dream of Isa 56:4-6 to bring the eunuchs and the gentiles into His house. This would be fulfilled through Jesus Christ.
3. To fall on this stone was to be broken, but to have the stone fall on them was to be crushed. When Jesus moves in judgment against his enemies, no power on earth will be able to resist Him. It will mean their destruction. Our response toward this 'stone' will decide our eternal destiny in heaven or hell.

They got the message so clearly that they sought to lay their hands-on Jesus that very hour, but they could not (20:19) because Jesus was too popular with the crowd. The haters of Jesus were the religious elites in the centre of the religious system who profited from it. It was a religion of convenience and a religion of exploitation. People got all kinds of power and prestige from it. St Peter's Church in Rome was built by selling 'indulgence' all over Europe. (You could 'purchase' with money your family member's salvation out of purgatory.) Religion can become a den of thieves and a cloak of respectability, hiding unclean things on the inside such as envy, jealousy and greed. And this religion is what crucified Christ.

Will GI be willing to go all the way with Jesus Christ, or be content to play 'comfortable religion'? Jesus is inspecting His Church and every individual member in this hour.

4. In Jerusalem lies the largest temple stone from 2000 years ago - 40 feet long, 12 feet high, 14 feet deep, and weighing close to 600 tons, an equivalent of two Boeing 747 Airplanes. How did they put the stone there? No one knows. When the Roman army destroyed the temple, they tried to break that stone. Titus tried to break it, but he couldn't. They huffed and puffed. In the end, they didn't break the stone, but the stone broke them. They left bewildered.

Jesus said, 'I will build My church (made up of Jews and Gentiles) and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' What God is doing now? Franklin Graham (Gentile) and Jonathan Cahn (Jew) were leading the national prayer gatherings in Washington DC last week! Gentile churches need to repent for: (a) putting the stumbling block before the children of Israel – the replacement theology, and (b) holding the doctrine of Nicolaitans (people's victory) – propagating the cross-less Christianity. (Rev 2:12-16)