

Focal Text

Luke 20:9-19

Background

Psalm 24:1; John 3:16-17;
Romans 5:8

lesson 14

Christmas

The Surprising Truth About God

MAIN IDEA

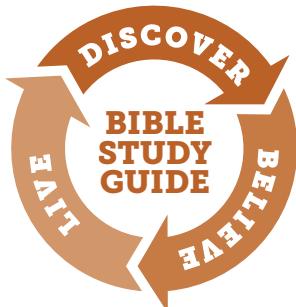
If you receive God's Son, you will receive God's forgiveness.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Have I received the greatest gift God ever gave—Jesus Christ?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to examine what the Bible says about who God is and how much He loves us



Bible Comments

Understanding the Context

The parable of the tenants or vinedressers remains a difficult parable to interpret. Still, the parable shares a Christological or Christ-centered focus. Christ hails as God's beloved Son who loves the world and came to bring salvation to all people. Christ in Luke's gospel and in this parable invited His hearers to believe, to respond to His words, and not to refuse the eternal life.

The wider context finds this parable set against a common theme in Luke: the Pharisees and other religious leaders of Israel seek to question Jesus's authority, to ignore His message, and to kill Jesus (Luke 5:21, 30, 33; 6:2, 7; 7:30; 11:53-54; 16:14). The chief priests, the supreme Jewish council known as the Sanhedrin, the scribes, and elders sought for ways to catch Jesus breaking the Jewish law and have him killed because they feared His teaching, His influence over the crowds, and His actions (Mark 11:18). For example, Jesus overturning the table of the moneychangers in the Temple arrested the Jewish leaders' senses and angered them so much they wanted to kill Jesus (Mark 11:12-17; Luke 19:47-48).

During this Christmas season, we remember that attempts on Jesus's life were not new. King Herod wished to kill Jesus; the babe born in Bethlehem. Jesus' parents fled with their baby to Egypt for safety, but many other male babies died in the poignant words of Matthew who recorded the prophet Jeremiah's lament, "Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:18; Matthew 2:1-23).

The immediate context found Jesus again in the Temple having His authority questioned (Luke 20:1-8). Obviously, the chief priest, teachers of the law, and Jewish elders did not believe Jesus or His powerful, often thought-provoking, life-changing words. Jesus heard this questioning of His authority and turned the conversation on its head and back at the Jewish religious leaders by placing them in the parable

The parable unfolds by looking at several key items: the vineyard, the owner of the vineyard, the tenants, the servants, the son, the punishment, and the “others.” Similar versions of the parable are also found in Mark 12:1-12 and Matthew 21:33-46. A reader of the parable must understand and interpret the parable considering Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leaders of Israel.

Interpreting the Scriptures

The Vineyard, the Servants, and Tenants (20:9-12)

20:9. Jesus told the story of a man who planted a vineyard and rented it to farmers. Recall that a parable is a “story alongside a story” with details, scenes, and circumstances common to life in the days of Jesus. The parable fits nicely after the story of the Jewish religious leaders’ questions about Jesus’ authority. The familiarity of farmers, vineyards, and the idea of tenants and servants would fit the common landscape of an agrarian culture.

20:10-12. Harvest time arrived and the owner of the vineyard sent one of his servants to visit the tenants of the farm and secure fruit from the vineyard. Shockingly, the tenants sent the servant away empty-handed, in vain. The tenants also beat the servant, that is, they whipped, thrashed, scourged, and repeatedly hit the servant. Jesus, His disciples, and the apostle Paul all experienced similar beatings as recorded in Luke and Acts (Luke 22:63; Acts 5:40; 16:37).

The owner sent a second servant and a third servant. The second servant received a beating, was despised and dishonored, and sent away empty-handed. The dishonor shamed the servant and humiliated him. The tenants wounded the third servant and threw him out of the vineyard. The term “wound” in Greek translates, literally, “traumatized,” that is, the inflicted wounds created trauma for the victim. The Scripture emphasized the fierceness, sinfulness, and unvirtuous nature of the tenants.

Note four important items at this point in the parable. First, the vineyard symbolized Israel. This was common knowledge and announced by the prophets Isaiah (5:1-7) and Jeremiah (12:10). Second, God owns the vineyard. He is the owner. After all, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1) and He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10).

Third, the servants, more than likely, are the prophets. The prophets proclaimed God’s truth. They heralded God’s covenant plan beyond the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They revealed the power of Moses and the Law. They acclaimed the forgiveness of sins (Isaiah 1:18), God’s promise of a new day (Jeremiah 31:27-40), and the Lord’s requirements: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah, according to legend, died violent deaths. King Herod beheaded John the Baptist, the last in a line of Old Testament prophets. Scholars cannot name the prophets whom the Jews killed here, but every interpretation point to God’s servants as the prophets (Daniel 9:6; 9:10).

Fourth, hidden subtly beneath the layers of God sending His servants (the prophets) three times is the thought of God’s patience, God’s relentless love, and effort to draw humankind to himself.

Second Peter 3:9 relays this message, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” The word “patient” here, *makrothumia* in Greek, means “slow to pay back a wrong.” God longs for people to know Him and demonstrates extreme patience. Moreover, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God’s love reaches to the depths of the earth, to the depths of the human heart, patiently waiting for souls to turn to Him and repent.

The Son (20:13-15)

20:13. The owner of the vineyard pondered curiously his next move. What should he do? He decided to send his son in hope that the tenants will turn toward him in reverence and respect. It almost seems bizarre that the owner

would send his son after the servants had been beaten, but it shows the risk, the importance, and the depth of the owner's concern for the vineyard, the tenants, and his kingdom investment. Both Mark 12:6 and Luke 20:13 describe the son as "loved," that is, a son supremely valued and loved above all. Might Luke use the term "loved" as reminder to his readers of how God is well pleased with the Son and the worthiness of His words (Luke 3:22; 9:35, "This is my beloved Son: hear him" (KJV)? The son's arrival at the vineyard creates a pivotal turning point in the parable.

20:14-15. The tenants treated the beloved son worse than the servants. They threw him out of the vineyard and killed the son. The tenants may have believed the owner died and the heir came to claim ownership, thus by killing the son they could claim ownership of the vineyard. Some Bible scholars see the words "out of" as an indirect reference to Jesus's suffering and dying "outside the gate" of Jerusalem on Golgotha, known as "Skull Hill" in Aramaic and 'Calvary' in Latin. The Romans executed Jesus by brutal crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem. Christ's love knew no limits, suffering at the hands of the Romans and dying, "obedient unto death," as a humble servant to give life to those who believe Him (Philippians 2:5-11). This truth joined with the joy of resurrection produces both hope and joy at Christmas.

The Owner (20:15-16)

This parable as with other parables possesses within it an interior dialogue or monologue, often asking rhetorical questions. One question followed: What then will the owner of the vineyard do to the tenants who killed the beloved son? The answer to the question, arrive forcefully, suddenly. The owner will return to the farm, to the vineyard, kill the tenants, and give the vineyard to others. The term "others" appears unclear. Will the owner give the vineyard to other prophets or to the apostles or to the disciples or to the church? An attempt to give an exact explanation remains speculative, but the imaginative mind and the New Testament lean toward Jeremiah's announcement of a new covenant, the covenant of blood, and a better covenant in Jesus (Jeremiah 31:31; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 7:22).

The Response of the Crowd (20:16)

Jesus' storytelling, parabolic words shocked the crowd. The crowd shouted, "God forbid." In Greek the word emphatically implies, "God forbid that this would happen." The crowd's response almost seemed strange considering the brutality, viciousness, and violent actions of the tenants. Yet, somehow, the crowd, the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders, scribes, elders, and other people present understood Jesus' message. Always protective of the piety and religious prowess, the crowd did not wish ill-will upon their leaders.

The Response of Jesus (20:17-18)

20:17. Jesus fixed His eyes on the crowd as He turned toward them and quoted Psalm 118:22-23: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The capstone (cornerstone) hails as the crowning stone, the stone on top of the wall, or 1 Peter 2:6 says, "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame" (Acts 4:11; Isaiah 28:16).

20:18. Jesus interpreted His spoken words from the Psalm. The Jewish leaders and those who did not believe in Jesus, already were falling and stumbling over the stone, Jesus. But soon, in the throes of judgment, the stone they rejected would fall upon them and crush them like a rock falling from a wall and crushing them to pieces, literally, "crushing them to powder." The owner returns to the vineyard. Judgment comes.

The Response of the Jewish Religious Leaders (20:19)

The Jewish leaders knew personally that Jesus had told the parable *on* them and *about* them. The chief priests and scribes of Israel immediately began to seek ways to have Jesus arrested. However, cut to the heart by Jesus's words and afraid of the power of the gathered crowd, they must have departed and yet kept a close eye on Jesus by spying on Him (Luke 20:20).

Focusing on the Meaning

Christmas arrives each year with the same stories: family gatherings, gifts shared, Christmas lights, Christmas trees, and Christmas cheer. It also comes with a familiar message: Christ is born, joy to the world, and glad tidings of great joy to all people. But Christmas also comes announcing God's love, His patient, shepherding care, and His far-reaching hand of eternal salvation.

This parable urges caution: Do not miss the word of the prophets and the message of the new covenant of salvation through Christ by faith and grace (Ephesians 2:8-10). The parable arrests the senses: Do not refuse the gospel and do not reject God's beloved Son. The parable also offers hope: God sent His beloved Son into the world to bring salvation to those who believe in Him. The parable also reminds us of God's patient, redeeming, ever swirling love. Love came down at Christmas. Love endured the cross. Love rose again. Love conquers all. Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails..." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). The wise saint, sinner, servant, or tenant responds to Jesus's love by believing in Him.

Teaching Plans

DISCOVERY PLAN

Connect With Life

1. As class members enter the room, have them list their favorite and least favorite Christmas gift they have ever received. This list can be on a dry erase board or butcher paper hanging from the wall. Ask the following questions?
 - What made your best gift so great? What was so bad about your worst gift?
 - Have you ever rejected a Christmas gift before? Why? How did the gift giver feel? If no one has ever experienced this, ask why someone might reject a gift and how they think the gift giver might feel?
 - God's greatest gift to His creation is His Son. What makes this such a great gift? Why would people reject this gift?

Guide Bible Study

2. When you are given a gift, you have a choice to receive or reject the gift. If you receive God's gift of His beloved Son, you receive forgiveness through a restored relationship with the Father. Have someone read John 1:12. Summarize "God is Loving" from the *Study Guide* to help the class understand the character of God and the human heart. Ask the following questions:
 - A gift says a lot about the giver. What does God's gift reveal about His nature and character?
 - What would rejecting God's gift reveal about the receiver?

3. Have a volunteer read the sidebar, “Who Is God?” found in the *Study Guide*. Genesis is often called the story of creation, but really it is the story of God. God is the focus. The focus is not creation or the creative process. Explain to the class that the gift is often rejected because the receiver or the gift have become the focus. When the giver, God, is the focus, the gift is often received. The gift is received because the receiver realizes the giver is good. In Genesis 1, you see the two words “I” and “good” throughout the verses. God is the focus. God’s character is good. Have a volunteer read James 1:17. Ask the following questions:

- Does the Christian perception of God lead Christians to believe God exists for them or that they exist for God? Do the daily lives of Christians place a priority on God, or do Christians prioritize their lives?
- How would you explain to someone that God should be the focus of their life and that the gift of His Son is good?

4. Despite our best efforts to share the Good News of the Gospel, many people will reject the Gospel. Make a copy of the “Introduction” from the *Study Guide*. Divide the class into groups. Have each group read and discuss the “Introduction.” Have them answer the following questions and then share their discussion with the entire group.

- The tenants of the vineyard rejected the owner’s attempts four times. What do you think their reasons and thought processes were in rejecting the owner? How are people today like the tenants in rejecting God?
- Verse 16 shows the surprise of the people as they cry out, “God forbid!” Why do you think they were surprised at the owner’s response?
- What do you think most people would be surprised to know about God’s nature and the gift of His Son? Why?

(A copy of this assignment is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.gc2press.org.)

Encourage Application

5. This parable should change how you view Christmas. The parable should change how you celebrate and share Christmas with others. Spend some time as a class discussing the four questions in the *Study Guide*.
6. Give the class time to think of and choose the name of someone in their life who needs to hear the truth about who God is and how much He loves them this Christmas season. Have the class pair off and pray for the names selected. Also spend time praying that class members would have an opportunity and the courage to share this truth.

DISCUSSION PLAN

Connect With Life

1. To begin class today, ask class members to share some of the most surprising Christmas gifts they received. Ask, *Why were they surprised by these gifts?* Say, *Christmas can be filled with surprises. Today, we are going to look at some surprising truths about God.*
2. Share with the class that the title of today's lesson is *The Surprising Truth About God*. Since this is a Christmas lesson, ask the following questions:
 - What is one truth about Christmas that surprised you when you first learned it?
 - What are some possible truths about Christmas that you think might surprise non-believers?
3. The passage for today's Christmas lesson is also a little surprising. The passage is about an owner, a vineyard, and tenants. Ask the class, *How do you think this passage might relate to Christmas?* After giving time to answer, summarize "Understanding the Context" from the "Bible Comments" to give a foundation of knowledge for today's lesson.

Guide Bible Study

4. The Bible is the revelation of God's character. God revealed Himself by sending His Son to die and restore the broken relationship between the Creator and His creation. God sent His Son, and His Son was rejected. Ask the following questions:

- Why was God's Son rejected? Do you think Jesus was rejected because people do not truly know and understand God's character?
- Do you think people have different understandings of God? What are some different ways people may view God?

5. Write on the board the outline from the *Study Guide*.

- God Is Good—He Gives Us the World to Tend (20:9)
- God Is Patient—He Sends Us Many Messengers (20:10-12)
- God Is Loving—He Sent His Only Son (20:13-15)
- God Is Holy—He Will Punish Sin (20:16-19)

Use this outline to help the class more clearly understand God's character. As you work through the outline, help the class see how the characteristics of God prove both He and His gift are good. The final learning goal of the outline is that the class would see that because the gift is good, we should accept the gift.

6. Now that the class has a deeper knowledge of God's nature, lead the class to discuss the four questions found under "Applying the Parable" in the *Study Guide*. Encourage them to answer the questions through the lens of their new understanding of who God is.

Encourage Application

7. As a class spend time finding and sharing Scriptures that reveal God's nature and character. Have class members write down the Scriptures. Challenge the class to use these verses to share with others about who God is and His love for us this Christmas season.