

# **BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary**

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## **Studies in Jesus Storyteller: Timeless Truths from His Parables (A Study of Luke)**

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Lesson Christmas

### **The Surprising Truth About God**

#### ***Focal Text***

Luke 20:9-19

#### ***Background***

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

#### ***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.

#### ***Study Aim***

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

#### ***Quick Read***

This parable not only highlights the surprising truth about the loving character of God but also reveals the utter wickedness of the human heart that rejects God's greatest gift—Jesus Christ.

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## Introduction

Christmas is a season of joy. Everyone loves the infant Jesus. Culture has added to the biblical story bringing holiday cheer with Christmas trees, gift giving and caroling. Churches prepare for Christmas weeks in advance emphasizing the Sundays of Advent: hope, peace, joy and love. One of the greatest celebrations of the year is the Christmas Eve service where families come together to celebrate the birth of the Savior. Seldom do we mention the prophecy of Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was looking for the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit revealed to him he would not die until he saw the Lord's Christ. When Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus to the Temple, Simeon took the baby into his arms and declared, "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel (Luke 2:29-32)."<sup>1</sup> Simeon continued, "Behold this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed (34-35)."

The baby Jesus we celebrate often makes no demands of us. He is an innocent child. We even clean up the barn where Jesus is born and describe a scene of adoration, praise and even a silent baby. We ignore the pain of childbirth for Mary, the noise of the crowded city, the stench of the animals and the oppression of the Romans. In all of the gospels only about three chapters are dedicated to the story of Jesus' birth while one third of the gospel of John is dedicated to the week of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Yet the typical evangelical church primarily sets aside only the week leading up to the Resurrection of Christ to consider the events and teachings of those last days. The baby in a manger is much more comforting than the symbol of a cross. How can we truly celebrate the birth of Christ without also preparing for His second coming?

The Advent of Christ is a reminder of the awfulness of our sins that required the incarnation of Christ coming as One among us to be the redemption of our sins (Philippians 2:5-11). Simeon knew the baby he held would bring the pain of a sword piercing the heart of Mary upon His crucifixion.

During the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, perhaps on that Tuesday just days before His death, Jesus challenged the authority of the religious leaders, exposed the hypocrisy of those looking for an opportunity to kill Him, and shared a parable of the vine-growers illustrating God's purpose for the events soon to take place.

## ***Commentary***

### **The Parable of the Tenants**

The followers of Jesus were probably perplexed at the events surrounding the last week before His resurrection. Jesus had already announced to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem where He would be killed and then be resurrected (Matthew 16:21). Peter rebuked Him for such fatalistic thoughts. Undoubtedly His closest followers were still confused about the nature of His kingdom. The risk of returning to Jerusalem during the time of the celebration of the Passover was extremely high not only for Jesus but also for His disciples. Thomas said, "Let us go, so that we may die with Him (John 11:16)." Yet when they arrived in Jerusalem it appeared the crowds were in support of Jesus. The crowd began to praise Jesus with loud voices for the miracles they had seen, shouting, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest (Luke 19:38)!"

Rather than keeping a low-profile Jesus drove the traders out of the Temple and continued publicly sharing parables of rebuke against the religious leaders. The Pharisees wanted to arrest Him, but they were cautious because the people were hanging on every word of Jesus (Luke 19:48). The crowds and even Jesus' closest followers must have been asking: Is He the Messiah? Is this the time He will restore the Kingdom to Israel? Is His life and are our lives in danger from the authorities?

One of the days of that week has been called the day of questioning, when folks were asking Jesus questions, some seeking life and others trying to trap Jesus. One of the parables is found in all three of the synoptic gospels: Mark 12:1-9, Matthew 21:33-41 and Luke 20: 9-18 the Parable of the Vine-growers. The imagery of the story was familiar because it was not unusual for absentee landowners to own land, leased out to tenants while they lived in a foreign place. "But an absentee landlord is fair game if the tenants see their chance. They paid their rent in blows. The landlord realizing that the situation was serious, sent his son to deal with it. The son of the proprietor would surely command a respect which was denied to the slaves who had represented him in the first instance. They murdered the landlord's son, cast his body unburied outside the vineyard, and seized the property."<sup>2</sup>

The story makes even more sense when we recognize the conditions of the country at that time. "Palestine, and Galilee in particular, was a disaffected region. Since the revolt of Judas the Gaulonite in A.D. 6 the country had never been altogether pacified. The unrest had in part economic causes. If now we recall that large estates agrarian discontent went hand in hand with nationalist feeling, as it did in pre-war Ireland, we can then see what the prelude to murder and the forcible seizure of land by peasantry might be. The parable, in fact so far from being artificially constructed allegory, may be taken as evidence of the kind of thing that went on in Galilee during the half century preceding the general revolt of A.D. 66."<sup>3</sup>

While parables typically have one primary point and the desire to turn them into allegory is a temptation for one to read into the story his own bias, the Parable of the Vine-growers is certainly an allegory. "The vineyard is clearly Israel, the tenants are Israel's rulers and leaders, the owner of the vineyard is God, the messengers are the prophets, the son is Christ, the punishment of the husbandmen symbolizes the ruin of Israel, the 'other people' (Matthew 21:43) are the Gentile Church."<sup>4</sup>

### The Rejection of God's People

"When Jesus began His story by telling how a landowner planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug a winepress, and built a watchtower, He was pressing the parable home upon His Jewish audience. Israel was the 'vine' of God, and everything Jesus said in that opening picture was known to have been applied to Israel in the Old Testament."<sup>5</sup>

Isaiah 5:1-2, "Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones (Isaiah 5:1-2)." Jeremiah wrote, "Yet I planted you a choice vine, a completely faithful seed (Jeremiah 2:21)." The Psalmist recorded, "You removed a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground before it, and it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shadow, and the cedars of God with its boughs (80:8-10)."

When Jesus spoke of the vineyard, the hearers were certain He was speaking of them and their heritage. The tenants were the religious leaders and the slaves sent to receive payment for the harvest were the messengers God sent throughout the generations that they had rejected. The number of slaves sent, three, was symbolic of completeness.

God sent Moses to the children of Abraham to deliver them from bondage, yet they resisted Moses when the foreman increased their work (Exodus 5:21), when they were trapped by the Red Sea (Exodus 14:11-12), three days later when the water was bitter in Marah (Exodus 15:22) and at Kadesh (Numbers 14:2) when the spies were too afraid of the Canaanites to enter the Promised Land. In Numbers 16 Korah led a rebellion against Moses and later even Moses' sister and brother turned against him.

They rejected Samuel the prophet and demanded a king (1 Samuel 8:4ff). King Jehoshaphat of Judah and King Ahab of Israel rejected the warning of Micaiah when they entered into an alliance to fight against Ramoth-Gilead and threw him into prison. Jeremiah prophesied that the Chaldeans would overthrow Jerusalem and King Zedekiah had him put in prison. At one time he was thrown into a muddy cistern and left

to die. Ezekiel was treated as a traitor because he announced the truth about the impending exile by the Babylonians while other leaders falsely preached peace. John the Baptist announced the coming of the Messiah and was put in prison and later beheaded by Herod the Roman tetrarch, and although multitudes of the people followed him, he was opposed by the religious leaders because he exposed their hypocrisy.

“In speaking to His Jewish audience, Jesus focused on the way God’s servants had been and would be treated. In that we have both history and prophecy. In the days of Elijah, Jezebel murdered the Lord’s prophets in large numbers. In the reign of Joash the people stoned Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada. Isaiah, the greatest of all the prophets, was sawn asunder by order of Manasseh, according to Jewish tradition. The tombs of many of those men were in the valley of Kidron, within a short walk of where our Lord was speaking, so anyone could easily have verified that the treatment of the prophets were as the Lord said.”<sup>6</sup>

After all of the vineyard owner’s messengers were driven away, the owner did something we might find unthinkable; he sent his beloved son believing they might respect him. “But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.’ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him (Luke 20:14-15).” Jesus then asked, “What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others (20:15-16).”

“They cast him out of the vineyard and killed him is symbolic of Jesus’ death outside the city limits, a matter theologically important to the early Jewish Christians (Hebrews 13:11-13). To Jesus it did appear that the leaders of Israel recognized him as the only thing standing between them and their goals. They had to destroy him.”<sup>7</sup>

“Jesus envisioned two things: the end of the nation of Israel as God’s fruit-bearers; and the giving of that responsibility to other fruit-bearers, the Gentiles.”<sup>8</sup> When Jesus announced the son will be killed and the vineyard given to others the hearers were outraged and said, “May it never be!”

Jesus then quoted from Psalm 118:22, “The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone.” And then paraphrasing Isaiah 8:14-15, “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust (Luke 20:18).”

“In the stories which the people told in recounting the building of Solomon’s Temple, a legend had grown up. When the workmen were building the Temple they had one stone of unusual shape. (The stones were all pre-cut in the quarry). It was hard to fit it into the structure, so they cast it aside. When they came down to the finishing of the Temple, however, they needed a stone of an unusual shape. In searching about, they

found the rejected stone, and it was an exact fit. It was the most important stone in the structure.”<sup>9</sup>

### The Message of Jesus’ Parable

What does Jesus’ parable say about us? *Our human condition must be horrible.* The Jewish leaders were not the only ones who have rejected God’s mercy. Each generation, each family and each individual has turned away from God’s grace. “There is none righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10).”

James Montgomery Boice, in his book on the *Parables of Jesus*,<sup>10</sup> refers to a sermon written by one of the greatest theologians our country has produced, Jonathan Edwards, entitled, “Men Naturally Are God’s Enemies.”<sup>11</sup> Edwards says, “We are enemies in several ways. *First we are enemies in our judgments.* We have mean opinions about Him.” “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice (Exodus 5:2)?” “What is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? And what profit should we have if we pray unto Him (Job 21:15)?” Every worldly enjoyment is set higher in their esteem than God.

“The second way in which we show that we are enemies of God is in the *natural relish of our souls.* Relish is an old-fashioned word, but it means ‘likes’ or ‘desires.’ Edwards discusses our hatred of the four great attributes of God—holiness, omniscience, power, and immutability.” “Third, Edwards says that *people are enemies of God in their wills.* That is, the will of God and their wills are set at cross purposes to each other. What God wills, they hate. What God hates, they desire.” “Fourth, the *affections of the natural man flare out against God.* In prosperous times, when God seems to leave men alone and their plans are not disturbed, they manage for the most part to keep their evil affections toward Him hidden. But let them be crossed, let something go wrong, and their malice burns against Him.” “Fifth, *men are God’s enemies in their practice.* They oppose themselves to God’s honor, persecute His prophets, seek to thwart His work in this world and, in general, ‘list under Satan’s banner’ as willing soldiers.”

In addition to Jesus’ parable sharing the horrible condition of our sins, He also reminds us that *God’s love must be wonderful.* Just as the owner of the vineyard provided everything needed for a successful harvest, God is the owner of all things. God created us with a capacity to know Him and constantly communicated His love to us. He entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham out of His mercy. He sent prophets with His truth and delivered His people time after time because of His patience. Ultimately He took on human flesh to live among us, experience our burdens, bear our iniquities and die as a ransom for our sins. “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13-14).”

The parable also reminds us that God is a God of righteousness. Those who reject Him will experience His wrath.

## Conclusion

William Taylor, a great Bible teacher in New York at the turning of the twentieth century, after he concluded a study of this parable spoke of the three points of Jesus' story. "The *greatest privilege* is to have the kingdom of God entrusted to us. This is what happens when the kingdom of God is preached. It is placed within our grasp for receiving, feeding upon, and entering into. The *greatest sin* is to reject the kingdom, which is to reject Jesus Christ. We reject His claims, and above all we reject His lordship over our lives. The *greatest doom* is to be crushed by the kingdom of that very Christ who is offered to us in salvation. If you will not have Him as Savior, in the day of His grace, you will have Him as your Judge when you stand before His throne at the final judgment."<sup>12</sup>

In the same Psalm, 118, the verse Jesus quoted about the stone rejected by the builders, we also find the praise offered to Jesus by the crowds in His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord (Psalm 118:26)."

The baby Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas is the Savior of the world. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in the appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11)."

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### ***Meet the Writer: Dr. Randel Everett***

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 96-97.

<sup>3</sup> Dodd, 97.

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus, Second Revised Edition*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 70.

<sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Boice, 192.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Summers, *Jesus the Universal Savior, Commentary on Luke*, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1980), 241.

<sup>8</sup> Summers, 241.

<sup>9</sup> Summers, 241-242.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from Jonathan Edwards' sermons by Boice, 192-196.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Men Naturally Are God's Enemies," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, 2 volumes* (Edinburgh and Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:131.

<sup>12</sup> Boice, 196-197.