

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 20:9-20

Year C - Lent 5, Text: Luke 20:9-20
Year C - Lent 5, Text: (John 12:1-8)

Editor's Note: Though Dr. Wendt did not write a commentary on this text, he did write a commentary on the parallel text Matthew 21:33-46. Much of the commentary below is taken from that source, with additional comments by John B. King, Jr.

In Luke 19:28–20:18 Jesus attacks Jewish political and religious leaders. As the culmination of this attack, He tells a parable that exposes their greed and failure to practice justice. This is the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

The Context of the Parable

In Luke 19:28-40, Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly, riding on a young colt. After weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), He cleanses the Temple (Luke 19:45-48). In so doing, Jesus attacks its “sin management system” (or “salvation marketing system”) and thereby disrupts its revenue stream. As a result of this action, the tension between Jesus and the Jerusalem leaders rises.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders therefore question Jesus’ authority to cleanse the Temple (Luke 20:1–8). They ask Him by what authority He does these things. In response, Jesus says that He will answer their question if they first answer a question of His. So Jesus asks them, “Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”

Jesus’ question traps the leaders in a dilemma with two bad options. If they say that John’s baptism was from heaven, Jesus will ask them why they did not believe John. On the other hand, if they say that John’s baptism was from man, the people will stone them to death since the people believe that John was a prophet. Having two bad options, they refuse to answer Jesus’ question. And because they refuse, He also refuses to answer theirs. So, Jesus avoids answering the initial question by posing His own counter question. But rather than resolving the conflict, this only causes the tension to rise

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

This rising conflict sets the stage for the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9–19). It is a rule of Biblical interpretation that a parable makes a single point. And since the point of a parable is often a response to something in its immediate context, it is often discerned by examining both the parable and its context together.

In this regard, the parable is a response to Jesus’ conflict with the Jerusalem leaders and is a thinly veiled attack upon their character and authority. This is seen by the close correspondence between the details of the parable and the real world situation which it illustrates and critiques. And its point is to put the present leaders on notice that God is going to take the Kingdom away from Israel due to the wickedness of its past and present leaders.

Verse 20:9: Since Isaiah 5:1–7 refers to Israel as a vineyard, the vineyard symbolizes Israel planted by God. The tenants, those responsible for caring for the vineyard, are the Jewish leaders.

Implicit in this verse is that the produce of the vineyard is to be used to pay the rent of the vineyard. Fruit represents the good works of obedient living. The message to Jesus’ hearers is that the produce is the good works demanded by God, and His claim upon them is total.

Verses 20:10-12: The series of servants sent to collect the rent represent the prophets whom God has sent — but whose mission and message the Jewish leaders rejected — and continue to reject (Jeremiah 7:25; Amos 3:7). They beat, kill, and stone them.

Verses 20:13-15a: When the landowner sends his son to collect the rent, the tenants throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. In Mark, the son is killed and then thrown out of the vineyard (Mark 12:8). Some scholars suggest that Luke’s (and Matthew’s) order points to Jesus being crucified outside city walls.

In relation to the tenants' plan to kill the son and gain his inheritance: If a Jewish proselyte died without an heir, the tenants of his land had the final claim on it.

Verses 20:15b-16a: In response to the killing of his son, the landowner then has the rebellious tenants put to death, and leases the vineyard to others who will pay the produce/rent at the proper time.

Verse 20:16b: The chief priests, scribes, and elders reject this judgment since they perceive that Jesus is speaking this judgment on them.

Verse 20:17: The psalm quoted in this verse (Psalm 118:22) was used in the early church as a prophecy of Jesus' resurrection (Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7). It is a psalm of thanksgiving for rescue from enemies, and here is applied to Jesus whom the leaders reject.

Verse 20:18: Many manuscripts omit this verse. However, throughout the parable, the tenants themselves are to blame for the catastrophe that will overtake them — even as those who rejected Jesus' message and ministry were to blame for the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. They brought it upon themselves!

Verse 20:19: The Jerusalem leaders reject Jesus' condemnation of them as greedy, murderous thieves. They do not repent. They do not understand Jesus as God's agent and Son. Rather, they desire to lay their hands upon Jesus but refrain from doing so since they are afraid of the crowds.

Verse 20:20: So, the Jerusalem leaders send spies to catch Jesus in something He says in order to hand Him over to the Roman governor. Through this tactic, they attempt to do what the tenants in the parable did to the owner's son (20:13-15a).

The Point of the Parable

In God's providence He would use the wickedness of the Jerusalem leaders against them. God delivered Jesus over to lawless men according to His definite plan and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23).

However, when these lawless men crucified Jesus, the curtain of the Temple which separated off the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom in two (Matthew 27:51, Luke 23:45). This signified that God's special presence was no longer restricted to one person (the High Priest) on one day (The Day of Atonement) at one place (Jerusalem). Rather, God's presence was

now available to all people at all times everywhere. As a result, a new religious economy was born in which Israel no longer had a monopoly on God's saving grace.

In other words, the Kingdom was taken away from Israel and given to Jesus Christ in His resurrection and ascension. And since Israel was now religiously obsolete, Jerusalem would be thoroughly destroyed in 70 AD. This was precisely what Jesus warned the Jerusalem leaders about in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. Due to their rejection of Jesus and their manifest wickedness, the threatened destruction eventually fell upon their city and nation.