



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 20:1-19  
Mark Mitchell  
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## Don't Get Stoned

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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There was once a wealthy man who wanted to get in on some of the action in Silicon Valley. His name was Steve. Steve had an idea and he decided to form a business around it. He chose a team of young guys to run it. They were all unemployed, but they knew what they were doing, and Steve liked them enough to think he could help them succeed. He bought a beautiful 10-story building where they could run the business. He saw that they had everything they needed. They had a great new product, a strong support staff, and a great contract that would allow them to share in the profits.

Now Steve was a hands-off kind of guy, so he basically handed it all to them and said that once a quarter his people would check in to see how it was going. After a few months he sent his accountant in to look at the books. Strangely, the accountant was met with a rather cold reception. As a matter of fact, the team insulted him and refused to show him the books. Steve was a little upset, but figured they were just being a little territorial. So he waited a few weeks and sent one of his attorneys in to touch base, but once again they refused to cooperate. They even started talking as if it was their business and not Steve's. I mean, they were doing all the work. When the lawyer showed them the contract they had signed they got so upset they called security and had him escorted out!

As you can imagine, Steve was getting very concerned that he had lost control of his own business. During the next few months he filed a lawsuit and sent several attorneys in to meet with the guys. Each time they were met at the door by a hostile security team. One attorney even went home with a black eye; another felt fortunate to escape with his life. This was getting out of hand! What will Steve do next?

This story captures the essence of another story which Jesus told; a story that gets at the very heart of how God operates. It's also a story in which Jesus asked this same question: what would God do if that were to happen to him? How does God deal with people he invests so much in, yet who reject his rightful authority in their lives?

### I. The authority of Jesus is questioned (20:1-8).

The issue comes up in Luke 20. Jesus is in the last week of his earthly life. Last week we saw how he entered Jerusalem and not only cleansed the temple but took it over, teaching in it daily.

You don't do something like that without ruffling a few feathers. The question that would naturally flow from that is, "Who gave you the right to do that?" This is what the religious leaders asked him the next day in vv. 1-2. **"On one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders confronted Him, and they spoke, saying to Him, 'Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?'"** We would ask the same question, "What are your credentials? Where did you go to seminary? Who ordained you? Who gave you the authority to do these things?"

But instead of answering their question, Jesus countered with a question of his own. Look at vv. 3-4. **"Jesus answered and said to them, 'I will also ask you a question, and you tell Me: Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?'"** This was not an uncommon thing to do in that day—to answer a question with a question. But this question put them in a quandary. Look at v. 5-7. **"They reasoned among themselves, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven," He will say, "Why did you not believe him?" But if we say, "From men," all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered that they did not know where it came from."** If they said John's authority came from God, they would have to believe what John said about Jesus being God's Son. John's whole purpose was to point people to Jesus. But if they said his authority was man made, which is what they really believed, they would lose favor with the people, because the people believed John was a prophet. Notice how they're NOT concerned about the truth; they're concerned about what people will think. So they copped out and said, "We don't know."

So Jesus says in v. 8, **"And Jesus said to them, 'Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'"** He says, "If you were unwilling to recognize God's authority in John, no amount of arguing will convince you of it in me." They didn't care about God's authority; they just cared about their own agenda. By the way, Jesus shows that there are times when we shouldn't get into it with people. There are people who want to argue with you about whether the Bible is true or God is real or some other issue and sometimes they're sincere but sometimes you can tell that they really have no interest in the truth. If that's the case, it's best not to engage with

them on that level because it accomplishes nothing.

Instead, Jesus tells a story. Stories are a more indirect way of confronting people about their hardheadedness. So Jesus tells this story which reveals how these people had rejected God's authority and what God would do about it. But it's not just about them; it's a story that could be about us. It's a story that is kind of like Steve's story.

## II. The authority of Jesus is affirmed (20:9-19).

**A. God establishes his people:** It begins in v. 9, **"And He began to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time.'"** Jesus uses an image that every Jew would have understood—a vineyard which represented Israel (Is.5:1-7). In fact, the very temple in which Jesus stood proudly displayed a carved grapevine, 70 cubits high, sculpted around the door which led to the Holy Place. The people understood how God, like the landowner in the story, had planted this vineyard, Israel. God had called Abraham from Ur and promised to make him into a great nation. God had raised up Moses to deliver his descendants from slavery in Egypt and plant them in a land flowing with milk and honey. God had protected them as they conquered the land under the leadership of Joshua. God had raised up a king from the sheepfolds named David to shepherd his people. God established his people like a vineyard.

And notice he hands over his precious vineyard to some vine growers. These kinds of lease agreements were common in Palestine, with the owner usually getting a third of the produce. Jesus is picturing how God entrusted his people into the hands of spiritual leaders; leaders like the ones he was speaking to at that very moment—priests, scribes, and elders. Together they made up the council of 70 called the Sanhedrin which oversaw the spiritual life of the nation Israel.

God has been no less gracious in establishing us. We, the church of Jesus Christ, are a far richer vineyard than the Jews. We have God's written word, the Bible. We have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We have the cross and the promise of forgiveness. We have the resurrection and the hope of eternal life. We have the community of God's people, both past and present, to cheer us on. I think about this every once in a while. We have so much: spiritually, intellectually and materially. God has invested so much in us.

**B. God pursues his people:** And God expects fruit. In this story, the owner of the vineyard sends servants to the vine-growers to receive some of the fruit of his investment. Look at vv. 10–12. **"At the**

**harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, so that they would give him some of the produce of the vineyard; but the vine-growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. And he proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out."**

This captures what occasionally happened in Palestine. Ancient records tell of disputes between hostile farmers and absentee landlords. Usually five years pass before any fruit could be harvested from a vineyard, so you can imagine that farmers had ample time to come to see that property as their own.

But Jesus is talking about more than ancient land disputes. The sending of these servants pictures God's patient pursuit of his people despite their rebellion. The violence done to these servants portrays how Israel's leaders had treated God's prophets. Elijah was harassed and hounded by Israel's king, Ahab, and his wicked wife, Jezebel. Jeremiah was put in stocks and laughed at as people strolled to the temple. Zechariah was stoned to death near the altar of God. John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, was beheaded. Notice in the story how the violence gets worse: the first slave was beaten, the second was beaten and treated shamefully, and the third was wounded and cast out.

All of this was done for one reason: they wanted to possess the vineyard for themselves. They didn't want to answer to a higher authority. They didn't want God butting in on their life and telling them how to live. People will go to incredible lengths to protect their right to run their own lives. We say things like, "You have the right to be happy," which often means nothing more than, "You have the right to be selfish." It's no surprise that when God sends someone into our lives who calls us to surrender to a higher authority, who tells us that it's not all ours, we find ways to shut them out. We shut them out of our families because God's ways seem so antiquated. We shut them out of our sexual lives because we all have "needs." We shut them out of our business ethics because it is a "dog eat dog" world out there.

I had a conversation with an old friend a couple of weeks ago. For a long time he was a professing Christian, but he has long since fallen away. He's gone through some difficult times, which I see as God's way of getting his attention. And God keeps sending people like me into his life to get him to see that God loves him and is on his heels, chasing him down. But, as we sat at a Starbucks, he looked at me and said, "All Christianity does is make me feel bad about myself. I don't want to have anything to do with a religion like that." The bottom line is that he doesn't want to accept the truth that he IS bad. But the glory of the gospel is that God loves bad people. That's why he keeps sending his servants, one after another, to these bad people. He loves them.

**C. God sends his only son:** Oh, the patience of God to keep sending his servants into that kind of hornet's nest. One after another, they beat them up and send them back. What will the owner do?

Let's go back to our friend, Steve. I asked the question, what would Steve do? Suppose Steve had a son, an only child, who stood to inherit everything he owned. His son had been with him when he set up the team and the guys all knew him. Suppose Steve thought that maybe the problem was a generational one; maybe his son, being their age, could connect with these guys in a way that he couldn't. And so he sent his son into that building, and when the guys recognized who it was they got very excited. They figured old Steve had finally bit the dust, and now if they could just get rid of his son the whole business would be theirs, free and clear. Before Steve's son even got to the conference room, the guys had given the order for the security force to put a bullet through his temple. As Steve's son lay in a pool of blood, the four original members of the team gathered around him, each grabbed a limb, and threw his lifeless body onto the street.

As you might have guessed, Steve is a fictional person, but his story pictures for us what God did. You see, the day came when God sent more than just servants. Look at vv. 13–15a. **"The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will 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."** For the first time in the story we get to hear the owner think: "They won't listen to my servants, perhaps they'll listen to my beloved son. They have to respect my son. He is me. He has my authority. When they see his face they'll see mine."

Those of us who listen want to give the man some advice: "If you really love your son, don't send him there! Don't be foolish. Don't be stupid." He should have taken our advice. When they saw his son they thought it was their lucky day: "If the son is here then the master must have died. The son is the heir to the vineyard. If we erase him, it's all ours." And so they did. They took him and killed him and as a last act of indignity they threw him out of the vineyard.

Martin Luther said, "If I were God and the world treated me as it treated him, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces." But instead, God sent his beloved Son to people who he knew were trying to erase him out of their lives. Have you ever stopped to think how irrational the love of God is? Someone has called this, "the blessed idiocy of God's grace." We want to say, "Don't do it. They killed the prophets and they'll kill him." But he did it anyway. What would compel you to send your only son into a war you knew he would die in? Most of us would say, "Nothing." But that's what God did and love compelled him. "Died he for me who caused his pain; for me, who him, to death

pursued. Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God should die for me?"

Are there limits to his patience? What happens to those who keep on pushing his authority out of their lives? How long will God let this go on? In v.15b Jesus asks that fateful question. **"What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them?"** (v.15b). It's the same question we could ask about Steve, "What will the owner of the business do after they kill his son?" We might be tempted to think that this was a tired, anemic old man with no fight left in him. We look at our world today and we see people refusing to submit to God, insisting on running their own lives, spurning his Son, in some cases, even killing his messengers, and nothing happens. It goes on and on and we wonder, "Where is the owner of the vineyard? Where is God? Why does he allow it to go on and on? What will the owner of the vineyard do next?"

**D. God forms a new people:** Jesus answers that question in v. 16a. **"He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others."** There comes a time when the owner of that vineyard has had enough. There came a time in the history of Israel when God removed his vineyard from those appointed leaders. It was only a few years later that a great national judgment came upon Israel as the Romans destroyed the city and leveled the temple.

He gave that vineyard to someone else. Who was it? The answer comes in vv. 16b–18. **"When they heard it, they said, 'May it never be!' But Jesus looked at them and said, 'What then is this that is written: 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.'**" Jesus changes images here from a vineyard to a building. The vine growers are now builders. These builders are picking choice stones to build a beautiful temple. Each one is carefully inspected. One is deemed useless and tossed into the dusty rubble. But later, when a choice stone is required, a stone that would hold the whole building together, somehow that rejected stone is picked up from the rubble and is made into the chief cornerstone!

It's no mistake that the word used here for "stone" (eben) is almost identical to the one used for "son" (ben). Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God, was killed by the vine growers and thrown out of the vineyard; he was the stone rejected by the builders and cast off into the rubble. It would seem they'd seen the end of him. But, the surprise of history is that he was raised up from the rubble of death, and he lived to become the heir of the vineyard and the chief cornerstone of a spiritual building made up of all who claim him as Lord, whether Jew and Gentile. Only God

could do that! The vineyard now belongs to those who claim HIM as their Saviour and Lord!

But that stone is also a stone of judgment for those who reject him. Here is why you don't want to get stoned! Whether you fall on him or he falls on you, the result is the same. Either you're broken to pieces or you're scattered like dust.

## CONCLUSION

*We can learn a lot about ourselves from this story.* We learn that we want to run our own lives. We believe we have the right to the vineyard. It's ours. "No one can come in here and tell me how to live. And no one can take this from me. It's mine. I get to enjoy the fruit of my labor." We look at people who aren't doing so well and we think, you know, they just didn't work hard enough. Or they just didn't have what it takes. So we stake out our territory and no one is allowed in. We forget that everything we have belongs to him and comes from him. This story shows us how sin works. When we insist on running our own lives and reject God's overtures into our life, our resistance becomes stronger and stronger. Once present, it becomes more deeply ingrained.

*We can also learn a lot about God from this story.* He's so patient. He doesn't give up on people very easily. He sends his servants and then when we beat them up and turn them away he sends his Son. What kind of foolish, reckless love is that?

A children's book called, *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown illustrates this. It reads:

*Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, "I'm running away."*

*"If you run away," said the mother, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny."*

*"If you run after me," said the little bunny, "I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you."*

*"If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother, "I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."*

*"If you become a fisherman," said the little bunny, "I will be a bird and fly away from you."*

*"If you become a bird and fly away from me," said the mother, "I will be a tree that you can come home to."*

*"Shucks," said the little bunny. "I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny." And so he did.*

*"Have a carrot," said the mother bunny.*

That's the love of God. But we have to be careful not to presume upon his love and his patience. Each of us stands at that moment in history between when God sent his Son into the world and when he finally comes to deal with those who reject his claim upon their lives. You see, after his Son there is no one else to send. He's the last one. It all depends on how we respond to him. Today we have to answer the question, "What will I do with the Son? Will I surrender my life to him, or will I kick him out of my life?"

Some of you say, "I'm a pretty good person. I may not be a real follower of Jesus, but I try to live a good life." From this parable, God says, "You may be taking really good care of the vineyard, but it's not yours, it's mine. I sent my Son into the world. He is the heir. Will you surrender your life to him, or will you insist on doing it yourself?"

The parable ends and you know that you don't want to be on that side of the story. You don't want to fall on that stone. Worse yet, you don't want it to fall on you.

On March 26, 2000, Seattle's famed Kingdome—home of the Seattle Seahawks and Mariners—was destroyed. A company was hired to do the job of imploding the 25,000-ton structure that had marked Seattle's skyline for 24 years. The remarkable thing about the event was the extreme measures taken to ensure no one was hurt. The company they hired had experience with over 7,000 demolitions and knew how protect people. Engineers checked and rechecked the structure. The authorities evacuated several blocks around the Kingdome. Safety measures were in place to allow the countdown to stop at any time if there was concern about safety. All workers were individually accounted for by radio before the explosives were detonated. A large public address system was used to announce the final countdown. They took every reasonable measure and more to warn people of the impending danger.

The Bible teaches of a final judgment and destruction for this sinful world. Like the engineers who blew up the Kingdome, our heavenly Father has spared no expense to make sure everybody can "get out" safely. He warns us through our consciences, through the prophets, through the Word of God, through the Holy Spirit, through the Church, and, most importantly, through his Son, that rejected stone which became the chief cornerstone. Don't fall on that stone; and don't let it fall on you!

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