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**The Gospel of Luke**  
**LIX. By What Authority?**  
**Luke 20:1-18**

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Right after Jesus entered Jerusalem, He went into the temple and began driving out the money-changers, saying, *“My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.”* He was quoting the prophet Jeremiah<sup>1</sup> – and both His actions and His words were deliberately symbolic of His status as Israel’s Messiah and as the Son of God. What He does in the temple also explains what we read in our passage this morning – the reaction of the *“chief priests and the scribes with the elders.”* From their perspective, it had been one thing when Jesus had been stirring up trouble out in the villages and countryside – but now that He is doing so in the temple itself, as if He Himself was Lord over the temple, is another thing altogether.

And so the religious leadership in Jerusalem is quick to respond: *“Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.”* Which means, *“Just who in the world do you think you are?”* Jesus responds with a question of His own. *“Now tell me,”* He says to them, *“Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”* Jesus has them trapped – and in front of all the people in the temple, no less. For if they answer that John’s baptism was from heaven, then they would be publicly compelled to acknowledge what John himself had said about Jesus – that Jesus was indeed the Messiah sent by God. But if they answer that John’s baptism was not from heaven, then the people will rise up against them – for the general public widely and fervently believed that John was a true prophet sent by God. So rather than acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, or claim that John was a fake, the religious leadership chooses option number three: *“So they answered that they did not know where it came from.”* To which Jesus responds, *“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”*

But actually Jesus does answer their question regarding His authority – that is a major part of the parable which follows about the vineyard owner and the wicked tenants. But before turning to that parable, we should sit for a moment longer with this encounter between the religious leadership and Jesus over the question of His authority. There is a tremendous irony – or is it rather a tremendous tragedy? – in this scene. The very ones who claim to be closest to God, the very ones appointed by God to be the shepherds to His people, the very ones most devoted to the teachings and practices of the faith – don’t recognize their God when He stands in front of them. They don’t accept His authority when He comes to them.

It’s important to understand this – that the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees were not wicked people, In fact, quite the opposite – they were good and devout people. But somehow it is their very religious devotion which has blinded them to God. That’s what the whole

den of robbers business is about in Jeremiah's prophecy – it's not about money-changers in the temple, it's about the people of God using their religious practices to shield themselves from the authority of God Himself. Den of robbers – meaning where the bad guys go to hide out after the heist. The accusation of Jesus, by way of Jeremiah's sermon, is that the religious leadership is using the temple, is using their religion itself, as a way to hide out from God. Such that it is no wonder that they do not recognize Him when He comes – they have been avoiding Him and His authority over their lives for a long time now.

And if that could happen to the most religiously dedicated in Jesus' day, could it be true of us today? For there are all sorts of ways by which we can manage to deny God's authority over our lives – even as, like the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees, we maintain a high level of religious activity and devotion. All sorts of ways – but all amounting to the same thing: that we keep God from getting His hands on how we actually live our lives each day, keep God from getting His Word from making a claim on what we are actually living for each day. Spend ten minutes in a morning devotional time, for example, only to completely ignore Him the other twenty-three hours and fifty minutes. Worship Him on Sunday (or, at least the occasional Sunday!), only to think about Him not at all Monday through Saturday. Using even our religion as a means to keep the real God, the living God, from getting too close.

The great preacher Peter Marshall once said that we are like people who go to soak up the ocean while making sure only to carry a thimble with us – in order that a few drops is all that we will ever be in danger of getting.<sup>2</sup> Another theologian calls it the “God is my co-pilot” school of faith, after the bumper sticker which was once ubiquitous in Christian circles. God is my co-pilot – meaning we let God in the car with us just in case we have need of His assistance, but we maintain our firm hold on the wheel, sitting in the driver's seat, so that God can't take over altogether, so that we can still live according to our own authority and not His. Rejecting the authority of God – that's what we are doing anytime we dismiss, ignore, and just in general don't do the things we know He wants us to do, and don't refrain from the things He has told us not to do.

Rejecting the authority of God – just like the words of another great theologian, an elderly woman who was a delegate at her denomination's big annual meeting. A debate was going nowhere on some moral matter of the day. And finally, out of frustration, she came forward to the microphone and addressed the assembly:

*I am a member of the women's Wednesday morning Bible study group at my church. Most of us have been there for the last 20 years, the same women, studying the Bible, week after week. We have refreshments, and then we have our Bible study . . .*

*One week, after our refreshments, after we had been studying the Bible for some time, one of the participants talked about how hard it was to understand what Jesus meant when he said certain things. Then Gladys spoke up and said, “Be honest. We already understand enough about Jesus. Understanding is not really [our] problem. Doing it is the problem. Following Jesus is much more difficult than understanding him.” Her words really struck us as right.<sup>3</sup>*

So how are we doing in relation to the authority of Jesus Christ over our lives, in our lives daily? This is not a small question, not one we should try to brush away quickly. Because, wholly aside from the rather critical matter of the depth of our discipleship and of our devotion to Jesus as our Lord as well as our devotion to Him as our Savior, there is the great sadness, the great tragedy we see unfolding in the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees as they question and reject Jesus' authority. For by not accepting the authority of Jesus Christ, the religious leadership misses out on the single greatest thing God has ever done for them and for this world, since the time of the Creation itself. And so could it be that the price we are paying for our own reluctance to submit every aspect of our lives to the authority of Jesus Christ is almost as tragic – that we are missing out on the great things Jesus Christ would be doing in our lives and through our lives if we were but to let Him? So where, honestly, do our lives stand in relation to the authority of Jesus Christ?

Back to the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees. They have refused to answer Jesus' question, so Jesus refuses to answer theirs. But actually He does answer their question, just in the slightly veiled form of the parable which follows. "*A man planted a vineyard,*" Jesus begins. And right away, that image reframes everything which is to follow – because, as everyone listening knew, the prophets again and again used this image of a vineyard being planted to speak of God planting His people in the Promised Land after their deliverance from Egypt.<sup>4</sup> "*A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long time.*" And then follows the very sad story, Israel's story, of how those tenants planted in that choice vineyard refused to honor the terms of their lease – that they should provide the vineyard owner with a return on His investment in them.

For the first time the vineyard owner sends a servant to the tenants, they beat him and send him away empty-handed. The second time is even worse – they beat him and send him away empty-handed and also treat him shamefully. And the same with the third. So Israel had done to the prophets whom God had sent. But then comes the heart of the parable, the central question: "*Then the vineyard owner said, 'What shall I do?'*" And then comes a most unexpected answer – the very one now playing out in front of the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees in the form of Jesus Himself: "*I will send my beloved son.*"

"*I will send my beloved son,*" says the vineyard owner, "*perhaps they will respect him.*" Simply put, this is not what any sane vineyard owner would have done, under the circumstances. A human vineyard owner most certainly would have notified the authorities, who would send in an army to destroy those wicked tenants. For that is certainly no less than what those wicked tenants deserved. But that's not what this vineyard owner chooses to do. He chooses a different path altogether – not one of violent coercion and vengeance, but one of vulnerable, even sacrificial love. Because He doesn't want them to be destroyed – He wants them to be redeemed, restored. He offers His Son to the wicked tenants that they might come to their senses, be won over to Him again.

Here's the scenario this vineyard owner is hoping for – a story Kenneth Bailey, a distinguished Biblical scholar who taught in the Middle East for many decades, tells about Hussein bin Talal, who was the King of Jordan from 1952 until his death in 1999. Bailey said he first heard

this story while teaching in Lebanon, and that it was later confirmed for him by a high-ranking American intelligence officer who was serving in Jordan at the time this incident took place. This story offers a real-world illustration of what the vineyard owner was hoping would happen when he sent his son:

*One night in the early 1980s, the king was informed by his security police that a group of about seventy-five Jordanian army officers were at that very moment meeting in a nearby barracks plotting a military overthrow of the kingdom. The security officers requested permission to surround the barracks and arrest the plotters. After a somber pause the king refused and said, "Bring me a small helicopter." A helicopter was brought. The king climbed in with the pilot and himself flew to the barracks and landed on its flat roof. The king told the pilot, "If you hear gun shots, fly away at once without me."*

*Unarmed, the king then walked down two flights of stairs and suddenly appeared in the room where the plotters were meeting and quietly said to them:*

*Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalize your plans to overthrow the government, take over the country and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way, only one man will die.*

*After a moment of stunned silence, the rebels as one, rushed forward to kiss the king's hand and feet and pledge loyalty to him for life.<sup>5</sup>*

"I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." That's what the vineyard owner was hoping would happen. But that's not at all how the story played out – neither the one Jesus was telling to the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees that day, nor the real-world story Jesus would actually live out over the next week in Jerusalem. The tenants did not respect the son. They rejected his authority altogether. They rejected the long-suffering love and patience of the vineyard owner in sending to them his son. They put the son to death: "*But when the tenants saw him . . . they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*" Which is precisely what the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees would very soon do to Jesus. All of which leads us to the second critical question raised in Jesus' parable – once again, the vineyard owner must ask himself what he will do in response to what his tenants have done. Only this time Jesus raises the question, not as if the vineyard owner is asking it, but rather as if God Himself were asking it: "*What will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.*"

And so the parable stands as a warning – a warning to the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees, but also to each and every one of us shielding our lives from the authority of the God who gave us our lives, shielding our lives from producing the fruit He expects from us. *“He will come and destroy those tenants.”*

Only, here’s the thing. That doesn’t actually happen in the parable itself, does it? And that’s not at all what happened at the end of that week in Jerusalem. In fact, when we put the Son to death upon His cross, God did not come and destroy us all. In fact, He did quite the opposite. The punishment which was rightfully ours the Son took from us and bore upon His cross in our place. And then, God didn’t reign down death upon us – but instead simply raised up His Son from the dead. Raised Him from death, ascended Him into heaven, and bestowed upon Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the authority of the Son has now been established by God throughout all eternity – but not by His vengeance and our death, but rather by His sacrificial love and His death in our place. By His sacrificial love offered up for the sake of those wicked tenants, offered up for the sake of you and me who even yet still refuse that authority. Offered up for the salvation for all who dwell in the vineyard of the Lord.

This parable Jesus told the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees doesn’t go at all the way anyone would have expected it to. Just like this story God is actually telling to us in the real world, telling us through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. And the difference between what we ought to have expected, between the way the story should have gone and the way it has gone, can only be summed up by one word: grace. Jesus Christ establishes His authority in us and in all the earth – through the demonstration and gift of His grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 7:1-15.

<sup>2</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Willimon, “Gone Fishing with Jesus,” *Pulpit Resource*, Vol.27, No. 1 (January, February, March, 1999), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Isaiah 5:1-7.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 418.

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:9-11.