

## **What Makes You the Boss?** **Luke 20:1-19**

### **Day 1: Luke 20:1-8 What gives you the right?**

In predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, and in disrupting the temple worship system, Jesus triggers an obvious question from Jewish leadership: “Who or what gives you the right to do such things?” It took breathtaking hubris for a poorly-educated, itinerant preacher from a rural outpost to assume authority over the central institutions of Israel: national capital, temple, priesthood. This confrontation between official Jewish leadership and Jesus is transparently over the issue of spiritual authority: the word ‘authority’ appears twice at the beginning (20:2), and once at the end (20:8), and the theme appears in every verse in-between.

The question was even more urgent for Christians after the crucifixion: How could Jesus have been the messiah if Jewish leadership rejected him, the Romans crucified him, and God let him die?

The gospel faces somewhat different challenges to its authority today. Now, Jesus’ preaching against Jerusalem and temple is generally of concern only to Jews objecting to ‘supersessionism’ (i.e., the notion that Christianity is the fulfillment of, and therefore supersedes, Israel as the people of God). More commonly today, in a pluralistic and relativistic environment, the issue is Jesus’ claim to be the only way to God. Still, the underlying challenge to Jesus’ authority is similar, and his reply to these first-century antagonists is also germane today.

Luke addresses the issue in two ways: by citing support for Jesus’ authority and by undercutting the Jewish leaders’ competence to vet spiritual authority. He does both simultaneously.

### **Day 2: Luke 20:1-8 The first defense & rebuttal: John the Baptist**

John the Baptist provides Jesus an appropriate case study for several reasons. First, both ministries were similar: like Jesus, John arises from outside the Jewish establishment and adopts a critical stance toward it. Second, John approved Jesus’ ministry as superior to his own. Finally, if the Jerusalem hierarchy intends to vet Jesus, it is only right that they first vet his predecessor. By their own admission, they lack the spiritual insight necessary to vet John, and so, they have no standing to vet Jesus.

In hindsight, Jesus’ authority is already a foregone conclusion for us. So how is this dispute relevant to us as Christians? As we interact with Jews or with thoughtful people from other faiths, they may legitimately ask, “If

Jesus was really Messiah, why did the Jewish leadership reject him?" Luke's answer is this: like John the Baptist, and like most Old Testament prophets, Jesus arose from outside the authority structure, and was critical of that structure, so the leadership naturally rejected him. That rejection points to the illegitimacy of the authority structure, rather than to the illegitimacy of Jesus.

### **Day 3: Luke 20:1-19 The second defense & rebuttal: authority from below**

In a social sense, Jesus lacks approval from above: the Jerusalem elite look askance at any professed prophet who arises from outside the appropriate social circle, and doubly so if he criticizes them. On the other hand, Jesus is approved from below: by 'the people', i.e., the non-elite masses. In 20:1, Jesus teaches 'the people'; in 20:6 'the people' approve of John the Baptist; in 20:9, Jesus tells 'the people' a parable critical of the elite rulers; in 20:16, 'the people' are horrified at thought that the son will be killed.

Luke also invokes 'the people' editorially in rebuttal against the elite. These leaders will not render verdict on the ministry of John the Baptist because they fear stoning by 'the people' (20:6). Recognizing that Jesus told this parable against them, they want to arrest him, but they fear 'the people' (20:19). The leaders lack courage: they want to act against Jesus, but they are intimidated by the masses.

In short, throughout this Gospel, while the elite oppose Jesus, the masses support him (see, e.g., 20:26; 22:2). At the same time, the elite demonstrate their own cowardice by not acting out of fear of the masses.

What does this have to say to us who support Jesus so many centuries later? In some respects, our contemporary situation is analogous. Modern opponents of Jesus are less often religious elite, but are often intellectual elite, especially within the university, and the liberal arts department and certain of the sciences. In our day, as in Jesus' time, the non-elite can be easily intimidated by their 'superiors'. Still, it remains that elite opposition to Jesus is often motivated by factors other than intellectual reasoning. (Moreover, empiricism and rationalism provide a more certain guide to matters of material existence, than to matters beyond material existence.) This passage invites us to be skeptical, not of Jesus so much, as of elites who oppose him. Is their judgment legitimately founded on their expertise, or is it motivated by other factors?

### **Day 4: Isaiah 5:1-6 The third defense & rebuttal: authority from above**

While Jesus lacks attestation from the ruling religious elite of his day,

he has support from a truer spiritual elite, that is, from the Old Testament prophets. Jesus may have invented most of his parables, but he does not invent this one. Instead, he adapts it from Isaiah 5. Today we look at the Isaiah original; tomorrow, at Jesus' adaptation.

Isaiah portrays God as a landowner, and Israel as his vineyard. The landowner loves his vineyard, and does all to ensure a productive harvest: he selects the best plot, loosens the soil, clears it of stones, and plants the choicest grafts. To guard against predators, he builds hedge, wall and tower. He installs a press to crush the harvest into wine. God asks, "What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?" (Isa 5:4). Nonetheless, there is no produce. So the landowner will no longer tend or protect his vineyard. He will let it degenerate into wasteland.

How does this parable support Jesus' claim to authority in his day? It links those who reject him with those who rejected Isaiah, and it associates his suffering with Isaiah's.

What does the Isaiah parable say to us? Primarily, it assures us that in their rejection both of Isaiah and of Jesus, the religious elite of each generation was wrong. In our day, we still find religious elite – even ordained Christian clergy, and seminary or university religion professors – rejecting Jesus (especially in television specials broadcast around Easter). This passage cautions us against accepting skeptical views just because they are advocated by a professional religionist with a PhD. Some religious elite have always opposed God and his servants. What matters is not a skeptic's academic credentials, ordination, or vocation, but the evidence that supports their views.

#### **Day 5: Luke 20:9-16 The fourth defense & rebuttal: servants and a son**

Jesus takes over Isaiah's parable, while adapting and updating it.

Jesus adapts Isaiah's parable by introducing tenant farmers. God remains the landowner, and Israel remains the vineyard, but now the religious leaders appear as tenant farmers. In time, the vineyard produces a harvest, but the tenant farmers refuse to give the owner his agreed share. Both landowner and vineyard are faithful; only the tenant farmers are at fault. Only they come under judgment.

Jesus also updates the parable to take into account the intervening eight centuries since Isaiah. The landowner went away 'for a long time'. He sends a series of servants – his prophets, including Isaiah – but the tenant farmers beat them and send them away empty-handed. Finally, he sends his son, 'whom he loves', only for them to kill him.

What is the effect of these changes? First, in keeping with the elites' rejection of Jesus but the masses' positive response to him, bringing tenant farmers into the story enables Jesus to shift from Isaiah's condemnation of all Israel to a condemnation particularly of the elite. Secondly, even though the

theme of condemnation continues, the changes underscore God's grace and patience: not immediate destruction, but eight centuries of second chances. Thirdly, these changes also underscore the stubbornness and wickedness of the rulers: 800 years of rebellion. Fourthly, the changes introduce God's ultimate grace, sending 'the son, whom [he] loves' (20:13; 3:22; cf. 9:35). We honor God for his patience, and for his grace in sending his beloved son, in the face of prolonged, resolute rebellion.

### **Day 6: Luke 20:16-18 Rejected, yet exalted**

The parable ends on a disturbing note: "[So the landowner] will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (20:16). We understandably shy away from talk of divine judgment. So did Jesus' audience: "May this never be!" (20:16) is the strongest objection in Greek. Are they objecting to the brutality of the tenant farmers in killing the son? Or to the fierceness of the landowner in taking revenge? Likely both. Jesus does not back down from either disturbing pronouncement.

Jesus does not back down from the prediction of his execution (and eventual vindication), because Scripture – Psalm 118 – speaks of it. In last week's text, we saw that as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowds cited Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord... With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar" (118:25,27). Now Jesus reminds the crowds what else Psalm 118 says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone" (118:22). This short verse makes two points. The stone is rejected by the professional builders, yet nonetheless becomes the most important stone in the entire building. The son is killed by the religious leaders, yet nonetheless is subsequently exalted to the highest place.

Nor does Jesus back down from the prediction of judgment against the religious elite which executes him, because Scripture also speaks of this. To make the point, Jesus couples Psalm 118 with another biblical text about a 'stone', returning to Isaiah, though this time to Isaiah 8 (rather than Isaiah 5): "The LORD Almighty ... will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall... They will fall and be broken" (Isa 8:13-15). In applying Isaiah 8 to himself, Jesus makes two bold statements at once. First, he takes the place of the Lord Almighty: the stone which causes men to stumble and which crushes those on whom it falls is no longer the Lord Almighty, but now Jesus. Secondly, this confirms the point noted in a previous reflection: just as the Old Testament God is gracious, so the New Testament Jesus is fierce toward those who resolutely oppose him. Neither continuity should come as a surprise. They are, after all, Father and Son.