

April 6, 2025
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Cornerstone

Luke 20:9-20

This Gospel reading known as The Parable of the Wicked Tenants is aptly titled—these tenants are awful! They are greedy. They beat, wound and treat shamefully those who are rightfully sent to receive the produce of the vineyard. They are murderous when the son is sent to them. And ultimately, they are stupid, thinking the death of the son makes them the heirs of the vineyard. That is not how things work! They cannot hoodwink the Lord who has the power to destroy them!

While it is rather clear Jesus' words are aimed at the Jewish leaders, you can't ignore that the parable is addressed to all the people and their reaction is "Surely not!" And Jesus cites Psalm 118 in asking them: *"What then is this that is written: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?' Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."*

It's pretty obvious to everybody this parable is referencing the tenants as the Jews and the servants as the prophets of the past sent by God to call Israel to repentance—prophets who in large part were rejected by the Jewish leaders. I'm not sure if the people, scribes and chief priests understand the murder of the son as a reference to the Messiah or not. I doubt it. What really sets them off though is when Jesus says the tenants will be destroyed and replaced by others—they know this is aimed at them; especially their leaders. Thus, the plot to kill Jesus will kick into high gear.

We know the son in the parable is Jesus the Son of God and that He was indeed rejected and killed by the Jewish leaders. But thanks be to God He has been raised from the dead for our salvation—those who reject Him are banished; we by grace through faith receive the vineyard—the kingdom of heaven.

So, knowing clearly the allegoric meaning of the parable in the first century, what is the obvious point for us 21st century believers to examine? It is the statement Jesus makes here only in St. Luke's Gospel: *"Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."* What exactly Jesus means there though—not so obvious.

I've heard this preached that this cornerstone, which all agree is a reference to Christ, falls on and crushes unbelievers who reject Jesus while those who believe in Jesus fall on it and are broken to pieces in right repentance. While I can see that view making for a right and proper sermon espousing faith and repentance, I just find the images a bit too destructive to take as Gospel good news. Following such a parable it seems both the breaking and the crushing are pictures of judgment and condemnation.

The right way to deal with the cornerstone that is Christ is to stand on it, build on it, be anchored in it. That's what a cornerstone is for! The psalm which Christ cites is speaking of the gift of God in Christ. Here it is in its context: *"I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."*

The cornerstone is all Gospel for those who do not reject it! That's pretty clear. While repentance is good and right, I can't see how that's what Jesus is referencing here. I think the understanding of what Jesus says is clued in by the parable itself.

What were the wicked tenants doing? Ignoring their Lord and doing things their own way to their own benefit and glory. When they couldn't ignore Him, they rebelled and attacked and attempted to destroy Him. They did everything except what they should; honor, respect and serve Him.

I take Jesus words about the cornerstone in this vein. If you ignore Christ, ignore the Gospel, live your life all for worldly benefits and your own glory—that stone is going to hit you. Ultimately you stand crushed by Christ's judgment. Willfully standing apart from His salvation, you receive what you desired, to be rid of Jesus for eternity, banished to the place absent Him and His blessings forever.

Those falling on it I see as falling because they stumble on Christ. There are a whole lot of people who acknowledge Jesus as Lord—kind of. But when His true authority over their lives tries to come near, the rebel. They put His clear Word and leading to death by clever reasoning, rationalizations and simply lying and misconstruing what Scripture says. But the Word is the Word and it says what it says. On Judgment Day all that cleverness in explaining away Christ's leading will be revealed for what it is—lame excuses deserving of condemnation.

That sounds really scary and so it should. This is very much a warning to folks, preparing them for what's to come—the death of the Son and the call to believe in Him when He is risen from the dead!

But the Gospel here is clear to us. Jesus is our cornerstone. We don't ignore Him and His salvation work. We don't oppose His Word as it calls us to repentance, forgiveness, obedience and following in His way of salvation. We stand on Him, the firm foundation. We build our lives on Him, every day waking in our Holy Baptism and striving to live in the blessedness and holiness He has made of us by His grace. We receive His blessings and gladly return to Him the praise He is due, seeking to make our lives a living sacrifice to His glory.

In short we do with our hearts, minds, souls and bodies what we declare with our mouth: "Jesus is Lord."

This, I think, is the basic point of the parable. Don't ignore your Lord. Don't oppose your Lord. Don't try to work around your Lord thinking you can hoodwink your way into His blessings. That simply ends terribly, terminally, forever.

The Gospel may be somewhat blurred at the time Jesus tells the parable, but it certainly is made clear shortly after through His cross and the empty tomb. Jesus is the risen Lord, the Son of the Father sent to save His people from their sins. Stand on this cornerstone. Receive Him into your heart as your Lord and, reborn the water and the Spirit, live out this gracious Lordship over you in faith.

Look around your life and see if any wicked-tenant stuff is hanging out there; a way you are ignoring your Lord, a way you are attempting to cleverly work around your Lord, a place where you stand in open rebellion against your Lord's Word and leading. Ditch that stuff. Turn to your Lord, bearing the fruit of repentance and begging His pardon. In that you will find, by His grace, your feet standing on Christ the cornerstone, forgiven and, somewhat ironically by this parable, an heir of the Lord, a child of the Most High God.

Standing on the Cornerstone, you never have to fear His wrath, only be the object of His love.

Amen.