THE REJECTED STONE; THE CORNERSTONE

Luke 20:1–19

Key Verse: 20:17

“Jesus looked directly at them and asked, ‘Then what is the meaning of that which is written: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”?’”

Have you ever thrown away a piece of paper, only to find out that you had some thing extremely important written on it? Sometimes we treat people that way, too. In today’s passage the religious leaders question Jesus’ authority and try to get rid of him. In response Jesus teaches how important it is to repent, and that even though he would be rejected, God would make him the cornerstone. Through this study may God open our hearts to accept Jesus the rejected stone.

In the previous chapter Jesus finally arrived at Jerusalem. He entered the city humbly on a donkey’s colt. He came as the spiritual King who could bring the people God’s peace. But he knew they would harden their hearts and reject him. He wept over the city, because he could see how God would severely punish them in the future. He went first to the temple, the place of worship, to pray. But he found it full of people buying and selling. They had turned the holy Passover into something for personal profit. Jesus drove them all out and started teaching people the Bible. That was how God’s temple should have been used. His actions infuriated the religious leaders. They wanted to kill him. But they couldn’t, because all the people hung on his words. People loved Jesus’ Bible teaching.

Verse 1 begins, “One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel . . .” If someone were ever looking for Jesus, this is most likely where they would find him, and this is what they would find him doing: in the temple courts, teaching the Bible. He wasn’t worried about the plots against him. He didn’t get fixated on the negative things about to happen. He was focused on his mission to give the people God’s word. The gospel he preached was the good news of the kingdom. It was God’s hope for these people, and his own hope, too. To the very end of his life Jesus was a diligent Bible teacher.

Look at verses 1b–2. These people were still seething over his cleansing the temple. To them, he was nothing but the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. He had no right and no authority to disturb what they had going on in the temple. Today people really don’t like it when someone else has authority over them. We love to dig out dirt on people in authority, so that we won’t have to listen to them. But these religious leaders were questioning Jesus’ authority not because they didn’t like authority itself, but because they didn’t like Jesus’ authority. Why? He never attended their rabbinic schools. He never did things their way. He ignored them and their traditions and worked directly with the people. And he didn’t ask permission. Actually, Jesus’ spiritual authority had already been well attested. He taught the word of God unlike any other. He used his authority unlike any other—not to crush or boss people around, but to heal. With authority he drove out demons. With authority he cured diseases. With authority he forgave sins. With authority he called and trained disciples to be shepherds like him. The religious leaders challenged his authority not because there was no evidence for it, or because he’d done something wrong, but simply because his authority hurt their empty pride. In the original Greek, their question is so strongly worded that they were virtually yelling at him: “Who gave you this authority?”

How did he respond? Quietly, and with a question. Look at verses 4–5. Jesus was putting his finger on their spiritual problem. What was it? It can be seen in their response to John the Baptist’s ministry. John began his ministry when the word of God came to him in the desert. With the power of God’s word he was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He wasn’t talking about a ritual of baptism: he challenged every valley of inferiority and fatalism in people’s hearts, every mountain and hill of pride, every crooked road and rough way of rebellion. With a passion for God and his truth he rebuked the people who came out to him, calling them a brood of vipers, and he told them: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” He wouldn’t tolerate lip service; he wanted action, and real fruit. He especially rebuked people’s complacent racial pride that they were Abraham’s descendants. He told them that without repentance, they were like trees without good fruit ready to be cut down and thrown into the fire. Those who accepted his rebuking were baptized. Even though he had such spiritual authority, John had humbly pointed people to Jesus. He said he wasn’t worthy even to untie the straps of his sandals (3:1–18).

How had the religious leaders responded to John? 7:29–30 says, “(All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)” In other words, these religious leaders refused to repent. They thought they were already righteous and didn’t need to repent (15:7). In their self-righteousness they gloated over themselves and looked down on everybody else (18:9–14). Jesus knew they were unrepentant still. When he cleared the temple, in their hearts these religious leaders knew he was right. But instead of repenting, they chose to keep their pride. Then they got emotional and attacked him. Questioning his authority showed their spiritual blindness.

Jesus’ counter-question about John’s authority stunned them. Look at verses 5–7. They were caught in their political way of thinking and desire to save face. Their discussion reveals their cowardice and lack of any interest in truth. In the end, all they could say was, “We don’t know.” How did Jesus respond? Look at verse 8. He wasn’t being elusive; he refused to give more truth to people who’d already chosen to ignore the truth revealed to them (cf. Jn7:16–17).

Jesus went on to tell the people a parable. His parable is related to the question about his authority. It also tells us what the relationship between God and human beings has always been like. Look at verses 9–12. Here, the owner of the vineyard is God; the farmer/tenants are the people of Israel, or God’s people in any day and age; and the vineyard was the land of Israel; for us it represents our life and whatever God chooses to entrust to us. In the parable the tenants were given the privilege to work in the owner’s vineyard. It represents the great blessings and privileges God gave the Jews, as well as all the gifts and blessings God gives to each one of us. At harvest time, all the tenants had to do was give the owner some fruit. It was normal, because, after all, the vineyard was his, not theirs. Here, the fruit was not just material things like a tithe; it was the fruit of obedience to God’s word, the fruit of a godly character, the fruit of becoming a blessing to the people around us.

But in the parable, the tenants were unreasonable. When the owner sent one of his servants to collect some fruit, they beat him and sent him away empty-handed. The owner must have thought there was some misunderstanding. So he sent another servant. But this time they beat him and treated him shamefully before sending him back empty-handed. When the third servant came, they gave him a head trauma and threw him out. Here, the servants represent the prophets all the way down to John the Baptist. God’s people grew more and more hostile to them. They repeatedly rejected God’s Lordship and purpose for their lives. They became greedy and wanted to keep the blessings all to themselves. Their increasing hostility illustrates how sin grows and makes people worse.

The most moving part of the parable is the owner’s patience. He could have evicted the tenants at the first sign of insubordination. But he repeatedly sent servants, even to the point of looking weak. Look at verse 13. Though these tenants were vicious, the owner still thought the best of them. Somehow, despite all their despicable behavior, he still believed they would respect his son. Why would he send his son to such tenants? Was he foolish? No. He wanted to show them that he wasn’t just demanding fruit; he wanted a relationship with them. This is the heart of God. He is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin (Ex34:6–7). He doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve (Ps103:10). The son represents Jesus. God the Father dearly loved his Son, but he sent him to us, to restore our broken relationship with him.

How did the tenants respond? Look at verses 14–15a. They committed the most heinous crime—they murdered the owner’s son. It reveals how hard their hearts were. They failed to grasp the owner’s heart to keep sending servants and even his own son to them. They misinterpreted the owner’s kindness, forbearance and patience as weakness (Ro2:4). They fell into the delusion that they could successfully rebel against him and rid their lives of any accountability to him. We may think we’re better than these tenants. But in our sinful nature we treat God just like these tenants treated the owner. Every time we intentionally sin, we’re rebelling against God’s ownership of our lives. It’s like we’re crucifying the Son of God all over again (Heb6:6).

Look at verses 15b–16a. Here, “others” refers to the Gentiles. God sent Jesus first to the Jews, but when they rejected him he turned to the Gentiles (Ro 1:16b; Ac13:46). The tenants represent not just the Jews but all privileged people, religious or otherwise; the Gentiles represent underprivileged or non-religious people. Luke’s Gospel often tells of how Jesus focused on such despised and rejected people. They’re the ones humble enough to accept God’s grace. How did the people respond? Look at verse 16b. Jesus’ parable was so powerful it stirred their emotions. Maybe they hoped people would never treat the owner’s son so badly; more likely, they didn’t want to lose their own privileges.

Read verse 17. Jesus knew for sure that these very people would soon shout for his crucifixion. But he also knew that though they would crucify him, God would raise him from the dead and make him the cornerstone. But why did he suddenly switch from talking about a vineyard to talking about a stone? It’s because this verse gets at the core of what he came to do. He’s quoting from Psalm 118:22. This one brief verse vividly illustrates the ironic nature of the gospel. A stone is plain, hard and doesn’t seem very valuable. People tend to trip over stones. When working the soil, we have to dig out the stones and throw them away. When constructing a walkway or building, we need stones, but many stones don’t fit in with what we’re trying to do: not the right size; not the right shape; not the right color. In this verse the builders represent the Israelites. They were trying to build their kingdom. They wanted a messiah, but Jesus wasn’t the kind they had in mind. They wanted a messiah who’d fulfill their dreams and desires. When Jesus didn’t fit their preconceived blueprint, they threw him away.

Read verse 17 again. What is a “cornerstone”? It’s a stone builders use to make the building square, plumb and level. It has to have perfect angles in all its dimensions. So the cornerstone is the most important stone in the building, the one all the other stones depend on and have to be like. How ironic that the builders threw that stone away, but it became the cornerstone! And that’s exactly what would happen to Jesus. The religious leaders executed him and thought they’d never see him again. But through his resurrection God made Jesus, who was crucified, both Lord and Christ (Ac2:36). Peter said, “He is ‘the stone you builders rejected which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Ac4:11–12). What does it mean that Jesus is the cornerstone?

**First,** it means we need to accept Jesus as our Savior and only source of righteousness. When the Jews tried to make themselves righteous by keeping many rules and laws, they stumbled over Jesus the cornerstone (Ro9:32–33). We shouldn’t make the same mistake. Keeping all kinds of rules, traditions and laws doesn’t make us even slightly more righteous or spiritual. We become right with God only when we receive Jesus, who died for our sins and rose again. We need to keep on trusting Jesus and his grace alone to be right with God.

**Second,** it means we need to follow Jesus the rejected stone who became the cornerstone. Nobody likes rejection. Everybody likes to be welcomed and accepted. But Jesus was rejected. He didn’t go along with the ways of this world; he obeyed the will of his Father God, denying himself. When we take steps to truly follow Jesus, it’s guaranteed that people of this world will reject us just as they reject Jesus. But to follow Jesus the cornerstone, we have to be rejected. Peter wrote to the early Christians scattered by persecution: “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house . . .” (1Pe2:4,5ff.)

**Third,** it means we need to give up our own ideas, dreams and plans and make Jesus the Lord of our lives. This was the problem of the Jews who rejected Jesus—he didn’t fit in with their ideas, dreams and plans. Like the Jews we may be working really hard to do something with our lives. But if it’s not done for Jesus and under his Lordship, it’s all in vain. We may even do some impressive things, build some impressive edifices, but if Jesus is not the cornerstone of all we do, it all will eventually be broken to pieces or crushed.

Read verse 18. Accepting Jesus can be as hard as falling on a stone and being broken to pieces. But the alternative is even worse. The disciples experienced this when Jesus didn’t give them instant glory in an earthly kingdom. Only when their dreams were broken could they truly accept the gospel. Being “broken to pieces” also means being broken in my pride and self-reliance. Paul experienced this when he encountered the living Risen Jesus. After he was broken, he changed and spread the gospel all over the Roman world.

Today we learned that in order to see Jesus rightly, we first need to repent of our own sins. We also learned that we need to make Jesus the cornerstone of our lives. May God help us to truly follow Jesus the rejected stone who became the cornerstone.