

THE CONFRONTATIONAL CHRIST

Luke 20:1–19

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The theme of my message is “The Confrontational Christ.”

“One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. ‘Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,’ they said. ‘Who gave you this authority?’ He replied, ‘I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?’ They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will ask, “Why didn’t you believe him?” But if we say, “From men,” all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.’ So they answered, ‘We don’t know where it was from.’ Jesus said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’ He went on to tell the people this parable: ‘A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.” But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. “This is the heir,” they said. “Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.” So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.’ When the people heard this, they said, ‘May this never be!’ Jesus looked directly at them and asked, ‘Then what is the meaning of that which is written: “The stone the builders

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rejected has become the capstone?” Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.” The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people” (Luke 20:1–19, NIV).

The twentieth chapter of Luke relates events in the day of the life of the Lord, which is called “The Day of Questions” or “The Day of Controversy.” He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He cleansed the temple on a Monday, and now He is back in those same temple courts teaching. The day begins with representatives of various factions within first century Judaism coming to Him with test questions. It is natural that the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes who were part of the Sanhedrin or the grilling group would ask Him the question most apropos to their situation. They were ones who had authority. Therefore, by what authority did He challenge theirs?

We’ll go on to see the next question which was asked by the Herodians and the Pharisees, who had opposites sides on the issue of whether or not one should pay taxes to the Romans (Luke 20:20). So that becomes the second question. The third question is asked by Sadducees, who don’t believe in the resurrection, in opposition to the Pharisees, who do believe in the resurrection. They asked Him about the resurrection (Luke 20:27). The fourth question, not recorded in Luke but recorded in Matthew and Mark, is the question of a sincere lawyer of the law, a scribe who says to Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” (Matthew 22:36). The last question is not a question put to Jesus, but one He puts to all of those who have challenged Him, “David’s Son, who is he? And how could David call his own son, his Lord?” (Luke 20:41).

It is a day of high confrontation. However, when you look at this Gospel text you make a mistake if you simply relate it to the past tense. On January 18th, 1987, this very day, if Jesus would say

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the same things that He said in this passage at the same place He said them, then He would again be arrested. This time He would be arrested in Jerusalem not by the chief priests and the elders and the scribes, but He would be arrested by the Temple Mount Muslim guard who controls the temple area, who would—just as a religious authority would do then—ban Him from promulgating His views. In fact, Jesus, if He were to come to Jerusalem today, would find himself unable to preach freely in Jerusalem. He could not preach on the street. He could not hand out literature. He could not buy radio or television time. He could not take out an ad in a newspaper to communicate His teaching, because the Israeli government bans all acts of proselytism. And from a Christian perspective, we can understand how this came to be because of the terrible way that the Jewish people suffered at the hands of so-called institutional Christians in the Middle Ages, when they were often, at the pain of death, forced to convert to Christianity. When they assumed their own country, they said, “Never again will anybody dump any information on us that we don’t want.”

But Jesus would not be welcome to give His viewpoint on life and religion today in Jerusalem, any more than He was welcome to do that in His own lifetime.

In America we handle religious people a little bit differently. We’re more like the Book of Acts describes the Athenian people to be. If you remember when Paul came to Athens, Acts 17, when they heard the message of the resurrection, they didn’t get all upset with him and throw rocks at him. Instead, they simply ridiculed him and laughed at him, because that’s typical for an upwardly-mobile, intellectually sophisticated culture. That if you hear a message you don’t agree with, you simply indicate that the person who’s giving the message is crooked in one way or another. In our culture what’s happening in the presidential race is interesting. I don’t, by the way, have a position on Pat Robertson’s candidacy, but I do find it interesting how the media

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seized on him for a statement that he believed God had answered a prayer of his. It seems that it's okay, within the American media and within the general culture, for any political candidate to pray to whatever God they may select. It's okay to pray to God, but a person shouldn't believe that God actually answers prayer. That's unthinkable, and a person who believes that is obviously a little bit nutty and you shouldn't trust him with the fate of the nation.

The question of Jesus' authority has been brewing throughout His earthly ministry. A quick run down in the Gospels traces the root of the conflict between the chief priests, elders and scribes and Jesus. By the way, "chief priest" is a term meaning "high priest." Along with former high priests, they served as the immediate top group of religious leaders. The scribes were people who, in a culture where many people do not write, had a particular function both of writing God's Word and of teaching it to others. They ran the schools. Then, of course, there were the elders, who were largely older men who were influential, who were selected for their political and economic connections. These three groups together formed the ruling body, the Sanhedrin. This group, right from the beginning, was opposed to Jesus. The issue over which there was division concerning Jesus is a gut issue. It goes back to a home in Capernaum, where Jesus is teaching and nobody can get in the door because the place is so packed. So a group of four takes out some tiles from the roof and drops down a paralytic, right in the middle of the room. Jesus, instead of just healing him, which would have been the easier thing, says instead to him, "Man, your sins be forgiven you" (Luke 5:20). The opposition to Jesus begins at that precise moment. There had been no opposition of him up until then. But when He lays claims to the ability to forgive sins, then the hostility starts and it never ends. It keeps on going.

I might add that that is still the watershed issue today. Does this man, above all others—above Mohammed, above Buddha, above Moses—does this man, Jesus of Nazareth, have authority to

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forgive your sin and my sin? Does He have authority to bring us into relationship with God? If He has authority to forgive sin, does He not by the same token have authority to bring us the eternal life that He's promising for the people whose sins He takes away? It's a gut issue. Who is He that can forgive sin?

The opposition builds when Jesus challenges the tradition of the rabbis in terms of external observances. A group of them walked 100 miles from Jerusalem to Galilee to ask Him an important question one day (by the way, if I were to walk 100 miles to ask anybody a question, you better believe it would be important!). The question that burned on their hearts, as they walked those three days to find Him, was, "Why do Your disciples eat without washing their hands first?" That's the kind of question we ask Johnny when he comes to the dinner table! But that was a religious question, because it had to do with tradition, with an application, an obtuse application of the Mosaic Law. Jesus challenged it all.

He stood tradition on its face. The opposition to Jesus was so fierce that by the time He'd raised Lazarus from the dead late in His ministry, John 12 tells us that not only were the chief priests trying to kill Jesus, but they were trying to kill Lazarus as well. You might as well destroy the evidence. That brings a direct challenge of Jesus to their authority when He cleanses the temple (Matthew 21:12). This then brings us to this moment, where they're asking Him, "By what authority are You doing all these things?" (Luke 20:2). They try to trap Him, to find some indictable word against Him.

As we look at those eight verses, first of all, we need to recognize in the authority of Jesus' question some foundational spiritual principles that apply to us out of that. For what's the good of looking at this Scripture if it only relates to them and not to us?

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One thing that certainly relates to us is the fact that today's attitudes are the result of yesterday's choices. What I decided to do yesterday is coming out in my life today, unless I take steps to change it. Yesterday, in the Gospel story—that is, before this time, yesterday in the broad sense of the word—the chief priests and the elders and the scribes had decided to take a different stand regarding John the Baptist. They really would have liked to have pushed him off, but because he was so popular with the people, they didn't dare. They had not made a clear choice in respect to him.

I found that it's the case in life that yesterday's choices have a way of reconfirming themselves in today's choices. In fact, if you go to the seminal moments of Jesus' ministry, back to when He was just a baby, back to the first and second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, you will find that when Jesus was born, wise men came from the East—probably from the country of Iran. And they came to Herod and said to Herod a very stupid thing, “Where is he that is born king of the Jews?” You could tell that they were not Palestinians, because had they been Palestinians, they'd had known that Herod was an absolute paranoid nut. He killed members of his own family for daring to challenge his own authority. But Herod is a slick enough politician to want to find out where this king of the Jews was born. So who does he call? He calls the chief priests and the scribes—the people who know the Old Testament. And he says, “Where is the king of the Jews going to be born?” They say, “Easy answer! Micah 5:2: ‘Behold you in Bethlehem, the littlest of the towns of Judea, out of you will come a deliverer’” (see Matthew 2:1-12).

What is interesting as a follow-up is that when they are done quoting that Scripture, the chief priests and the scribes do absolutely nothing. Only the wise men go and find where He is and worship Him. In other words, they were people who had knowledge but did not act upon the knowledge they had.

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I think it's possible, as an individual person living in the world today, to have knowledge about God. Certainly you're here on Sunday morning as an indication that there's some kind of spiritual commitment in your life. You wouldn't be here unless there was something drawing you. But there's a whole world of difference between having information about God and really laying one's life down and acting on it. The chief priests and scribes and elders, right from the beginning, from the first moment when He was a baby, chose not to make a positive decision on the basis of the information that they had. In our life, we are either moving toward Him or moving away from Him. There is no neutrality.

They cross-examined Jesus. It's interesting. If you want to have a fun Bible study, I suggest you go through the Gospels and make a list of all the questions that people ask Jesus. Then make a second list. All the questions Jesus asked people. They're fascinating lists. One of the things you'll discover when you get done with the listing, is that whenever anyone asks Jesus a straight out, from the heart, question, He gives a straight out, from the heart, answer. But when anyone asks Him a question that is based upon evil intention or simply for argumentative purposes, He either turns the tables on the questioner, or steps around it and evades a direct answer, because He is committed. He has committed His life to those who will seek Him from an honest and true heart, as He said, "They who worship the Father must worship Him in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). And to those who do not quest for truth, there will never be answers given.

The chief priests and the scribes and the elders had done nothing with the knowledge they had had. Therefore, Jesus doesn't give them a straight out answer. He asks them a question instead. It never pays to challenge Jesus. He'll wind up challenging us.

When I was in college, I had a friend. Maybe when I use those words "when I was in college," I date myself. I'm going back to my alma mater tomorrow to speak at Spring Spiritual Emphasis

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Week. It's hard to believe it, but this spring will be twenty-five years since I graduated from college. I know I don't look that old and I appreciate all the compliments you're giving me! It was twenty-nine years ago this last fall that I entered college. I got to thinking about that this week. What a change in twenty-nine years. Dwight David Eisenhower was president. It was before Vietnam. Before computers. It was when "coke" meant a soft drink. Grass was something you mowed. Gay meant having a good time. A world of difference.

I had this friend in college. His senior year, none of us knew what he was doing. About twenty of us guys lived in this dorm. He was at one end of the hall and I was at the other. I found this out after we had both graduated from college. But toward the end of his senior year, he locked himself up in his room. He decided to stay there for seventy-two hours, three days. He basically said to God, "God, if You're real, I'm going to give You three days to make Yourself real to me." What he wanted was, I think, for God to move something on his dresser or to put a mystic flame of fire in the room or something very miraculous like that. And nothing happened. He came out of that room and, as far as I know—and I haven't seen him in the last ten years, but up until ten years ago—he has lived a lifestyle that is anything but Christian in his adult experience. Scripture says, "Don't put the Lord, your God, to the test" (Matthew 4:7). This is in the sense of doubting Him and forcing Him to show His hand. Jesus will not let us put Him in our own little pressure cookers. What He did on this occasion was turn the tables and say, "What are you doing with truth?"

I find He does that in our own life. When I want to challenge Him and say, "It's not fair." He says, "Wait a minute. What's going on in your life?" It's when I'm forced to look at myself that I am ready to come to Him in humility.

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The whole case for Christianity, when it boils right down to it, boils not down to what Jesus said, although what He said is so important, it's what He did. It's who He represented himself to be. He represented himself to be God's Son, who lived a sinless life, died a saving death, and physically rose again from the dead. The Gospels say to us that all that is true and any account that differs from that is the result of the religious leadership of Jesus' day, conducting against Him something that would make Watergate look like a Sunday School picnic. We're talking about a massive job of cover-up that attempted to suppress and deny the real story. And Christians in this world are simply people who believe that the real story is: Jesus is God's Son who came to earth, lived for us, died for us and rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven and is coming again. That's our faith. Anything that denies this goes back to this historical incident in which He had enemies that gave themselves to suppress the truth He represented. Their legion has not died in the world today.

Jesus tells this parable of the vineyard. This was really as a response to the question of authority. He doesn't answer the question head on. He likes to go round-about so He tells a story. Immediately, of course, the leadership—after the story is told—perceived that He had told it against them. It's a story about a vineyard. And biblically tuned ears immediately pick up the strands of the prophets, because Isaiah 5 specifically says, "The vineyard of the LORD almighty is the house of Israel and the men of Judah are the garden of His delight. He looked for justice but saw bloodshed, for righteousness but heard cries of distress." So when Jesus uses the word "vineyard," everybody knows what He's talking about. The owner of the vineyard is God. The vineyard is Israel. The servants are the prophets who come, not once, not twice, but three times—that is, repeatedly. And the Son is Jesus himself, who is taken outside the vineyard—that is, outside the camp, as Hebrews says, "outside the city"—and is killed.

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What is the tremendous lesson that this parable is telling us about God and about ourselves? How do we relate it, not just to Jesus' first century contemporaries, but to us?

Several implications flow out of this parable that smack us right in the face. Some of them aren't all that pleasant, really, when you think about it.

I. We are all renters in life.

None of us own anything, really, in God's sight. It's all His. We may have a trust deed or a title deed, but nothing is really ours. The vineyard tenants made the mistake of thinking that what they had was theirs. It belonged to someone else. Someone was telling me that they had been to a lot of funerals and seen a lot of funeral coaches go down the street from the mortuary to the church, to the graveyard. But they have yet to see a funeral coach going down the road that was pulling a U-Haul trailer behind it. You're not going to, obviously, take it with you.

It's all on loan. Everything we have. A fundamental assumption in life is, "Everything I have, Lord, is Yours. My home is Yours. My children are Yours. My property is Yours. My time is Yours. My life is Yours. Lord, I'm just the renter. You gave me life. Someday, life will go back to You. I'm the receiver of life as a loan. It's a loan. I use it, but it's not mine. It's Yours. You gave it."

II. The second great lesson that comes out of this parable of the vineyard is that the owner, that is God, expects a return on His investment.

What kind of a return does God want? He wants us, as the New Testament says, to be "for the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:12). He wants worship from us. He wants us to live a lifestyle that is a testimony to His character and nature. He doesn't want a whole lot, does He? Just everything. He wants a return.

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These two things—we're all renters and the owner wants a return—if that's all there was to the story, then what we have is a business deal. Sign on the dotted line. Make a contract with God. That's all you've got to do. But it's, at this point, that Jesus, as a religious teacher, dives off the diving board into the deep end of truth and takes us in different directions. We read this story now and we know it. It's commonplace after we've been around the church awhile. The freshness of it and the dramatic nature of it can evade us. Because Jesus as a teacher at this point so radically dives into the deep end of the nature of God that the parable takes us by the shoulders and shakes us hard.

III. The parable goes on to tell us that there is an incredible patience in God.

He sent servants. They were beaten up. He sent more servants. They were beaten up. More servants. They were wounded. Patience. I used to think that God didn't have any patience. I don't know where I got that from. I thought, "One strike and you're out." Or that God was just waiting to find an excuse to get me out of the Kingdom. He was trying to get the small, despised few and I wasn't holy enough to get in that camp. I understand why people feel like God doesn't want them, because I had that feeling.

Here's the dramatic reverse of that. Look at the patience that God has. Patience: something that I don't have in generous supply. Anybody who's close to me knows that I tend to be a very impatient person.

I think I can appreciate this story better after being the pastor of this church and watching our parking lot development. That's our parking lot out there. Yours, mine—it's the Lord's. We're paying for it. I come out on a Saturday afternoon and see that the swap meet has overflowed and trashed it with beer bottles and McDonald's hamburger leftovers and Burger King leftovers. All kinds of trash are laying around. A few Sundays ago, I saw a bunch of four-wheelers drive right

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over the curb and they broke the water lines and everything. I say, “Don’t they have any respect for private property? Besides, this is a church! Tow them away! It’s our property. Tow them away!” We did tow a few away, by the way. You help me pray about two things—we’ve got a mission field over there that somehow God, through the Holy Spirit, has to show us a way to reach them. To me, it’s a spiritual crime that there are more people at the swap meet in Costa Mesa on Sunday than in all the churches in Costa Mesa put together. It ought to be the reverse. God needs to visit this community with a revival—a tremendous spiritual awakening.

But I know my reaction to the people that drove across the property and smashed the water lines and parked on the berm and messed up our landscaping. I was irate. I wasn’t going to take the time to send them any notice like, “Please do not park on our lot.” Tow them away! This is God’s property and people are violating His ownership rights. And He simply sends messengers. Would you change? Would you try to do better? Act a little differently?

They’re not just ignored.

It’s funny. A couple swap-meeters parked at the church. I said to them, “This is church parking.” These two ladies looked at me and said, “We’re coming to attend a church function.” They proceeded to promptly walk across the street. They didn’t know I was pastor and I didn’t bother to tell them. And I didn’t tow them either. But they treat the messenger rudely.

Look at God’s patience. I think it’s possible that there’s some here this morning that really feel like your last chance was a few years ago, and God is through with you. Then you haven’t read this story. You haven’t read the heart of Jesus. God is never through with you. I’ve even had people say, “I’ve committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.” I said, “Nonsense! You wouldn’t be at a Gospel meeting if you’d committed that sin. There wouldn’t be a shred of anything in you that ever wanted to draw close to God. You wouldn’t have an inkling of even wanting to worship

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God or love Him or come to Him. Baloney!” The Spirit is yet drawing. God has patience. What a wonderful God we serve!

IV. Another incredible thing this story is telling us is that there is an almost unbelievable miscalculation on the owner’s part about how he should get the rent.

He sent one group of servants and they’d been beaten. Then another group, and they’d been beaten and treated shamefully. A third group—they’d been wounded. Then the owner said, “What shall I do?” (Luke 20:13). That’s an incredible question. He had sent three groups of people over a long period of time. He’s been away a long time. Three groups of people had come. Then the owner says, “What shall I do?” All my humanity says, “I know what you do!” He makes the most incredible miscalculation. “I’ll send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will serve him.” I could talk to that owner from a little bit of my human wisdom and say, “If they’ve mistreated your servants, wait until they get a hold of your son!”

But when God has a choice between appealing to us on the basis of His power or on the basis of His love, He will always choose His love. He has no desire to twist our arms and break our back. He has a desire to win us, to open the door of our heart by us unlocking it from the inside. So this incredible miscalculation—He sends His Son.

When His Son is rejected, it looks like the story suggests that there are terrible times ahead for the tenants. We know in history that was the case. At the same time, in reading a parable, we must always be careful to put the interpretation on the parable that the Lord himself gives. After telling the story, He turns right around and says that the fate of anyone who turns Him down is the result of their own miscalculation. “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone and on whomever it falls they will be crushed and whoever falls on it will be broken to pieces” (Luke 20:17–18). In other words, the destruction and emptiness we experience in life are not just

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a matter of God's judgment visitation. It is a matter that we ourselves choose. Over the years, I wish I could have looked at some persons in the eye, grabbed them by the shoulders and shaken them and said, "Wake up! Do you realize what you're doing? What implication it's having on your children and on your family? Do you know what's happening? You're off on a self-trip. Do you realize what's going on? What seeds are being sown long range?" I just want to grab them and say, "Come to reality!"

The Lord knows that, when we choose our own way, there's going to be a lot of breaking, a lot of needless suffering, and a lot of pain inflicted upon our lives and upon other people's lives. So He stands, appealing to us in love. Why? Because He loves us, that's why. In fact, on this very same day that Jesus tells this story, He will later go out onto the Mount of Olives, and on the Mount of Olives, He will give a sermon that is probably one of my favorites in the Gospels. It's Matthew 23, where He denounces the hypocrites. It's a masterpiece, if you like irony and satire. When He gets all done He says, "Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town" (Matthew 23:34). What is He saying? He takes the story one step beyond where it ends here, because the story ends here with the son being killed. Jesus, in a few more hours, across on the Mount of Olives, on the Temple Mount, will continue the story by saying, "When the son is dead, when he is killed outside the vineyard, yet the owner of that vineyard will keep sending messengers to people." He will send prophets and wise men and scribes. That is, Christian apostles and preachers and evangelists and teachers whose hearts are flaming with the Gospel. Why? Because God does not give up. Even the great "No!" that was given to His Son, God works to break through that "no" so that our answer to Him might be always a "yes."

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The answer of His heart to us is always, “Yes.” The promises are always “yes” toward us. He asks us to take a “yes” toward Him.

Is there any truth in your life you haven’t acted upon? It’ll be hard for you to act on greater truth if you’re not already living in truth. What does God want from your life? He wants the rent. He wants your praise. He wants your life. He wants your commitment. He wants the fruit of the personality of Jesus Christ present within you, which is love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and gentleness and long-suffering and faithfulness. He wants those things in our life. He tells us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto Him, which is our reasonable service (Romans 12:1).

Closing Prayer

Lord, You confront us. You confront our thoughts and our ideas and our attitudes. Yet how patient You are to come to us so humbly and draw us with love. You don’t hit us with a hammer. You hit us with Your heart. Thank You, Lord, for Your respect for us as people. Thank You for Your great love for us. Lord, there may be friends here today who feel unloved, who wonder if You even care about them. I pray, Lord, that Your Spirit, in these moments, will draw them to You. Let them know in their heart of hearts that You care all the way to Calvary because You loved us. We’re all guilty of Your death, for it was our sin that made it necessary for You to die for us. But in laying down Your life, You pick it up again. And You will that whoever dies with You, will also live with You. Thank You for that life. Lord, for any area of our life in which we’re not living in accordance with Your will or in accordance with Your truth, bring our lives into conformity to Your will for us—our emotions, our attitudes, our actions. Bring them into conformity with Your will. That from our life there might come the rent You seek to collect. Bless Your people, Lord, we pray. In Christ. Amen.