



# WHO'S THE BOSS

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Luke 20:1-18

68th Message

Shawn Reese

October 26, 2014

Good morning. Well, who's the boss? That's the question we aim to answer today. It's kind of fun to ask children that question, specifically, who's the boss in your family? Maybe the next time you are out at the playground, you can ask some of the kids. Here are some answers from 2nd graders:

1. Mom. You can tell by room inspection. She sees all that stuff under the bed.
2. I guess Mom is, but only because she has a lot more to do than Dad.
3. Mom doesn't want to be boss, but she has to because dad's such a goof ball.

I asked my kids this week who the boss was in our family. They both said mom and the reason was because she makes good dinner. I didn't know that making good dinners brought that kind of authority.

Who's the boss in our lives? It really does boil down to a question of authority.

Authority happens to be a key word in our text today. We're in the book of Luke, and Jesus has just arrived in Jerusalem. His arrival has been grounded in two bold displays of authority: first, his approach to Jerusalem on a donkey amidst joy and celebration, and second, the removal of all the noise in the temple that we looked at last week. These are audacious and bold moves by Jesus and they will not go unchallenged. As we'll see today, he has stepped on some toes.

So if you have your Bibles or worship guides, please turn with me to Luke, chapter 20, beginning with verse 1.

## Jesus' Authority Questioned (20:1-8)

One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Our text today divides into two sections: *Jesus' Authority Questioned* in the challenge from the religious leaders and *Jesus' Authority Established* in the telling of the parable of the wicked tenants.

Well, there is murder in the air. If you remember from last week, the religious leaders are looking for a way to destroy Jesus. But Jesus continues to teach and the crowds are transfixed by his words. Where is he? he is in the Court of the Gentiles, and will remain there

throughout chapter 20. This is where he just removed the merchants and moneychangers. It is the largest section of the 35 acres of the Temple Mount. Remember, it's Passover time, so it is crowded with lots of pilgrims. The temple is also the power base for these religious leaders. No one has authority to walk in here and tell them what to do because they are the bosses of this turf.

## The Definition of Authority

Authority. What does it mean? The word used here in our text today, *ἐξουσία*, denotes power or right or dominion. But it's not power in the sense of strength, rather it's power displayed in areas of legal, political or moral affairs. So it has to do with the right or power of an official to delegate or dispose as he wishes.

## The Question of Authority

Have you ever seen a pin like this, "Question Authority"? The slogan came out of the 60s-70s when asking questions and striving for change was considered part of one's responsibility to society and country. Ben Franklin is reported to have said that it is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority. He probably said that because if authority wouldn't have been questioned in his time, we would still be talking with English accents and drinking tea, instead of coffee. Indeed, the question of authority starts way back at the beginning. Back in the garden, Adam and Eve questioned the very authority of God.

PJ O'Rourke, a humor columnist, says this:

It is easy to understand why the cat has replaced the dog as modern America's favorite pet. People like pets to possess the same qualities that they do. Cats are irresponsible and recognize no authority, yet are completely dependent on others for their material needs. Cats cannot be made to do anything useful. Cats are mean for the fun of it.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe cats are the ultimate questioner of authority?

But here as Jesus teaches, the religious leaders are the questioners of authority, questioning his right to do what he's doing; "Who and what gives you the right to come in here and tell us how to run our temple?" From their point of view Jesus has no credentials and therefore no authority. He is simply an outsider with no formal training, and that will not fly in the temple.

This might sound a bit odd to us because in our culture we have the freedom of speech. We can pretty much go anywhere and say almost anything, as long as it doesn't threaten anyone. But that's not how it worked in the temple. In order to teach in the temple you had to have permission from the religious leaders.

Now, what is amazing here is that these religious leaders simply don't care about people worshipping in the temple. All they care about is keeping their power and authority and keeping things running smoothly. Anyone who threatens that, they're going to get rid of.

Jesus doesn't give them an answer. He responds with a question: "Was the authority of John the Baptist from heaven or not?" (v. 3)

Now, although it looks like it's an evasive changing of the subject, it's not. It's a zinger of a question. It's brilliant!

You can kind of hear the crowds say, 'whoa' because they know it's a zinger.

At this time, John would have been dead for 2 to 3 years. Like Jesus, though, John had no qualifications, no formal training and was an outsider. But people flocked to Him. He was very popular with the crowds.

The religious leaders are put on their heels and need to have a chat about this one, so they get into their holy—or maybe unholy—huddle:

If we say "from heaven," then we sinned by rejecting John. And we have to believe this Jesus is the Messiah because that's what John said about him. We can't say that.

If we say "from man," we will be killed because the people think John was a prophet. Let's not say that. What are we going to say? Why don't we just say we don't know. 'WE DON'T KNOW!' (v. 7)

"And Jesus says, 'neither will I tell you.' "(v. 8)

He answers this way not because he doesn't want to make a claim, but because the point has been made already. It doesn't need to be stated. Jesus has come from heaven as John did.

But he then tells a parable that will also answer their question.

### Jesus' Authority Established (20:9-16)

**And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do?"**

### The Background of the Parable

I'm going to stop there. Don't read any further, because it is here that we get a painful pause in the story. Let me explain the story a bit then we'll get back to it.

This parable is commonly referred to as the 'Parable of the Wicked Tenants' and is an easily understood allegory.

The setting is a vineyard, with God as the owner.

### The Vineyard Imagery

The vineyard represents Israel and was very much a part of their identity, just like countries today have their identity markers. For example, if I say maple leaf, what country do you think of? Canada. If I say bald eagle, it's the US. Awhile ago, if you would have said a hammer and a sickle, it would be the Soviet Union. If Israel had had a flag at this time, it would have had a vineyard on it. It was their national symbol; so much so that a gigantic golden grapevine hung in the temple. Josephus, a Jewish historian, says that it was so big, the clusters of grapes were the size of a man.<sup>2</sup>

This vine was held very sacred to the Jews because this was what they were; they were God's vineyard, planted by him.

Many Old Testament passages reflect this identity (Is 27:2-5, Ps 80:8-16, Jer 2:21, Hos 10:1), the most famous being the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5. In fact, that text may have been in Jesus' mind as he told this parable. We don't have time this morning to compare the two, but I would encourage you to go read the Isaiah text and compare it to this parable in Luke.

### The Parable Itself

By the very first sentence, everyone listening to Jesus knows that this parable will be about God's dealings with Israel. And as Jesus continues on, it becomes clear that it is specifically about God's dealings with Israel's leaders, because the tenants of the vineyard represent the leaders of Israel.

God plants the vineyard and puts the tenants in charge of it for a long time. This was a common situation in that time period for an owner to live some distance from their estate. So the audience would have been very familiar with the situation.

Although this owner, God, is gone, he sends his servants, the prophets, to retrieve fruit of the vineyard. In the parable he sends three prophets, and the tenants' treatment of the each prophet gets increasingly worse. The first is beaten. The second is beaten and treated shamefully. The third is wounded and cast out. One writer rightly says, "The casting out implies that there was physical violence involved not only as he arrived but also when he is expelled."<sup>3</sup>

### The Servants as OT Prophets

The treatment of these three servants summarizes Israel's terrible treatment of the Old Testament prophets:

- Elijah was driven into the wilderness (1 Kings 19:1-5),
- Isaiah, according to tradition, was sawn asunder.
- Jeremiah was thrown into a pit and left for dead. (Jer 38)
- Zechariah was stoned to death (2 Chronicles 24:21)
- John the Baptist was beheaded (Mk 6:14-29)

Over thousands of years God's servants, the prophets, have consistently been rejected.

### The Painful Pause

And now there is a painful pause in the story.

How much violence and insult can the owner of this vineyard tolerate?

What will this owner (God) choose to do now?

At this point the owner has every right to send in an army to utterly destroy the tenants. This is a direct challenge to his authority, and an absolute insult to his person.

Kenneth Bailey provides some helpful background here:

In the Rabbinic tradition, there is a story surrounding the ten plagues in Egypt. Because Moses, God's servant, has been slighted by Pharaoh in the first 9 plagues, God will not stand idly by and watch his servant get shamed. He will go himself to carry out the 10th plague. And you know what that was—the plague which killed the firstborn in all of Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

This is probably what any listener would have thought would happen next. That God would come down and destroy the tenants. But what do we get after this painful pause? "I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." (v. 13b)

To the surprise and amazement of all listening that day and reading it today, the owner, God, responds in love and grace. He

sends his very son, his beloved son, and sends him unarmed! He is hoping that the tenants will recognize his son's authority, who would have had the full authority of the owner. And for us readers, the phrase, 'my beloved son' echoes the announcement from heaven at Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration (Luke 3:22; 9:35).

But the tenants don't get it. Now it's the tenants who get into their holy huddle and chat: "What should we do? I don't know what do you think? Hey, let's kill him then the inheritance will be ours." (v. 14) So they did it. They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him (v. 15).

In our eyes the tenants' decision to kill the son seems like a pretty silly response; after all don't they know that the owner will come after them? But there is logic to their decision. In those days, there were 'squatter's rights'. It was possible for a tenant farmer to claim land for himself if the landlord was gone for three years, the presumption being that he had lost interest or was dead.<sup>5</sup>

This is what they mean by "the inheritance will be ours." If they kill the son, maybe that means the owner is dead. Then when three years is up, the vineyard is theirs. And isn't that exactly how the religious leaders are acting? As long as they are still in power, they're good. And that's exactly the point of the parable: the tenants will do whatever they need to do to keep their power, including become murderers.

It is then that judgment comes. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." (vv. 15b-16)

In a prophetic word, Jesus says that God will eventually destroy the tenants, will take the vineyard from them and will give it to others. This judgment may look forward to the destruction of the city in AD 70, but more than likely refers to eternal judgment for these religious leaders because they are rejecting Jesus.

Note that the vineyard remains intact, only the tenants are destroyed. The vineyard will then be transferred to new tenants, which refers to Jesus and the apostles.

### The Cornerstone

So what's the response from the crowd? Verse 16b:

**When they heard this, they said, 'Surely not!'**

**But he looked directly at them and said, '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.'**

The crowd of people respond in shock: 'Surely not!' Perhaps they respond this way because they are appalled at the murderous intentions of their leadership. Or maybe they respond this way because they know that if their leaders are destroyed, their security is in jeopardy. We don't know exactly, but whatever the case, Jesus responds forcefully by "looking directly at them".

You know those commercials—do you wanna get away? I think they would come to mind right now for whoever he is looking at. We're not exactly sure who he is looking at, but if he is looking at the crowds, surely he is warning them that you do actually need to get away. You need to get away from these religious leaders because they are leading you toward destruction.

Jesus then quotes from Psalm 118, the famous cornerstone passage. We've already heard this psalm the previous day when Jesus approaches Jerusalem: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Ps 118:26). Psalm 118 is about a joyous procession into the temple, but right in the middle of the psalm is this small parable about the stone. The builders, the very leaders of Israel, have rejected the cornerstone, the most important stone in the building, the one on which all other stones sit.

Jesus then quotes from Isa 8:14-15 saying, "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." Remember way back in Luke 2:34 when Simeon declared, "Behold, this child is appointed for the falling and rising of many in Israel"? Jesus is indeed bringing division because all authority has been given to him. As our Scripture reading today said, if you believe in him you will not be put to shame. But if you reject his authority you will stumble over his stone. There is judgment.

That's our text today. I want to close today with a couple thoughts organized like this: The Authority, The Danger, and The Good News. First of all, The Authority.

### The Authority

From our passage today we see that Jesus is the cornerstone, the very foundation of our faith. He is also the beloved son from the parable, having the same authority as the Father. Indeed "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matt 28:18).

Last week we saw him clear the temple. We talked about how we are now the temple of the living God. Where the Holy Spirit resides is now the sacred space where the living God dwells. And what we learn here is that he, and only he, has the authority to come into his temple today, and clear out all that noise that is in our lives. He has the authority to come into our lives and be the boss.

Now the question for us is, will we submit and surrender ourselves to his authority? Who is the boss of our lives?

### The Danger

And that brings us to the danger. The danger for us is that we would rather be owners than tenants. Every one of us will view our world as tenants or owners, and they are two fundamentally different ways of seeing life.

Either we are the boss or we submit to the boss, the person of authority, namely Jesus.

Either we want to be God or we obey God.

Either we want our will be done or his will be done.

And typically in our sinful, stubborn and selfish hearts, we choose the route of owner because we don't like someone else telling us what to do. That is the danger.

But what does the Lord's Prayer say? "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). A confessional document from the 15th century says it this way, "Help us and all people to reject our own wills and to obey your will without any back talk."<sup>6</sup>

Do you remember the wedding at Cana? Remember his mother Mary's famous line. They run out of wine and Mary goes to the servant and says, "Do whatever he says!"

That's the question for our lives—will we do whatever he says, he being the one with all authority? What we have to realize is this:

Jesus' will is safe and it is what is best for us. Being a tenant is the best thing for us! As GK Chesterton said about Christianity:

The more I considered Christianity the more I found that while it had established a rule, an order (ie, an authority), the chief aim of that order was to give room for the good things to run wild.<sup>7</sup>

That's what he's doing when we make him boss of our lives; we make room for the good things to run wild.

If you're anything like me, this is really hard. Really, really hard—to give my life over to his will on a daily basis. But let me finish with this good news:

### The Good News

It's the truth from the parable—we serve a patient God. Last week I shared a few common misperceptions of God. One I did not mention was the God of the hammer. Here is a God who looks more like Thor. He is an angry God who's ready to crush people when they mess up. But this passage conveys an altogether different picture—here is a God who is supremely patient.

There is judgment, but there is an overwhelming disposition toward patience.

Rejection after rejection after rejection after rejection and after that great pause—what should I do?

Maybe this will help: think of a time you were rejected—maybe for a job, maybe in a relationship, maybe for a sports team. Remember how that felt? I got cut from my 9th grade baseball team. Man, it hurt and I was angry. And how did I respond? I just stayed away from those people who rejected me out of anger. I stayed away from the coach. One of my good friends made the team, and it took me a long time to even talk to him again. That's how I deal with rejection.

How does this God deal with rejection? “For God so loved the world,” he sent not more servants, but his beloved son. He sends his beloved son (John 3:16). Supreme patience born out of an endless pool of love. A god who does not give up on his creation but responds in patient love.

Patience. It's a virtue right? Turns out it's a virtue I really struggle with. But what helps me is to think about those who have been patient with me. I think about my parents who were so patient with me, especially through my teenage years when I rebelled. I am so thankful to them. I'm thankful for the coaches (not the one that cut me) that were very patient with me when I got down on myself. I'm thankful for teachers who were patient with me when I couldn't figure things out. Today I'm very thankful that I have a wife and kids who are super patient with me when I am such a goof ball and don't make good dinners.

But most of all I'm thankful for God being unbelievably patient with me through the ups and the many, many downs of my spiritual journey.

So the question for you is, how has God been patient with you? Think about that for a second. It's humbling isn't it? But aren't you thankful that we have a God of supreme patience?

Well, I need to close. But I want to leave you with one more question:

How can you take the patience that God has given you and extend that to others this week? Mark my word, when you do that, get ready to watch the good things run wild!

Amen

1. O'Rourke, PJ. *Modern Manners: An Etiquette Book for Rude People*, (Atlantic Monthly Press), 215
2. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*. 15.11.3. 395.
3. Bailey, Kenneth. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 415.
4. *Ibid.* 416
5. Morris, Leon. *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 211, 212.
6. *Heidelberg Catechism*. First Electronic Edition: July 2012. ISBN: 978-1-62314-069-4
7. Chesterton, GK. *Orthodoxy* (Dodd, Mead & Co, 1908), 148.

© 2014 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino