

Midweek 6
His Final Steps Led to His Enemies
Sermon Text: Luke 20:9-19

It's like walking on eggshells. What do I mean? Maybe we're the parent who has to have a serious talk with a rebellious teenager. Maybe we're the spouse who decides it's time to call a cease-fire before the marriage flies apart. Maybe we're the manager who is tasked with mediating a dispute at a business. Or maybe we're the district officer who has been asked to counsel with a congregation. We realize the situation will be tense. Every word we use will need to be chosen carefully, rehearsed ahead of time, and prayed over "*without ceasing*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We know it will be a delicate business that we don't want to make worse. But how could that happen? Because instead of taking "words and actions in the kindest possible way," our sinful human nature will take them in the worst possible way. Too often we practice selective listening, or defensive listening, which is really not listening at all. Instead, we're just waiting for the words we can seize to twist the argument in our favor.

I don't think any of us enjoys being put in a situation like that, one where we realize anything we say may be hurled back at us like a handheld thermonuclear device. Such situations are physically and emotionally exhausting and, dare I admit, a bit spiritually draining. Perhaps that's why, as we age, we learn to pick our battles wisely. And when we are convinced that we absolutely, positively have to get involved and say something, we allow the old adage to guide us: the less said, the better.

All of this makes me marvel all the more at the final steps our Savior took just days before he took **his final steps** to his cross! Our Lord didn't hide away from the crowds, nor did he shy away from confrontation. He wasn't guided by "the less said, the better" mantra. Instead, the gospels are filled with chapter after chapter of what our Savior said in his final days to the large crowds gathered at the temple courts of Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. And much of what our Savior said was targeted squarely at the "*chief priests and experts in the law . . . [and] the elders*" (Luke 20:1). How amazing and how comforting that . . .

His Final Steps Led to His Enemies.

- I. Those enemies included the Jewish leaders.**
 - II. Those enemies included you and me!**
- I. Those enemies included the Jewish leaders.**

Whenever we read Scripture, it's always wise to check the context. So it's crucial for us to know the target audience for what we study this evening: Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants. The target is identified back at the beginning of this same chapter: "*One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the good news, the chief priests and experts in the law came to him with the elders. They asked him, 'Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Or who is the one who gave you this authority?'*" (Luke 20:1,2). The religious leaders of Jerusalem were baiting the trap—tightening the noose!—because they already knew the answer! Throughout his ministry and in these very same temple courts, our Savior had made it crystal clear that his authority came from God the Father because he was God the Son! Give John's gospel a quick read if you doubt me (John 5:17,18; 7:28,29; 8:19,58; 10:30,36-39)! This question was nothing but a trap, and Jesus knew it! That's why he answered a question with a question—one about John the Baptist's authority.

Then our Savior continued with his parable—an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. By the time he finished it, Jesus’ enemies—the religious leaders—knew that Jesus had answered their question so perfectly, it’s as if he had raised the scope of a 30-06 to their foreheads and struck them with the laser-guided bullet of God’s holy law!

Jesus’ parable—as always—was ripped from the headlines of the everyday life of the Jewish people. The upper Jordan River valley, the western and northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, and even much of Galilee itself contained vast estates owned by foreigners who lived far away in another country. Their farms and vineyards were run by tenant farmers. Some might call them sharecroppers, but that term carries some connotations that didn’t fit those tenants. For these tenant farmers weren’t necessarily poor, eking out a subsistence on the land as they begged for scraps dropped from the owner’s tables. Keep in mind the owners lived far away in a distant country. So as long as a revenue stream went back to them—which was supposed to be at the percentage agreed to in a contract—the owner was satisfied. He didn’t care if the tenant farmer became quite wealthy. But the owner wouldn’t necessarily know if the tenant farmer was being honest, if he was holding back on some of the profits—skimming some off the top, so to speak.

All of Jesus’ listeners, including those leaders of Israel, knew only too well how this system worked and how rife it was with abuse! But where does Jesus take his parable? To a whole new level!

In Jesus’ parable, when the owner commissions a servant to collect the percentage specified in the contract, what happens? Servant 1 is beaten and sent away empty-handed. (I doubt that was in the contract.) Servant 2? The same. Servant 3? Even worse! They “*wounded him,*” literally traumatized him, and “*threw him out*” (Luke 20:12). These tenant farmers sound like a drug-dealing cartel protecting their cocaine fields from a raid!

So what happens next? Frankly I am astounded at the patience of the owner who says, “*What should I do? I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him. But when the tenant farmers saw him, they talked it over with one another. They said, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, so that the inheritance will be ours.’ They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him*” (Luke 20:13-15). According to the laws of that day, under certain conditions, if the owner died leaving no heir, whoever claimed the estate, especially the current occupants, was allowed to have it. So in Jesus’ parable, these wicked tenants must have figured, “The owner must have died. That’s why he sent the son. If we kill the son, this vineyard is ours!”

What a tragic, final mistake! Jesus quickly wraps up his brief parable with a question. “*So what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others*” (Luke 20:15,16).

When Jesus finished his story, I think our Savior sucked the air out of the temple courts until it was replaced by this collective gasp: “*When they heard this, they said, ‘May it never be!’*” (Luke 20:16). The crowds got it! They knew Jesus was talking about their nation of Israel! In part, they knew because Jesus—ever the master teacher—ripped a page from their Scriptures, one they knew only too well, as the basis for his little story. It’s the extended picture found in Isaiah chapter 5. Please read it, if you have a moment or two this evening or later this week. For now, I hope it will be enough to hear the summary the prophet Isaiah offers in verse 7: “*Yes, the vineyard of the LORD of Armies is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the planting that was pleasing to him. He expected justice, but instead there was oppression. He expected righteousness, but there was an outcry.*” Also permit me to add verse 25: “*Therefore, the LORD’s anger burns against his people, and he has stretched out his hand against them and has struck*

them. The mountains tremble, and their dead bodies will lie like garbage in the middle of the streets.”

God’s own people were the vineyard in Jesus’ story. And the servants who were beaten or even worse? God’s prophets: men like Elijah; Jeremiah, the weeping prophet; and John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord who was beheaded for his efforts. Time and time again God’s prophets were rejected, and the consequences to God’s chosen people were horrific. The Assyrian captivity—722 B.C., the ten northern tribes taken away and never heard from again. The Babylonian captivity—586 B.C., the two southern tribes ripped from their homeland for 70 years but then returned. All so that the owner of the universe could send his beloved Son to this earth. The Son who made sure **his final steps led to his enemies**, even though he knew full well they would reject and kill him!

The minute Jesus finished his parable, the crowds got it. So did the religious leaders! *“That very hour the chief priests and the experts in the law began looking for a way to lay hands on him, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people”* (Luke 20:19). The noose was tightened. Because **his final steps led to his enemies** and those enemies included the Jewish leaders, Jesus was going to die on the center cross on Calvary’s hill just three days later.

If this message ended right now, what would you have gained? Yet another history lesson and little more. But you deserve more than that. You and I need far more than that! We all need to know that **his final steps led to his enemies**, and . . .

II. Those enemies included you and me!

When the collective gasp, *“May it never be!”* filled the vacuum of the temple courts, Jesus seized the moment and shared words you and I need to hear today. *“Then what about 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 it will crush the one on whom it falls”* (Luke 20:17,18). Our Savior quotes Psalm 118:22 in his reply. That’s the famous cornerstone prophecy. But what exactly is a cornerstone, and why is it so important from a civil engineering or architectural standpoint? Cornerstones then were a far cry from the little plaques we hang on foyer walls or the engraved marble slabs we cement into the walls of our buildings today. In Jesus’ day, the cornerstone was the first stone laid. It determined the orientation of the building, relative to north, south, east, and west. The cornerstone also bore the weight and stress of two of the walls of the structure. So if the cornerstone failed, the building fell.

Now let’s get back to the verse: *“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”* (Psalm 118:22). Jesus is that cornerstone. Everyone in the temple courts that Tuesday who heard Jesus’ parable, his warning, and his use of this psalm verse understood that. That included the Jewish leaders who detested Jesus and wanted him out of the way, partly because the crowds were following *him* instead of *them*, maybe more so because Jesus preached the Lord’s *“good news”* (Luke 20:1), the gracious forgiveness of sins, and not the fake forgiveness the high priests peddled, forgiveness that could be bought and sold by the merchants and the money changers who normally set up shop in the temple courts!

That’s why just two days later these same Jewish leaders grew bold enough to send their thugs to lay hands on our Lord outside the Garden of Gethsemane. And within the next 24 hours, they made sure he was hung on a tree. Their rejection of the cornerstone became complete—but that didn’t end up hurting the cornerstone. Instead, it crushed *them!*

That's what Jesus was getting at when he paraphrased a common Jewish proverb of his day. The proverb goes like this: "If a stone falls on a pot, woe to the pot. If the pot falls on the stone, woe to the pot. Either way, woe to the pot." "May it never be!" God forbid that anyone rejects Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, for then God's righteous judgment will crush them!

So it will be for anyone who remains an enemy to our Lord. And that, my friends, could also be you and me, for that's what we once were as members of the human race! The apostle Paul warned, "*The mind-set of the sinful flesh is hostile to God, since it does not submit to God's law, and in fact, it cannot. Those who are in the sinful flesh cannot please God*" (Romans 8:7,8).

All the more reason to treasure the good news Jesus came not only to preach but also to make a reality! For all of his enemies, the entire human race lost in sin, Jesus took **his final steps** to the cross. For all of his enemies, including you and me, Jesus suffered and bled on Good Friday's cross. For all of his enemies, including you and me, he finished his work to wash away every last one of our sins in his blood (John 19:30; 1 John 1:7). That includes all those little nitpicky and persnickety sins we're struggling with right now in these days of walking on eggshells; when every word is measured and tried in the court of public appeal, sometimes via social media; when every action is watched like a hawk and often swiftly judged; when the stress, at least for some, can be withering.

For times like these and sinners like you and me, **his final steps led to his enemies**. Those steps led to me, a sinner, and to you, a sinner, so that through his sacrifice and by his grace, our Savior could lead us all through this life so filled with pain and danger until, at last, he will lead us all on our final steps home to heaven.

Dear friends, Jesus is the rock that grounds us all right now. That's why our Lord took all **his final steps**—so that he could become the cornerstone of God's church. Your cornerstone and mine, by faith! The cornerstone the apostle Paul talked about when he wrote, "*You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the Cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit*" (Ephesians 2:20-22. See also Acts 4:11 and 1 Peter 2:7ff). Amen.