

Aren't all religions basically the same?

Tough Questions, Part 4

Luke 20:9-19

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 21 May 2006

During this month we've been attempting to answer a series of tough questions: Would a loving God send people to hell? Why are there so many hypocrites in the church? What gives life real meaning and purpose? Today I want to look at the last, and possibly toughest question of all: Aren't all religions basically the same? This is a question that often gets posed by thoughtful people. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam – aren't they all just different roads to the same ultimate destination? How would you answer that question? How would Jesus answer that question? As we've been doing throughout this series, let's take a look at another of the parables that Jesus tells in the gospel of Luke. Turn to Luke 20:9-19 (p.1019). This is the last parable that Luke records. It may well have been the last parable that Jesus ever told. He is now just days away from the end of his life. He's reached Jerusalem. The religious leaders there are looking for a way to arrest him and kill him. Earlier in this chapter they say, "Who gave you this authority?" What sets you apart from the rest of us? In this intriguing little story Jesus tells them. He outlines his unique understanding of (a) the human condition, (b) his identity and mission, and (c) our ultimate future. And, in so doing, he explains how Christianity is not – and could never be – just one of many roads to the same destination.

How Jesus understood the human condition

At first glance, we might struggle to understand this parable, but Jesus' audience understood it easily. Eight hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had used the image of a vineyard to describe the people of Israel, the people of God (Isaiah 5:1-7). Jesus had simply borrowed this image. So in this parable the vineyard represents the people of God. The one who planted the vineyard is God himself. The servants represent the prophets of the Old Testament. And the wicked tenants represented Israel's leaders, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who are resisting Jesus. But the message of this parable is not limited to Israel and its leaders in the first century. Jesus is outlining here his understanding of the human condition generally. A tenant, by definition, is accountable to somebody. He pays rent. Jesus is implying that we are placed on this earth as tenants. So we owe a debt of moral obedience to the One who gave us this beautiful world to live in. We are accountable to him. Intuitively, we know that. Our conscience tells us that there are things we ought to do, and things we ought not to do. There is a moral law by which we are bound.

The problem is we don't want to believe that. We don't want to be bound. Growing up, my favourite superhero was Superman. He could do anything. He could bend steel with bare hands. He could leap over buildings with a single bound. He could defy the laws of nature. I wanted to be like Superman. I wanted his superhuman strength, his supernatural speed. (Most of all, I wanted his chest, with that giant red *S* on it. I've never had the kind of chest that could accommodate a giant *S* – a less curvy letter, perhaps, a lowercase *f* or *i*.) We all want to be like Superman, Jesus suggests. Verse 13: "This is the heir," the tenants said, "Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." We're not content to be tenants. We want to be owners. We want to defy the laws of our own moral nature. Like Eve, we've believed the serpent's lie: "You can be a god." You can do what you want. But I'm reminded of the story about Muhammed Ali, who once allegedly refused to fasten his seat belt on an airplane. After repeated requests by the flight attendant to buckle up, Ali finally said, "Superman don't need no seat belt." To which the attendant is said to have replied, "Superman don't need no plane." The fact is we're not Superman. We're not God. We can't run this world. Look at the mess we've made trying. Other religions define the basic human condition in relatively positive or neutral terms. According to Buddhism, for example, our problem is the existence of pain itself. We simply need to detach ourselves from passion and desire, and we will reach nirvana. But Jesus says that our fundamental problem – the *cause* of our pain and suffering – is that we are rebellious tenants. In spite of all the messengers God sends our way – all the opportunities he gives us to repent – we persistently refuse to acknowledge his authority over our lives.

How Jesus understood his own mission

Yet Jesus says that God still wants to show us mercy (v13): "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him." That phrase, "my son, whom I love," is the very same phrase that was used of Jesus when he was baptised back in Luke 3:21-22. "You are my Son, whom I love," said the voice from heaven. So Jesus has introduced himself as a character in his own story. This is important. Writers like Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, would have us believe that Jesus was one of the world's great religious teachers, but just a teacher. He says that Jesus never himself claimed to be divine – that the deity of Christ is an invention of the early church. Dan Brown needs to read this parable. Jesus obviously had a very clear sense that he was unique. He says here, "I am not just one of the servants, one of a long line of prophets or religious teachers. I am the Owner's Son. I bear his likeness. I am God in the flesh." This sets Jesus apart from the leaders of all the world's other major religions. Muslims don't worship Muhammad. Buddha didn't regard himself as divine. But Jesus did. And that has huge implications.

There's the scene in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* when King Arthur and his knights have to get across a bridge to complete their quest. The bridge is guarded by an old man who tells them they each must answer three questions in order to cross; if they get one answer wrong, they are plunged into the abyss. The first knight steps up. "What's your name?" He gives it. "What's your quest?" He explains that. "What's your favourite colour?" "Red." He crosses the bridge, amazed it was so easy. Then it's the second knight's turn. He is asked to state his name and his quest. But the third question is, "What's the capital of Assyria?" he says, "I don't know – ahhh!" He is thrown into the abyss. The third knight is terrified. He correctly gives his name and quest, but when asked the third question ("What's your favourite colour?") he is so nervous he responds, "Red – no blue – ahhhh!" Finally, it's King Arthur's turn. Same drill on the first two questions. The third one, though, is particularly difficult: "What is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?" Arthur responds, "That depends – is it an African or European swallow?" The bridge-keeper says, "Well, I don't know ... ahhhh!" And *he* is cast into the abyss. That scene is a picture of every religion in the world. Whether it's the Buddhist Eightfold Path or the Five Pillars of Islam, they are all simply expressions of our attempts to reach the Holy Grail, to attain paradise, to reach across to God – by our own efforts. Christianity is God reaching across the abyss to us, revealing himself to us, in a form we can understand – the form of a person. Jesus is God in the flesh. And so, the owner in this parable says, "Perhaps they'll respect him." But they didn't. Jesus says in v15, the "tenants threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." Just a few days after he spoke these words, the Jewish authorities had him taken out of the city and nailed him to a cross. Now, again, we can be tempted to evade the application of this parable by limiting it to some first century Jews. After all, we weren't there. We didn't drive the nails into Jesus. But Jesus' implication is that every time we say, "I don't want God interfering in my life. I want to be my own master," we add our own nail to those that held Jesus to the cross.

How Jesus understood our ultimate future

This brings us to the last dimension of this parable: how Jesus views our ultimate future. He goes on in v15 to say: "What will the Owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." On one level this verse predicts the way in which the Jews, by their rejection of the Messiah, would forfeit their spiritual privileges to the Gentiles. But, on another level, Jesus is saying that for every rebellious tenant – every human being who refuses to acknowledge God's authority – there will come a day of accounting, a day of judgment. He describes that judgment in vv17-18: "The stone the builders 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." These verses may seem difficult for us to understand. But to Luke's original readers they made perfect sense. Jesus is fusing together here three well-known verses from the Old Testament. The first quotation – about a capstone – is from Psalm 118. It pictures the construction of a house. The masons building the house discover an oddly shaped stone that won't fit in the wall. At first they discard it, but then when they get to the very top of the building they realise that this is just the piece of rock they need to complete the supporting arch, the brick without which the whole building would otherwise collapse. In its original setting this psalm, this metaphor, was referring to the king of Israel on his return to Jerusalem after a successful military campaign. The pagan nations had treated the king of Israel with contempt, but God had vindicated his

anointed king, and exalted him over his enemies. But to the Jews of Jesus' day, this psalm was interpreted as referring to the coming Messiah. So, with this verse, Jesus is saying, "I am the Messiah. I am that stone. Like the pagan nations rejected the king of Israel, you can reject me, ignore me, kill me. But God will raise me up to a position of authority. I will have the last word."

So for those who follow Jesus, the message is, "Keep going. You're on the right road." But for those who reject him, Jesus goes on to mention two more verses from Isaiah 8 ("Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken") and Daniel 2 ("the one on whom the stone falls will be crushed.") Both verses speak of judgment. Jesus is saying, in effect, "Your final destiny will be determined not by what you do with the words of Buddha or Mohammed, but by what you do with me. You must either let me break your pride now, or you will one day be completely crushed, completely separated from God. Not all roads lead to heaven. Some lead to hell." Of course, many people say, "I can't believe in a God that would send anyone to hell." But Jesus is not saying that God sends anyone to hell. He's saying we send ourselves. God sees us walking into misery by trying to live independently from him. And in love he gives us signposts, he sends us messengers to warn us. He even sends his own Son to die for us. But Jesus says that if we keep telling God to leave us alone, then at the end of the day that's just what he'll do: he'll leave us alone forever.

Maybe that's why Luke tells us that when Jesus issued this solemn final warning to the religious leaders, he "looked directly at them" (v17). Jesus fixed his eyes on them. Why? What was in that intense look? Urgency? Probably. Pity? Maybe. But, more anything else, love. These were the eyes that, just a few hours before, had been weeping over Jerusalem. These were the eyes that in just a few days to come would look down from a cross at his killers and say, "Father, forgive them." And don't you get the sense that Jesus is looking directly at us? He is looking at us with that same intensity, that same urgency, that same love. Because we were there with all the other rebellious tenants; we were there when they crucified the Son of God. We have rejected him, pushed him out of our lives, over and over again. But with love he says, "It's not too late. Now is the time to say, 'I'm sorry for the way I've lived. Come into my life. Come restore this vineyard. And use me to transform this world.'"

Questions

1. Mahatma Gandhi said, "My position is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal." How would you respond?
2. Jesus says that God has placed humans on this earth as tenants, not owners. What evidence can you point to in support of this notion that we owe God a debt of moral obedience – that there are things we ought to do, and ought not to do.
3. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "Without God, everything is permitted." What do you think he meant by that? What are the implications for the human condition?
4. What sets Jesus apart from every other religious leader in the world? See Acts 4:8-12.
5. C.S. Lewis said that, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher, he'd either be a lunatic – on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg – or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make a choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something else But don't let us come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to." How would you express this argument in your own words?
6. The difference between religion and Christianity is that religion is spelt "DO" and Christianity is spelt "DONE." Is this accurate?
7. What's your reaction to Jesus' vision of the future? How would you respond to someone who said, "I can't believe in a God who would send people to hell"?

Acknowledgement

This message is largely drawn from a brilliant little book on the parables in Luke by Roy Clements: *A Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995).