

## EVICTIION NOTICE

Luke 20:9-19

I have a problem with religion. This, of course, is not good if you're a religious leader as I am. Unfortunately the problem is real, and sadly I am as guilty as anyone when it comes to this problem. My problem is that religion often resembles the Padres. Last night we went to the Padres game with a group from the church. It was fun and to my amazement the Padres won. They rarely win when we go to a game. But here's the problem. Last night was jersey night. They were giving team jerseys to all fans in attendance. When we arrived and went through the turnstiles they handed me a little package. with a little blue cloth inside. I asked "what's this?" They said, "It's a bandanna." "Bandanna? I don't got to wear no stinkin bandanna. It's jersey night. Where's my jersey?" They said, "we ran out." So there we were in a crowd of thousands of people wearing their Padre jerseys and we had bandannas. They promised me a jersey and I got a bandanna. Talk about adventures in disappointment.

Unfortunately religion can be sort of like that. It promises a jersey but delivers a bandanna. You get this image when you listen to the words of religious people, but the reality of their actions often is quite jarring, and more than a little disappointing. A religion with people transformed from the inside out so that they are different from other human beings sounds exciting. God is real to them. They're people who are not of this world, their hearts beat for different purposes and goals. They don't stress over the stuff that most people do, they are at peace because they know God will always provide for them so stress is like a foreign word to them. They forgive when they are disappointed or hurt, they love unconditionally and sacrificially. They are humble, honest and can always be trusted. Wow, that sounds terrific, doesn't it?

Is that what most Christians deliver? I wish. I have had the misfortune to deal with Christians when a dispute over money has erupted. Sadly I've discovered that when someone stands to lose some serious money or get shortchanged or cheated you find out what they're made of. What they're made of appears to be an awful like the stuff everyone in the world around us is made of. Their hopes for their kids are that they'll be a star in the sport they play, they'll do great in school, go to an outstanding college and grow up to make a lot of money, and maybe even be famous. How is that any different than the world?

They talk about peace, about trusting God, but when they suffer setbacks or face serious financial struggles you'd think that God had died, or maybe worse, had turned against them. I've been dismayed at how pastors who preach sermons about forgiveness and unconditional love when treated in a way they deem to be unfair or hurtful become resentful, bitter and absolutely refuse to forgive.

A pastor, lawyer and doctor in the upper Midwest went out deer hunting. They encountered a magnificent buck with a huge rack of antlers and all three fired at him simultaneously. The buck went down. Then the argument began. Whose shot had actually taken down the animal? Each one

insisted that the animal was his. As they were arguing a game warden happened on them and broke up the disagreement since they appeared to be on the verge of coming to blows. "What's this about?" he asked. They explained to him, so he examined the deer. After looking it over for some minutes he stood up and said, "The pastor's shot was the one that hit him." The other two men protested, "How can you possibly know that?" He answered, "Easy. Just look and you'll see that the bullet went in one ear and out the other."

Sometimes I feel like that. What I say on Sunday seems to go in one ear and immediately exit out the other without even briefly pausing on the way through. Most distressing of all, I find I don't always live what I preach either. This morning we are going to look at one of Jesus' parables from Luke 20:9-19 that speaks to this issue. We will see where this problem starts. Hopefully we will learn something that will help us become more what our advertising claims that we are.

### JESUS ADDRESSED THE ISSUE OF AUTHORITY

To see this we have to back up and look at the context of this story. In Luke 19:45 we read of Jesus, "he entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling." There were people selling animals that worshipers could offer for sacrifices in the temple. This was convenient for people who came from out of town because they didn't have to bring animals from home. Selling animals and exchanging foreign currency was a big and very lucrative business. No one saw anything wrong with it because it provided a convenience for worshipers in Jerusalem. It also provided considerable profit for some businessmen.

When Jesus threw out the businessmen it was an act that went well beyond controversial. A lot of people made money on the business activities that went on in the temple and Jesus was threatening their livelihoods. To make matters worse, the whole religious system of the temple depended on that business being conducted, so Jesus was disrupting the religious life of the nation and posing a threat to the position and power of the religious leaders.

Jesus based his actions on the Old Testament scriptures. He did it, he claimed, because Isaiah 56:7 says, "my house will be a house of prayer," and those people weren't praying, they were making money off of people who had come to worship and pray. The problem was that the business had taken priority over worship. Reminds me of a church I read about in the south. In an effort to draw more people they started having a chicken dinner after their worship services. They proved to be very popular. In fact it became so popular they eventually quit having worship services and just had the chicken dinners. It became a restaurant. Jesus objected to the profit motive taking precedence over worshipping God.

That, however, was not enough of a rationale for the religious leaders of that day. In Luke 20:2 they ask, "tell us by what authority you are doing these things, who gave you this authority?" In other words, who gave you the right to enforce your ideas of what is proper in worship on everybody else? Who appointed you God? We would ask that person who came in and disrupted our worship service what gave him the right to do that.

One of the things that I admire about Jesus is his remarkable aplomb in dealing with attacks and interrogation. When people asked him questions, especially of the antagonistic variety, he rarely answered them. He frequently either told a story or turned the tables on them by asking them a question of his own. In this context he did both. He first asked a question, then told a story. You can see his question in Luke 20:3-4. “I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?” In other words, oh, you want to talk about authority. All right, who gave John the authority to go around baptizing people?

Suddenly the religious leaders had on their hands a ticklish problem that they did not see coming. They didn’t like John and had disdain for his weird ministry of hanging out in the badlands baptizing people. Gentiles had to go through ritual cleansings to become Jewish. When John called Jewish people to be baptized he was saying, “Yes, you might be Jewish, you might be circumcised, you might even observe the Sabbath and the feasts, but there’s something wrong with your heart. You don’t truly worship God, you worship yourself and it shows in the way you live. You need to turn from that and wash it out of your heart so you can commit yourself to what God really cares about. He cares that you humble yourself and walk with him in integrity and justice and love. So turn and be baptized to commit yourself to that. You need that washing just as much as Gentiles.”

This was offensive to some, especially to the religious leaders who could not have disagreed more. John was saying the Jews had the same problem the Gentiles had. The religious leaders were appalled at that idea. If you were Jewish and you were circumcised you were in. You had no need to be baptized or to repent. So their honest answer to Jesus’ question was, “John has no authority whatsoever to do what he is doing. He’s doing it on his own so his authority is from a man.”

This is where they ran into a problem. In order to be a religious *leader* you must have *followers*. I can call myself a pastor, but if my wife is the only person in my church who will think I’m actually a pastor? The IRS most certainly would not. Unless, of course, I had the right political beliefs. Or maybe I should say the left political beliefs. Unfortunately for those religious leaders John the Baptist was wildly popular with the mass of Israelis. If the religious leaders answered Jesus’ question honestly they would have turned off the populace and lost their following. So they answered Jesus’ question the way politicians usually answer hard questions, by ducking it. They said, “We don’t know.”

So Jesus said, “All right then, fair’s fair. If you won’t answer my question about John’s authority, then I won’t answer yours about my authority.” Then he immediately launched into this little story. It is all about authority, but it deals with the authority of the religious leaders themselves rather than with John’s. The story says they have none. Then it concludes by doing the thing they asked. It established Jesus’ authority.

## A LANDLORD HAD SOME AWFUL TENANTS

In this story a man owns some prime land in Napa Valley that is perfect for vineyards. He decides that since he lives in San Diego he will rent the land out to others rather than trying to run a vineyard remotely. The lease stipulates that he will get a percentage of the proceeds of the crop. The time comes for him to collect the rent. He sends an employee to collect the rent. Only the renters decide they don't want to pay. Not only do they refuse to pay the rent, they physically attack the landlord's representative. Appalled, the landlord sends another man. I'm guessing this second guy was more experienced and maybe bigger, but it does him no good. The tenants also attack him and "treat him shamefully." So the landlord sends yet a third employee. This guy they actually do more than just throw a few punches. They seriously wound him.

Imagine that you are in this situation. You've got some rental property in another town. The renters refuse to pay the rent. When your property manager goes to confront him they get physical and beat him up. This happens repeatedly. In today's society you start eviction proceedings. Eventually the authorities will handle the problem for you. But in that culture it was not so easy. What would the landlord do? The solution is totally unexpected. Everyone in the audience figured that the landlord would gather up all of his employees or maybe hire a goon squad. They would come armed to the teeth ready to throw out the deadbeats by force. But that's not what the owner does. Instead, he sends just one person, his own beloved son. Surely, he figures, they will see that the owner is serious. Surely they will have respect for his son and know that they'd better treat him well and pay up.

But the deadbeats figure just the opposite. They think, "Hey, we'll show him. This is his son who stands to inherit this land. Kill him and there's no one to inherit it. The land will be ours." And that's what they do. There are scholars who note that in some cases if there was an absentee owner squatters could eventually claim the land. They reason that Jesus had these people figuring that if they were persistent the landlord would just give up and the land would be theirs. I don't think that's what Jesus intended. I think he meant to depict the thinking of the tenants as totally irrational. He wanted his audience to see the tenants as horrible people who were making utterly foolish choices that would ultimately have terrible consequences.

Verse 19 says, "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." Everybody knew it. They all knew that Jesus was talking about authority. They knew the owner of the vineyard is God and the tenants were the leaders of Israel. They also knew that God, the landlord, had sent many representatives to Israel. We call them prophets. And they were not well received. Micaiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Micah, Amos and Zechariah ben Jehoida were all mistreated and or killed by Israel.

This was Israel's history. In Luke 11:49 Jesus said, "God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.'" In Luke 13:34 Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you."

Jesus had made the point in Luke 11:47 that the Jews of his day loved to build tombs to honor long dead prophets, yet it was the Jews of earlier days who killed them and those of his day reacted to prophets in precisely the same way. The son of the landlord was, of course, the Messiah himself. This story predicts what none of them thought they wanted or ever expected. The tenants from hell would not just reject and mistreat him, but kill him.

#### THE LANDLORD DEALT WITH THE DEADBEATS

What will the landlord do? Everyone knows he will come and rain down retribution on those terrible people. Jesus was saying there would be a consequence for rejection of God's messengers, and ultimately of God's Messiah. The people understood the story. They were appalled by it. They cried out, "May it never be!" Surely Israel will not reject Messiah when he comes. Surely she will not be so rebellious and experience the deserved and just consequence for such a terrible act.

Jesus then confirmed that's exactly what was about to happen. He quoted Psalm 118:22 that the builders of a building rejected the key stone. They were certain they didn't need what was actually the most important piece.

A man is lost in a vast desert. As the days go by he runs out of food, then drinks his last drop of water. Soon he is staggering through the blazing heat, parched and nearing the end. He must have water. Then he thinks he's hallucinating when he sees a lone man walking in his direction. When he is convinced the man is real he is joyous, thinking that he is saved. When the man gets close he says, "Sir, could you spare me a little water? I'm dying of thirst. I have some money so I can pay you for it." The man says, "Oh, I'm awfully sorry, but I don't have any water with me. However, I'm selling these lovely ties. Would you like to buy a tie?" The lost guy is incredulous. "Why would I want to buy a tie? I don't need a tie. I need water!" Discouraged he staggers on, hoping against hope. He decides he will climb one last sand dune and hope he can spot an oasis from the top of it, and if not he'll just give up and die. He struggles to the top, looks down, and can't believe his eyes. There is a restaurant, a beautiful restaurant in the middle of nowhere. It's a miracle. He runs down to the restaurant, opens the door and steps inside. There he is stopped by the maitre'd who says, "I'm sorry, sir. Gentlemen aren't permitted in the restaurant without a tie."

The thing he most needed he rejected, thinking he didn't need it. In a humorous way, that parallels what happened with the Jewish people as described by Psalm 118. They were about to reject what they most needed, their own Messiah. Jesus is the key stone of that Psalm, the one they would trip over with the result that they would be "broken to pieces." They would be crushed. Jesus is the landlord's son, and in rejecting him they were rejecting the very authority of God himself and would experience the consequences. The story tells us the leaders had no legitimate spiritual authority because they consistently refused to submit to God, and that they were now completing that refusal by rejecting the Messiah, God's authority on earth. But Jesus had authority over the temple because he was in fact what it was all about.

## IMPLICATIONS

### NEVER MISTAKE PATIENCE FOR INABILITY

The landlord displayed patience to a fault. He waited far longer than anyone could ask before he started knocking tenant heads. The lesson is that God had shown remarkable patience to Israel but that patience would not go on infinitely. A time was coming when God would act. God is patient. That is his character. Nahum 1:3 says, “The Lord is slow to anger and great in power.” Nehemiah 9:17 says, “You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” But he is just, too, and will act.

This has some big implications for us. One is that it is easy for people to assume that patience is impotence. It is crucial to note that Nahum 1:3 says the Lord is slow to anger and **GREAT IN POWER**. He is not slow to act because he is unable to, but because it is his nature to be patient. My freshman year in college I had an experience that has remained as a good reminder of this difference between patience and inability. I was playing baseball and batted against a pitcher I’d never hit against before. I was the first to hit against him. His first pitch was a very unimpressive fastball that was well outside for ball one. His next pitch was another powder puff fastball that was right over the plate. I swung and hit that thing right on the screws. I crushed it, but it was foul. Well that was all right because from all I could see this guy was throwing batting practice and I owned him. Then he threw me another lousy fastball that was outside the strike zone. It appeared to me that this pitcher had nothing that I needed to be concerned about. What I didn’t know was that he wasn’t unable to defeat me with his pitches, he was just being patient. With his next pitch his patience ran out.

His next pitch looked like one that was even easier pitch to hit than the one before. I started my swing and just as I did it registered in my mind that this was actually kind of a strange looking pitch. Just before it got to the hitting zone the ball looked like it rolled off the top of a table. It dropped almost straight down. My swing missed badly. I stood there thinking “what was that?” I’d never seen a pitch quite like it. Then he threw me another one that I struck out on. He was throwing knuckle balls, and I’d never hit against one before. I had assumed he had no ability to throw such a pitch. I learned there is a big difference between patience and impotence.

Understanding that God is patient is important. We should not make the mistake that the deadbeat tenants made and think that the landlord either can’t or won’t do anything about us. Peter wrote about the fact that it has been a long time since Jesus was here, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God will act, and we need to be ready now for that time.

But understanding God’s patience can help us as we wait now. It can help us wait when life is taking an unpleasant turn and we keep asking God to work. We need to remember his patience is

grounded in his power and his ability to see the long term goal and accomplish it. We get impatient because we want the situation to change right now.

Think of what this means when someone has done you wrong. You want to lash out, you want to get even or set things right. This is particularly difficult when that person seems to experience no consequences from their mistreatment of you. That's when we need to remember God's patience. He is slow to anger, but he will bring about justice. Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord."

### LET GOD BE LORD

Here's the issue that to me looms largest in this story. How was it that the people of God could be compared to deadbeat tenants who related to their landlord with either total disregard or outright opposition? The message of this parable is that God's people while convinced they were worthy of God's approval in fact were living in opposition to him!

There's a tendency among religious people to tailor their religion so it fits the life they want to live. John the Baptist said, "There's something wrong with your religion. It touches your lips and some of your outward activities, but it never touches your hearts." In effect they had a religion that was convenient in many ways because while it certainly had its requirements it still allowed them to pursue the things they really desired.

Jesus was saying that the big problem was that the religious leaders in particular, but ultimately the majority of his contemporaries had failed to acknowledge God's authority. Just as the tenants didn't acknowledge the authority of the landlord, so did God's people. They didn't let God be the Lord of their hearts and lives. One of the major problems of God's people was a tendency to fall into idolatry, the worship of false gods. In Exodus 32 after Moses had been on Mt. Sinai for weeks the people of Israel got tired of waiting for him. According to verse 1 they said to Aaron, "Come, make us gods who will go before us." They had something they wanted. They wanted to get through the wilderness to a place where there was water and arable land. They didn't want to hang around in a desolate wilderness. They said, "we'll worship anybody or anything that will promise to get us out of here and lead us to a place we like." So Aaron made an idol in the shape of a calf and verse 4 tells us the people said, "these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

Right there you have the essence of the problem of idolatry. When a person identifies something that is more important to him than who God really is, than serving that God, he has created an idol. That group of people had a good in mind that was paramount. They wanted to get out of the wilderness and have a good place to live. They would serve and honor whatever they thought and hoped would give them that end.

This was not an anomaly, but the norm. In 2 Kings 17 we read about the destruction of Israel by Assyria. Verses 7-8 say, “All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them.” Psalm 78:57-58 says of Israel, “They put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High; they did not keep his statutes. Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless, as unreliable as a faulty bow. They angered him with their high places; they aroused his jealousy with their idols.” They were unreliable as a faulty bow. Imagine your life depending on your bow and arrow to protect your life, and at the crucial moment when the enemy attacks, your bow fails. That’s what God said Israel was like. He could not count on them. Given half a chance they would run off and start worshiping idols. It happened throughout their history.

In his book, *Israel’s Greatest Sin*, Bernard Taylor wrote that the ancient contemporaries of Israel believed that each people had their own gods who were sovereign only in the territory where they were worshiped. Israel’s God, Yahweh, is the true God, the universal sovereign over all. Taylor said that when the Israelis “accept the god of some other nation...they would not simply fail to impress this important truth upon the nations around them, but would most effectually teach that it is not so.” Their idolatry was a total denial of Israel’s mission, as a nation of priests they were to represent the true God to the world. Instead they denied him. Taylor wrote, “in tracing the history of the Israelites it is very evident that their downfall was due to their idolatry more than anything else.”

But Jesus’ contemporaries weren’t worshiping idols or praying to Roman gods, so what does this have to do with them? And how does it relate to us? Go back to that incident of idolatry in Exodus 32. Where did Israel go wrong? What they should have done was to say “we will worship the true God and him alone, no matter what happens. That is our first and greatest priority. If it is his will that we stay out here in this barren desert forever, then we will stay and worship him. If he wants us all to die out here, then we will do so, but we will worship him.” That statement says, “we will let God be God. He is Lord of all creation, and he will be Lord of our lives, no matter what that takes.”

Something like this did happen in Israel’s history. In Daniel 3 many ancient Israelis were living in exile in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that everyone bow down and worship a statue of him. They were to worship an idol. Three young Jewish men who were in the King’s administration, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, refused to bow. They would not worship an idol. The penalty for disobedience was death by being thrown into a blast furnace. The king flew into a rage at their rejection of his order and reminded them of his threat to burn them to death. In Daniel 3:17-18 they answered, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” For those men worshiping God was the highest priority. He was Lord of their lives.



What he says goes. He was the Landlord of the property that was their lives. So if staying true to him meant they would die, then they would choose to die.

Unfortunately that didn't happen often enough in Israel's history. All too often they had some good beyond worshiping God and letting him rule. They wanted to have rain when they needed it. They wanted to have abundant crops. They wanted to defeat their enemies. They would look at others around them appearing to get what they wanted while worshiping their wannabe gods, so the people of Israel would say, "hey, why not? If it works for them maybe it will help me." They were hedging their bets. They were willing to do that because they had some other good in mind that was most important to them and they would do whatever they deemed necessary to obtain that end.

The same thing was happening in Jesus' day, though it was not so overt. They didn't worship little statues nor were they worshiping any of the myriad of Roman gods, but they did have something they wanted more than they wanted to worship God. For many of the people it was political freedom and power or simply to have plenty to eat without fear of starvation. For the religious leaders of Israel it was position, respect, approval which came from their status in the religious system. It was that more than anything that led to their rejection of Jesus. He gave them all the evidence that they could ever have asked for that he was their Messiah. By their own doctrine they should have admitted his divine power. They couldn't deny the power so they denied its source, calling the power of the Holy Spirit satanic or demonic. They refused to believe because to do so would have dismantled their system and cost them their position.

In other words, they would not let God be Lord in their lives. They were serving some other goal. So they would tailor what they believed and their view of God so it served their goal. If God sent Messiah and gave evidence of his identity through miraculous power but believing in him would not serve their goal of power and position then they would reject him.

A couple of years ago Steve Martin, Owen Wilson and Jack Black starred in a movie titled *The Big Year*. It is all about men being competitive about bird watching. Wilson plays world record holding birder Kenny Bostick who is arrogant and cutthroat. Brad and Stu, played by Black and Martin are two birdwatchers who are out to defeat him by spotting the most birds in a year, beating his record of 732. Kenny is so frantic about winning the Big Year that he sacrifices everything, including his marriage to wife Jessica to the goal. Finally, after he once again misses an important doctor's appointment with her Jessica tells Kenny she still loves him but says she doesn't want to be married to him anymore. He tries to convince her not to leave him. He says, "Come on, give me a break Jess. This year and then it's over." She says, "It's every year! I know you. I know that right now you're in pain trying to think how you're going to get on your flight to Phoenix without looking like a jerk." He pleads, "No, no. I'm really in pain because I really love you and I'm scrambling to make this work." She asks, "Enough not to go to Arizona?" He answers, "Well, I have to go to Arizona." "Why, why?" she asks. "Because right now there's a guy out there named Stu with 730 plus birds, and if I don't get out there, people could say that

he's the greatest birder of all time—and he's not! This is what I'm great at: this is what I'll be remembered for. No one remembers who came in second."

In the story Kenny wins the big year with 755 birds. But in the end he is alone. Brad and Stu end up with family and friends and with their integrity intact. Brad tells Stu, "he got more birds, but we got more of everything." The point of the story for us is that Kenny had an idol. And his wife knew it. He worshiped himself really, which is what idolatry always is. He served the god of being the best, being remembered for something. And his wife got the message very clearly. The problem for us is that like ancient Israel, like Kenny, we create our own idols. And it is very common for us to fashion a religion that we label worshiping God when in fact it is merely a disguised pursuit of our own idols with a little veneer of Jesus.

Only worship of God can save us from our deadly idols. But that means we're going to have to let God be the sovereign Lord of our lives. That means choosing for ourselves day by day to make knowing, honoring, serving and obeying God the one thing that our lives are about. That means choosing him as that which we will serve even if it means we have to suffer loss, say not to some desire, or go through hard times. It means saying, "My God is able to save me, but even if he does not I will not serve your gods."

It means saying as God commanded in the Ten Commandments according to Exodus 20:3, "I will have no other gods before you, Lord." Not my comfort, not my success, not financial security, not avoidance of pain, not pleasure, not the opinions of others. I will serve only you, God.

Do you have any idols before God? Here's a way to get an idea. Ask what your worst nightmare is. Is it rejection or humiliation? You worship your own approval. Is it stress? You worship control. Is it being helpless? You worship power. Is it being uncertain and confused? You worship control. Is it being financially ruined? You worship comfort and money.

Many of the people of ancient Israel suffered eviction from the kingdom of God because they refused to bow to the King. Let's make sure that we don't repeat their mistake. Let's make sure God rules in our lives and that our "religion" is the real thing that delivers as promised.