

August 23, 2009
Riverside Covenant Church
Daniel S. Teefey
Luke 20:9-19 – Landlord Tenant

Read Luke 20:9-19

I want to use this morning to not only take a look at our passage in Luke, but to pull Jesus' parables together for a common theme. The parables are wildly diverse in their characters and subject matter, but they do have a thread of similarity too. I believe if you had to pick one component that is present in every aspect of the Gospel, including every parable, it is response. There is a lot of information in the Bible and it is all important for us to know, but its point is not simply for us to know it, but to prompt some sort of response to it. It is given to us as revelation, God telling us about himself and ourselves, so that we will do something with it.

A retired seminary professor of mine, gave a message at our denomination's annual meeting last year on how we read the Bible. And the premise of his message was a contrast between reading the Bible for consumption and reading it as capital. He said, **"I think it's possible to read the Bible as a consumer, in which case you might read it as you read Reader's Digest or USA Today – quickly. You just want a quick digest of everything – a little bit like email. Quick, pointed, not well thought out oftentimes. Or a text message – its all for consumption, but its not capital. It's not a reservoir. It's not a resource."**

When we consume the Bible we use it for our desires. We treat the Bible as a reference book that comes off the shelf when we need it. We occasionally find verses on love or encouragement or hope after we have consulted the concordance in the back of the Bible. And we read these verses to get a pick me up or to pass along to a friend. But we treat the Bible as a bag of chips to get a quick snack now and then, when in fact God wants to be that pure, clean water that we cannot live without.

My former seminary professor went on to **"talk about the Bible as capital, as a word that will demonstrate its claim."** He asked, **"what it means to become a reader of Scripture. That's what [Covenanters] were called in the beginning – "readers," people of the book. Not consumers, but people after capital that gave us a resource on which to draw and a perspective with which to look at questions and at life in such a way that made us credible Christians."**

This understanding of the Bible and Jesus' words as capital implies that there is something deeper in it than we could expect. That when we respond to it, even before we know the benefit, we find a much deeper sense of God.

Let me give you an example from my life. I have told you before that I grew up a good kid. I never really got into any trouble. I did not get arrested. I did not do drugs. I did well in school and played sports and went to youth group. I even mowed my grandma's yard and was nice to people. I even had a Bible that always sat next to my bed. And I took that Bible with me to college. I did not read it much, but if I needed something, I knew where to find it. **If I needed the definition of "haiku" I pulled the dictionary off my shelf. If I needed a synonym for "fantastic" I went with the thesaurus. If I needed some comfort for an upcoming test, I dusted off the Bible and looked up "encouragement" in the concordance.**

God and the Bible were a part of my life. But that is not enough. The Bible demands more from us than that.

I have told you this story before, but my freshman year I got involved in a Bible study for the first time. And I watched how others did not just read the text, but were read by it. They did not say, "I am going to do x, y and z, how does the Bible encourage me in doing these things." They said, "these are the choices I have before me, how does the Bible help me to discern what I should or should not do." Very different questions.

Under one perspective our decision is already made up and God comes in as an afterthought. Under the other perspective God is fundamental to our decision making process. Our response to life is predicated on our processing what we know about God and his desires for us.

Here is what I believe fundamentally changed at that time in my life. Before I presumed I was the "good guy" in the Bible. In the years following I began to more regularly ask, whether I was not the "bad guy." I wasn't saying, look how bad a person I really am, but I was increasingly honest in my assessment of how I measured up against God's standards for me. The truth was that I did not regularly respond to God's word in a meaningful way.

Response is a fundamental component of interacting with God. The pattern is persistent throughout the Bible. God speaks, we respond. God speaks us and the rest of creation into existence, we respond. God speaks through the prophets, we respond. God speaks through Jesus, we respond. The pattern is clear. God initiates, we react.

There are generally two types of responses in life: involuntary and voluntary. An involuntary response happens when something is exposed to a stimulus that causes a response. If I pinch you, you will respond with pain whether you want to or not. It is involuntary. Voluntary response, however, requires some act of our will. If I tell Adelaide to say “thank you,” her response is not predetermined. She makes a choice whether to respond with “thank you” or simply to ignore me.

The parables call us to a voluntary response. They cannot make us do anything, but are designed to compel us to some rightful action once we have heard them. I have mentioned before that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond. God is what happens to us and our responsibility is to respond rightly.

It’s a choice though. Has anyone ever heard of the “bystander effect?” Anybody know what it is? It is basically the human response that is particularly prevalent in the United States and other individualist cultures where no one comes to the aid of another in emergency situations. A classic example is an incident where **a 78 year old man was hit by a car in Connecticut.** He was flung into the air and the injured man laid in the middle of the road as people continued to drive by. No one stopped to help him for quite some time. They looked, but no one stopped.

Researchers have repeatedly found as they have studied why some people help others and others do not that **“until someone helps, no one will help.”** It sounds so simple. But until someone steps up and takes the initiative to help someone, no one will ever help.

The reason people generally do nothing is because they look at others around them and see no one else doing anything and thus conclude they should not do anything either. **It is peer pressure.** When I was in school I remember that all the **new students would carry their books underneath their arms** and then while you were walking down the hallway someone would come up behind you and knock the books out and all over the ground. And everyone would laugh, but no one would help you pick them up. People

would look and then just keep walking down the hallway. Some kids would even kick them while you trying to pick them up. It is really too bad that so few people are willing to help like you guys did.

Researchers did a study one time where **they put several people in a room and had them playing cards.** In the room next to they made it sound like a woman was climbing up onto a chair to get a stack of papers that was high on a shelf. Then there was a big crash and she fell, landed on the ground, and proceeded to scream that her ankle was hurt. She yelled, “my ankle is hurt, get this thing off of me!”

They did this experiment over and over again with different groups of people and **80% of the time no one playing cards showed any concern for the women** in the room next to them that was yelling. It seems crazy, but over and over again when we are faced with opportunities to help someone we don't do anything. But you did and you should be proud of yourselves.

There is a Psychologist in New York that has over the years conveniently lost about 500 wallets in New York City and tried to see if he could pick up any common characteristics in the people that chose to find him and return the wallet. He has found that the finders who think that others have been helpful to them in similar situations are most likely to mail the wallet back. What does that tell us? It tells us that because you helped someone else, that person is more likely to help someone else too. There is a chain reaction that happens when people are kind.

There are two important things that I believe we can learn from this bystander effect. First, our failure to respond has severe consequences. And Second, surrounding ourselves with folks that do process things rightly greatly increases our ability to do so too. Hold onto these things as we look specifically at our parable in Luke 20.

The focus of Jesus’ parable here is clearly on the tenants. They are the characters to watch. And we are immediately told their position. A landlord planted a vineyard and then leased it to some tenants. It seems that the agreement was that the tenants would be paid for their management from the vineyard proceeds, but then the landlord would also get his cut from the profits as well. So they enter into this lease and the text says that the landlord “went away for a long time.” When harvest came, the landlord sent a servant to go to the tenants and collect the landlord’s share of the crop. But the tenants beat the servant and sent him away with nothing. And they do basically the same thing with two other servants

that the landlord sent. Finally, the landlord decides to send his son believing that they will at least respect him. They do not and kill the son hoping to receive his inheritance.

The parable prompts a clear question in verse 15, **“what then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?”** The answer is startling. **“He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”**

The text says that the people were shocked when they heard this and responded, **“may this never be!”**

Jesus then uses an Old Testament Scripture, one they would have known, to emphasize what he is saying. It comes from Psalm 118. He says, **“the stone the builders rejected, has become the capstone.”**

Some translations say, “cornerstone.” The point is clear though. That which has been rejected by many will become the most important element. The capstone is the pinnacle, the final stroke, or crowning achievement. The cornerstone is the essential element that holds two walls together. It is vital for structural integrity.

Jesus’ message is clear. The beginning of chapter 20 makes it clear that his message was directed at the **“chief priests and the teacher of the law, together with the elders.”** They are questioning Jesus’ authority. He has been preaching and teaching and healing and they feel threatened.

Jesus message is clear to them. He, who they are rejecting, is the capstone, the cornerstone, the essential element of what God is doing. And their response to him and his message will determine their fate.

The early church made the analogy work this way. The tenants are the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders. The landlord is God. God gives the people resources, gifts, talents, everything to use, but he expects a return on them. Similar to what we discussed last week. We enter into a trust with God, he freely gives us forgiveness and love and so on, but with that trust comes a responsibility to use them for his purposes. The tenants are given the land to use for God. The servants God sends are the prophets and other messengers that God has send throughout history to instruct and lead the people, but the people regularly and repeatedly send them away. And of course, the son that God sends is Jesus, who is killed and cast away.

Our response to God has consequences.

As with the bystander effect, being idle in our faith has drastic consequences. Passivity is not an option.

I think this parable helps us to understand why God has a claim on our lives too. The servants that the landlord sends to the tenants are not asking for anything that is not the landlord's already. It is one thing if I come over and ask to have your car, which you paid for and own. It is something entirely different, if I come over and ask to have my car back, which I simply let you lease or borrow.

The reality of our lives is that all that we have has its source in God. Our very breath was breathed into us by God. Your personality and your gifts and talents were hand selected for you by God. Your family and your shoes and your house and your eye sight and every ounce of your being was given to you by God. And it was given to you on lease, in a trust, for you to employ according to God's wishes. So when Jesus comes and asks for your life, calls you to respond by making God the center of your will, he is simply asking you to remember from whom it all came from. God has a claim on your life. And our ignoring of that claim has consequences just like our positive response to that claim frees us to participate in what God is doing in our world.

So that is the most basic point of this parable. The tenants should have given to God what was rightfully his. They should have responded positively to God's call on their lives. They instead resisted because of their own self-interest. This is what we do.

I said there were two things about the bystander effect that help us to understand this passage. The first was that our response or lack thereof has serious consequences. The second is that surrounding ourselves with other responders positively affects our likelihood to respond. The odds say that if the tenants in this parable would have more regularly spent time with Godly tenants, they would have responded to the landlords requests.

If we regularly spent time with people that view the world through godly eyes, we are more apt to see things this way too. Now I clearly don't mean just hang out with Christians, but I do mean make a

concerted effort to spend time with and be influenced by people that regularly view the world through a biblical lens.

Think theologically. That sounds really hard and complicated but it is not. Really, it is just about asking better questions of ourselves when making decisions. We respond to issues by asking what biblical story might help me sort this out. When I was trying to determine my life path I spent a lot of time wrestling with the story of Jonah and what elements caused him to run from what God was calling him to do. When Dana and I agreed to come here, we tried to ask how might God have prepared us to do ministry here?

We are responding to God when he is prompting our decisions. He is not at our disposal, but our will is at his.

I am a visual person and so this is how I have imagined my relationship with God and my struggle to be a responder. I am running through life or walking whatever you prefer. And there is Jesus standing there. Sometimes I run away from him. Sometimes I run right by him and look back to see him standing there. Sometimes I run up to him and try to grab his hand and run ahead, but he does not budge. But other times, far rarer than I would like, I watch him and when he moves, I move, when he does not I stand by his side studying him, watching him, trying to imitate his movements and his words . . .

If you have never responded to God, I encourage you to begin today. If you have struggled to respond to God recently, hone in on him. Don't try to run ahead or pull Jesus, just get near him. If you feel like you are in a good place, keep it up. This is the Christian life. God prompts, we respond.

References consulted:

Snodgrass, Klyne R. Stories of Intent. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.

Weborg, John. "The Word of God as Capital." The Covenant Companion, Sept. 2008.