

“The Cornerstone” | Luke 20:9-19
The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican
Preaching Draft | April 6, 2025
(Discussion questions on page 8)

There are non-negotiable realities in the world that can either aide us or break us. We can build are lives in accordance with them; or we can become broken by them. But there is no middle ground.

Consider nature’s laws, such as gravity. Surrendering to it, working with it, makes all types of things possible. But if you are considering hopping off a high ledge to avoid a crowded stairwell, the law of gravity won’t change to accommodate your impatience. If you break it, it will break you.

This is true of moral laws as well. “We do not break them,” said one theologian, “we break ourselves upon them.” Film producer Cecil B. DeMille—who during the silent film era directed *The Ten Commandments*—said in a speech,

We cannot break the Ten Commandments. We can only break ourselves upon them, or else, by keeping them rise through them to the fullness of freedom under God.¹

Many of us know this by experience. Not only with natural laws, but more so with moral: we have learned that we really don’t get away with anything—lying, cheating, hating, these things end up wrecking our lives, our souls. We either build our lives around these non-negotiable laws of morality, or, in breaking them, we end up broken by them.

Our passage from Luke presents us with the most non-negotiable reality of all. It is the cornerstone upon which you will either be built or broken. In Jesus’ words,

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. (Luke 20:17-18).

We learn from a speech Peter makes—just weeks later—in Acts 4, the identity of this cornerstone:

let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel.... This Jesus is **the stone** that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. (Acts 4:10-11). Jesus will either be the cornerstone your life is built upon, or the stone your life is broken by. That is the message he sets before us today. A warning, yes, but more so, an invitation to a life built upon Christ, built by the very fingers of God.

We will walk through the passage—which begins with a parable about a vineyard and ends with the image of the stone—by considering three characters: **(1) the tenants, (2) the owner, and (3) the stone.** In doing so, we will be drawn toward the non-negotiable realities of life in God’s

¹ <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/cecil-b-demille/ten-commandments-and-you/#:~:text=We%20cannot%20break%20the%20Ten,us%20the%20power%20of%20choice.>

World—we will be drawn toward Jesus the Cornerstone. And we will be asking how we can build our lives upon this stone, rather than find them broken by it.

I. The Tenants

The first character to consider are the tenants. In verses 9-16 Jesus tells a parable about “a man who planted a vineyard and let it out to **tenants** and went into another country for a long time” (Lk 20:9).

Jesus has recently arrived in Jerusalem for what will be the week of his crucifixion. Tensions are rising with the Jewish leaders. In this parable, Jesus evokes a common image from Scripture of God planting a vineyard and inviting his people to tend it. Jesus’s parable also calls to mind two recurring themes from Israel’s history. As that vineyard’s tenants, they often did not tend the vineyard well.² And when the Lord sent prophets calling for their repentance, they rejected and even killed them. Jesus refers to three “servants” sent by the owner of the vineyard to the tenants to collect fruit. Each are beaten and sent away empty handed.

In this parable, the **tenants** seem to refer to the religious leaders that will eventually reject Jesus. A broader panorama of things tells us that the tenants refer to all of Israel, and in fact, all of us.³

A non-negotiable reality that surfaces here involves our self-understanding. Humans are not first owners with rights. We are tenants with responsibilities. Jesus tells several parables where humanity is described as tenants with obligations to God.

From the creation of Adam and Eve to the creation of His people, God places us in His world to bear fruit for him. This is our responsibility. Notice that the owner of the vineyard sends his servants to the tenants “so that they would give him some of the **fruit** of the vineyard” (Lk 20:10).

What is the fruit that God expects of his tenants?

It is not foremost the fruit of our ingenuity, our ability to cultivate from this earth inventions or cities or machines. It is the fruit of obedience, praise, and repentance. This is what the Bible calls “beautiful fruit,” “good fruit.”

In Jeremiah, we read, “The LORD once called you ‘a green olive tree, **beautiful with good fruit.**’” (Jer 11:16). John the Baptist, the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus, sounds the same message:

² “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” (Isa 5:3-4).

³ In Peter’s reference to Jesus as the rejected stone in Acts, he refers to “all of the people of Israel” in noting those who reject Jesus: “let it be known **to all of you** and **to all the people of Israel** that.... This Jesus is the stone that was rejected **by you**, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. (Acts 4:10-11). A broader reading of the Bible reminds us that Israel represents human nature more broadly.

Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not **bear good fruit** is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt 3:10). “**Bear fruit** in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8).

There is an important place for thinking about individual rights. But if we begin our self-understanding by making individual rights our cornerstone, we tend to relate to God from a place of entitlement, rather than humble responsibility.

Yes, God wants to shower gifts of mercy and grace upon us. But this parable reminds us that a fundamental feature of being human is to be God’s tenant—those who use their lives to produce fruits of praise, righteousness, goodness for God.

Apply: If you begin your day as a tenant, you’ll start by asking God, “How can I serve you and others today?” This builds your life on a cornerstone of humility, gratitude, selflessness. If you begin your day as owner, you’ll start by making demands of God and others, “I better get what I deserve today.” This may end up breaking your life on a stone of ingratitude and unmet expectations.

The tenants remind us of the non-negotiable reality that our posture in the world is one of responsibility to bear fruit for God. Consider a second character in the parable, the owner.

II. The Owner

The “man who planted a vineyard” in verse 9 is referred to in verse 16 as “the **owner** of the vineyard.” This character represents God. Scripture emphasizes God as owner.

God is the owner of every **animal, bird, and insect**: For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine (Ps 50:10-11).

God is the owner of the **land of Israel and all that surrounds** it: God has spoken in his holiness: “With exultation I will divide up Shechem and portion out the Vale of Succoth. ⁷ Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet; Judah is my scepter (Ps 60:6).

God is the owner of our **bodies**: Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Cor 6:19-20).

God owns the **breath** in our lungs and the **outcomes of our ways**: ...the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored” (Dan 5:23).

God owns **everything**: The earth is the LORD’S and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein (Ps 24:1).

Why is God the owner of everything?

God was not created. God has always existed. Everything else has been created by God according to his design and purpose. God therefore has rights over everything. I stress this, because it makes the actions of the owner of the vineyard more shocking. What shines through in this passage is that God's rights and demands as owner of his vineyard are seasoned—radically so—with patience and grace.

Three times he sends a servant, and in each case, they are beaten and cast away empty-handed. Finally, in verse 13, he sends his “beloved son” (v.13) who they end up killing.

When reading this passage, we clearly face the reality of God's rights as owner and judge. After the tenants kill the son, Jesus says “the owner ... will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others” (v.16). But that is not the only point. We also see God's radical patience and mercy: he sent three different servants and then his very his own son. The realities of God's rights as owner and justice as judge are seasoned by the reality of a father's heart, brimming with patience and grace.

God did not merely make us to bear fruit, but to enjoy fellowship with him. And God is a God of mercy and grace, who longs to make a way even for wicked tenants to find their way back to him. So God exercises his rights as owner, with the mercy of his nature as Father. Theologian **Kenneth Bailey** spent 40 years of his life living in the middle east. He tells the story of the late King of Jordan, Hussein bin Talal.

One night in the early 1980s, the king was informed by his security police that a group of about seventy-five Jordanian army officers were at that very moment meeting in a nearby barracks plotting a military overthrow of the kingdom. The security officers requested permission to surround the barracks and arrest the plotters. After a somber pause the king refused and said, ‘Bring me a helicopter.’ A helicopter was brought. The king climbed in with the pilot and himself flew to the barracks and landed on its flat roof. The king told the pilot, ‘If you hear gun shots, fly away at once without me.’

Unarmed, the king then walked down two flights of stairs and suddenly appeared in the room where the plotters were meeting and quietly said to them:

Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalize your plans to overthrow the government, take over the country and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way only one man will die.

After a moment of stunned silence, the rebels as one, rushed forward to kiss the king's hand and feet and pledge loyalty to him for life.⁴

Hanging over this scene between Jesus and the Jews and Jerusalem is the promise that God was going to return to his people: *Immanuel*, God with us, as the prophet said (Isaiah). Jesus is the coming of God back to his people. And He is going to lay down his life for them.

⁴ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 418.

So here is the second non-negotiable fact arising from this passage: The all-authoritative Son of God has laid down his life in order to draw sinful tenants to himself. Grace is at the center of reality. This grace is not to be presumed upon—those who go on rejecting the son will know only the judgement and justice of God. But for any who would come to him, there is peace with the owner of the vineyard.

A third character to consider is the stone.

III. The Stone.

After telling the parable of the vineyard, Jesus' hearers are incredulous: "When they heard this, they said, 'Surely not!'" (20:16). Jesus responds by citing scripture about a stone:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? 18 Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. (Luke 20:17-18).

We already noted that this rejected stone refers to Jesus—who is also the son in the parable about the vineyard. There is both a note of vindication and warning in these words. Vindication, because the stone that is rejected—crucified—will rise from the dead, vindicated by God.

Warning, because those who try to break the stone, will be broken by it.

So, the final non-negotiable reality in this passage is Jesus—Jesus as a stone that will either become the foundation of our lives, or the object upon which our lives are broken. Let's conclude our time by considering a few questions that arise from this point.

First, why might we reject this stone?

A cornerstone was the stone that set the shape, or oriented the foundation, of an ancient building. One reason we might reject Jesus as our cornerstone is because we have other cornerstones we are building upon. These might be dreams we have—what we hope, or want, our lives to look like. We may invite Jesus into our lives, but not to replace that 'dream-cornerstone,' but only to help us build upon it.

Another reason may be because we are offended by his stone. This stone is referred to at times as "a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense" (Isa 8:14; 1 Peter 4:8). The Gospel of Christ crucified was foolishness to many, and offensive to others. People don't want a God who became weak. They do not want a Gospel that requires them to admit their sin, die to themselves, and take up the way of the cross.

They reject Jesus the stone. And in doing so they become rejected by him. When we reject Jesus' offer of forgiveness on the Cross, we simultaneously say that we will bear it ourselves. By breaking with his offer of grace, we break ourselves.

Second, what might the benefit be of accepting and building upon this stone?

Besides the obvious fact that it avoids the absurdity of going against the non-negotiable law of God's universe—namely, that every knee will bow to his Son, and his son will be the cornerstone. Beside this, consider what it would mean to come and surrender to this stone, as Peter writes in his first letter:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, (1 Peter 2:4).

When Jesus becomes the cornerstone of your life, you are liberated from two lies. The first is the lie that the decisions of others are the most powerful determinate of the shape of your life. The decisions of others—good or bad—have huge impact on us. But when Jesus is the cornerstone, he builds out of your life what *He* determines and desires, no matter what others do. An example of this was the life of Joseph in Genesis. His brothers sold him into slavery, but God used their evil act to bring about good.

The second lie is that the most determinate force in your life is a decision you've made. Maybe you've made a decision in your past you regret, and you think this has determined the ultimate shape of your life. This does have an impact, but if Jesus is your cornerstone, it is not the ultimate determinate. Jesus is.

And there is a great relief in realizing that the cornerstone of your life is not a tradition, a family or origin, or a decision of yours or others—but a *person*. A living and loving and all-powerful person. It reminds you again and again that Jesus is actively taking the various events of your life and shaping them into the Temple that he is building. Peter helps us understand that when Jesus is our cornerstone, we are being built into something holy—a temple where God will dwell.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5).

God's design from the beginning is that the world would be a temple—a place where God could dwell with us. This is his plan for your life. When Jesus is your cornerstone, and you are increasingly brought into alignment with him, you have the joy of experiencing a life that is being built into a house for God. The various pieces of your life—your home, your relationships, your work life—can all become a place where God more and more dwells.

I have been following Jesus intentionally for over twenty years. I have kept journals during this time—they number around a dozen, the first dating from 2005. Sometimes I go back through these and re-read seasons of decision making. These were often seasons of uncertainty, where I wasn't sure what to do, what door to go through. Those pages of the journal are marked by both prayers but also honest confessions of anxiety and uncertainty. But because every page of those journals are, ultimately, founded upon the cornerstone of Jesus Christ, I can rest in the assurance that Jesus has been actively at work, building my life into a temple where God would be pleased to dwell. That is always what Jesus is doing. Always.

A third and final question as we close: what can you do today and tomorrow, to not reject, but set your life upon this stone?

This is a preaching draft.

You can repent of the ways you have rejected him, or sinned against God, the owner of your life by refusing him the fruits of praise and obedience. And you can surrender to him in faith. You can then start to build your life upon him—your rock, the cornerstone.

DRAFT

Small Group Questions:

1. Jesus' parable of the vineyard (Luke 20:9-16) presents people as tenants, not owners. Do you think of yourself as a tenant of God's vineyard or an owner of your own vineyard? How might living as a tenant of God's vineyard impact how you treat your family, or co-workers, or other church members?
2. Jesus is presented in Luke 20:17-18 as a stone: a corner stone one will either build their life upon or a stone that one will be crushed by. Does your life have a cornerstone—something that lies at its foundation, and shapes all else you do? What are some cornerstones that people shape and build their lives according to?
3. Read Luke 20:18. In what ways are we broken by Jesus the Cornerstone if we totally reject him? In what ways are we built up by Jesus the Cornerstone if we surrender to him?
4. Peter speaks of Jesus as the cornerstone in his first letter, writing, "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5). Considering Peter's words, what are some ways you are a living stone being built into a "spiritual house" for God.