

The Parable of the Bad Tenants

⁹He went on to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. ¹⁰At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. ¹²He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. ¹³“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’ ¹⁴“But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ ¹⁵So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”
When the people heard this, they said, “God forbid!”
¹⁷Jesus looked directly at them and asked, “Then what is the meaning of that which is written: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’¹⁸?
¹⁸Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”
¹⁹The 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. But they were afraid of the people.

Of all the different occupations that a person might have, or side jobs that a person might pick up, the one that I have never had, and frankly, the one I'm not sure I'd want, is the job of being a landlord. The idea of getting a phone call in the middle of the night because someone's toilet is backed up or because the fire alarm is going off or because nobody plowed the driveway yet – no thanks. But maybe some of you know what it like to be a landlord. Maybe you've had tenants tell you that all they do is work and sleep and keep a really clean house, when in reality, they party all night, trash the house, never pay the rent until finally you have to evict them. And if you think you're the only landlord who's ever experienced that, then just Google the phrase “Renters from Hell” and you'll find that you have plenty of company.

But you realize that people who are bad tenants are nothing new. In fact, over two thousand years ago, Jesus used a story about some bad tenants to illustrate some key biblical truths that still have application for our lives today. Today we turn our attention to we might call:

The Parable of the Bad Tenants.

As we work our way through the various components of this Parable, will see how these words apply to the people in Jesus' day, and in our day as well.

First, a little background information. to this text. The words that we have before us were spoken by Jesus just days before his death. Jesus had spent the day teaching in the temple courts in Jerusalem and during that time the Jewish religious leaders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, once again confronted Jesus, demanding that he tell them by whose authority he was teaching and performing miracles. It is in response to their accusations that Jesus tells this parable, not so much to those Jewish leaders, but rather about them.

Jesus begins with the words, *“A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.”* Mark’s gospel records that the owner also put a wall around the vineyard, dug a pit for a wine press and erected a watch tower to protect it.

I think you realize that Jesus often used these kinds of real life stories to illustrate spiritual truths. But we often need to look to other places in Scripture to determine what each part of the parable represents. For example, in Isaiah chapter 5, we find a very similar story of a man who planted a vineyard, built a watch tower and wine press and then looked for a crop of good grapes. But in that account, the prophet identifies what that vineyard represents. Isaiah 5:7 says, *“The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the garden of his delight.”*

Do you see the connection there? In a sense, God planted the nation of Israel. Out of all the nations of the world, God chose the descendants of Abraham to be his own. He built a wall around them. In other words, he used the laws of Moses (things like circumcision and unique sacrifices and festivals) to keep them separated from the heathen nations all around them. He had the tabernacle and later the temple built in their midst. He fed and nourished them with his words and promises, fully expecting that they would produce good fruits in their lives. You might say that God gave his Old Testament people every advantage. As the Lord himself says in Isaiah 5:4, *“What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?”*

But, if you think about it, that picture of a vineyard planted by God could be applied to not only to God’s Old Testament Church. It also could apply to God’s New Testament Church. I mean, if God fed and nourished his believers with his Word in the Old Testament, how much more so today. In the Old Testament, God gave his people the promise of the Messiah. We now have the fulfillment of that promise. We have the inspired record of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Today, the Christian Church is the vineyard planted by God.

But now maybe someone might ask, *“Wait a minute, if the vineyard represents God’s people in the New or Old Testament, then who did the farmers represent?”* Remember, in this parable, Jesus had said that a man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. So who were those men to whom the owner entrusted his vineyard? Who were the tenant/farmers who were expected to protect and cultivate his vineyard so that it would produce lots of good fruit? Well, in the Old Testament that would be Israel’s religious leaders, the priests and the Levites and to a lesser extent, the kings, who were to shepherd God’s people. God trusted these leaders to feed and guide his people so that they would bring forth fruits of faith that would be pleasing to God.

Well, in any landlord/tenant relationship the time comes for the owner to collect the rent. So, in Jesus’ parable, when the owner sends his servants to collect the rent, what did the tenants do? They beat the messengers, treated them shamefully and sent them away empty-handed. So, in real life, who do the servants represent? They are God’s prophets, the faithful messengers like Isaiah and Jeremiah and John the Baptist, whom God sent to call his people to repentance. And what happened to those messengers of God? For the most part, they were rejected, especially by the religious leaders. You think about Stephen’s words to the Jewish Sanhedrin right before they stoned him to death. He told those religious leaders, *“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One.”* (Acts 7:51-52) In Jesus’ parable and in real life, the tenants, the people who were supposed to be carrying for God’s vineyard, were in fact thumbing their noses at God by abusing his servants.

So, in response to that bad behavior, what does the owner do? Rather than evicting them, he's incredibly patient with them. He gives them one more chance. In effect, he pushes all his chips in. He says, "*I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.*" (Luke 10:13) I expect that if we were listening to Jesus tell this parable, we might say, "No! Why would the owner do that? That's too risky. What if these bad tenants do the same thing to his son that they did do his servants?" But Jesus is making a point. He's underscoring how patient and long-suffering the owner is with these wicked tenants. Unfortunately, the owner's patience is not rewarded. "*When the tenants saw (the son), they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'*"¹⁵ *So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

I don't think it's hard to decipher who the son represents in this parable. I mean, Jesus even includes the detail that the son was taken outside of the walls of the vineyard before he was killed – something that finds its fulfillment in Jesus' crucifixion outside of the walls of the city of Jerusalem. But what's really amazing he's not just that you and I understand what Jesus is referring to here, but so do Jesus' enemies! Can you imagine? Have you ever overheard a conversation about some terrible, no good, louse of a person—only to later realize, "Wait a minute. They're talking about me"? That's what happened with Jesus' enemies. Luke tells us that after Jesus told this parable, then *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.* (Luke 20:19)

Hmmm. I wonder how they knew that Jesus was talking about them? Could it be because they all knew exactly what they were plotting to do? Remember what happened after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and so many Jews put their faith in him? John records the event. *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."* (John 11:47-48). In other words, these religious leaders were all worried about what they might lose because of Jesus. They'd lose their power, their influence, maybe their jobs—which is exactly why John goes on to tell us, *From that day on, they plotted to take Jesus life.* (John 11:53)

So my question to you is this. If Jesus' enemies already knew that they were plotting to kill Jesus, and if Jesus already knew that they were going to kill him, why does Jesus go to the trouble of telling this parable? Three reasons. First, Jesus wanted to let his disciples, the crowds, and even his enemies know, "I know what's coming for me." As Jesus had already told his disciples on a number of occasions, here he was once again saying, "I'm going to die at the hands of my enemies." Secondly, Jesus told this parable as a call for his enemies to repent. Just like Jesus did with Judas, reaching out to him during the Last Supper, even though Judas had already agreed to betray Jesus, so here Jesus reaches out to his enemies one more time. He reminds them of what God had done for them, the trust he had placed in them, the messengers he had sent to them—all in a last ditch attempt to lead even one of those religious leaders to say, "I was wrong about you, Jesus. Please forgive me for treating you with contempt." Unfortunately, Jesus' call to repentance apparently fell on deaf ears and hard hearts. What Jesus once said about the inhabitants of Jerusalem applied to their leaders as well. In Matthew 23, Jesus says, "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.*" (Matthew 23:37).

Which brings us to the third reason that Jesus told this parable. And that is to make it clear that anyone who rejects Jesus as the Son of God will not go unpunished. You heard what Jesus said. *“What will the owner of the vineyard do to them (those tenants who killed his son)? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. (Luke 20:16)* In the end, God will not be mocked.

So, the real question is, “Does this parable have any meaning for our lives today? Yes, it does. Think about it this way. You and I, just like God's Old Testament people, we have been so blessed by God. He's given us his word and sacraments to feed our faith. He sent his Apostles and Prophets to speak to us through his holy word. He produces good fruit in our lives. But no matter how long we been members of a Christian congregation, we will always face the temptation to do exactly what these bad tenants did, and that is to say, “I don't want to give to God what he deserves. I don't want to produce the fruits pleasing to him. I don't want to listen to the messengers he sends to me. I kind of like the way I am. The position I'm in. I'm a pretty good person. I don't really need you, Jesus. And honestly, I think I can get along just fine without you.” And just like that, we become like those Jewish leaders, rejecting Jesus as our only hope for salvation.

In fact, maybe you've caught yourself thinking, “You know, if those Jewish religious leaders, the people who were in God's House all the time, the people who should have known the scriptures better than anyone else, the people who were working so hard to keep all of God's commands (like Paul in our epistle reading), – if those people ended up killing God's Son and persecuting his church, what's to keep people like you and me, who share a lot of those same characteristics (namely, religious people, who know the Scriptures, who are trying to keep God's commands)—what's to keep us from doing exactly what those Jewish leaders did, namely, turning our backs on God and being guilty of the same damning rejection of Jesus?”

The answer is found in this parable of the tenants. If you can see yourself in those bad tenants, you recognize that in so many ways you haven't produced the fruits God demands. You so often refused to listen to his Word. You pushed him and his messengers away. You've insisted on doing your own thing, having your own way. And yet you realized that God has not given up on you yet. He keeps coming after you with his love and his forgiveness. In fact, to prove how much you mean to him, he gave you his beloved Son. And even though your sins brought about Jesus' death, his resurrection has given you a new life. It's given you a new purpose, and the power to live your life as a faithful manager of all that God has given to you. In the end, it's God's grace, his love for you and Christ, that makes all the difference in the world. It's what turns you and me from a bad, self-serving tenants, into a good and grateful tenants, eager to produce bushels of good fruit, pleasing to God. In the end, it's God's love in Christ that turns the Stone the builders rejected into the cornerstone of God's church, yes, the cornerstone for your life and mine, in time and for eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.