

“Being a Good Tenant”

Matthew 21:33-44 and Psalm 118

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My parents taught me to always return something you borrowed in as good of shape as you got it and if possible to return it in better shape. It matter not if it was a library book or a cabin. Something borrowed was to be treated with great respect. If the book had a torn page, stop and tape it. If you were a guest at a cabin leave it cleaner than you found it.

The same philosophy was to be applied to everything even that which you owned for my parents were quick to point out that everything we have is lent to us by God. On the farm we had a lake surrounded by fertile land. We never tilled this land even though it would have been very profitable because Dad saw the bigger picture. Leaving this land untilled allowed it to filter any runoff from the fields before it reached the water. Most of our neighbors plowed in the fall. We always waited until spring, then sometimes planted no till to cut down on erosion. Unless we were desperate for feed we left a strip of unharvested grain for the wildlife. We used a more expensive fertilizer that was less harsh so the earthworms could thrive. We used less herbicides because we monotonously cultivated the corn. We left swaths of land untilled between fields for vegetation to reduce wind erosion and left swaths of grass in waterways to reduce runoff. None of these practices made the farm more profitable for us. Just the opposite they all reduced our profits. Dad’s goal was to pass on the land to the next generation in great shape. Hopefully better shape than he received it to the next generation.

Jesus said, **Matthew 21:33 “Now listen to another parable. A certain landowner planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country.”** Parables are rich with multi layers of meaning and an abundance of insights. This parable reveals spiritual insights to illiterate tenants who lived out this parable in daily life and the well educated religious leaders who had the scriptures memorized, for this parable is laden with scripture allusions. The classic interpretation is that God is the landowner. Notice how the landowner is exceedingly generous, gracious and trusting. Normally the tenants would need to clear the land, plant the vineyard, dig the wine press and build the tower. The landowner does all of this and gives the farm to the tenants in pristine condition. The landowner is not a micro-manger instead he gives freedom and trust as he leaves the country. This parable alludes to Genesis, the creation, the good earth and skills God has generously given us. It alludes to the covenant with Abraham being blessed by God so that God can bless all the people of the earth. It alludes to Isaiah where God sings of God’s love for Israel comparing them to a vineyard that will hopefully yield nourishing blessings.

Jesus continues **Matthew 21:34-39 “At the time of the grape harvest, the landowner sent his servants to collect his share of the crop. But the farmers grabbed his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. So the landowner sent a larger group of his servants to collect for him, but the results were the same. “Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking, ‘Surely they will respect my son.’ “But when the tenant farmers saw his son coming, they said to one another, ‘Here comes the heir to this estate. Come on, let’s kill him and get the estate for ourselves!’ So they grabbed him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and murdered him.”**

The classic interpretation is we are the tenants. We have taken advantage of God's trust, grace and generosity. We are tenants of the world, yet somehow we have gotten it into our heads that we should be the owners. Have you ever said it's mine? My money—My house—My stuff—My talents—My time; A song declares, "it's my life." All of this is wrong. None of it is ours. It is all God's. Everything even our life is all generous gifts from God. We are not owners of anything. We are tenants, renters who are getting an outrageously awesome deal, for God does not require any rent from us. Instead God gives and gives and gives and then lovingly hopes we will share some of our blessings. Instead we often hoard, build fences, post no trespassing signs, secure the borders. Why do we do this? Where do we get the idea that it is our stuff to control? When did we lose sight of our covenant with God that everything we have and are is a blessing that is to be shared so we can bless others? How have we become spiritual squatters, inhabiting a kingdom that isn't ours and refusing to give God much of anything in return?

When the Israelites were set free to the Promise Land—a land flowing with milk and honey, a land so rich with resources that it could support and bless both the inhabitants and the Israelites. Where did they ever get the idea that they were to conquer the land, own the land, drive the inhabitants of the land out? The covenant was you are blessed to bless all people. The land was to be shared. Israel was blessed with love and grace in hopes that all could experience God's love and grace through them. This twisted thinking has happened over and over again. It is at the root of most of our hate, broken relationships, violence and wars. What about the United States a land rich with resources? When our ancestors came here on the grounds of religious freedom, did we share the land with the Native Americans or did we parcel up the land, build fences and declare that we own it all?

Pastor John Claypool said, "What the renters did in this parable is what our kind has done with the opportunity given us by God. This story catches humanity red-handed in our most common game; namely, playing God. Let us face it, from the beginning we have resented the idea that this world belonged to Another and that anyone had the right to tell us anything. We have been unwilling to grant God the inalienable rights of ownership and control of this planet. We have wanted either to ignore God or take God's place."

God lovingly, generously, graciously gives and gives and gives. God hopes to see fruit, faith in God's promise, growth in your skills and talents, sharing, repentance of sins, forgiveness of others, peace, joy, love.

Why is the parable called the parable of the evil farmers and wicked tenants? Why is it not called the parable of the gracious, generous, trusting landowner? God the landowner sees the mess the tenants are making of God's blessings so God sends prophets, priests and messengers. We the tenants ignore them. Our ancestors beat them and killed them. Notice the sharp contrast to what an earthly landowner would do. First the tenants would be evicted for abusing the property and failure to pay rent. Second the tenants would be arrested and jailed for the numerous crimes including murder. Instead God is gracious and gives a second then an outrageously gracious third chance. God sent Jesus, God's son, yet our greed, desire to own, drivenness to be in control crucified Jesus.

Jesus continues with the parable, **Matthew 21:40-41** "When the owner of the vineyard returns," Jesus asked, "what do you think he will do to those farmers?" The religious leaders replied, "He will put the wicked men to a horrible death and lease the vineyard to others who will give him his share of the crop after each harvest."

What will the owner do to us, the ones who have blatantly, flagrantly, disobeyed? You hear this question all over today. Whenever someone is caught red handed, where there is no doubt that they are guilty, what will be the consequences, the judgment?

This is where the parable takes an unexpected 180 degree turn and becomes outrageously gracious. The expected outcome is the death penalty. Notice that Jesus does not confirm the

credible, reasonable, rational judgment pronounced by the religious leaders. Instead Jesus offered a cryptic comment that connects scripture of the past with his and our resurrection. **Matthew 21:42** **“Then Jesus asked them, “Didn’t you ever read this in the Scriptures? ‘The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see.’”** This is an exact quote from Psalm 118 verses 22 and 23. The quote comes from a psalm that begins and ends proclaiming **Psalm 118:1 & 29** **“Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good! God’s faithful love endures forever.”** The psalm tells of God setting us free, God helping us, God removing fear, we will not die, we will live and over and over the psalm declares God’s faithful love endures forever. The psalm concludes **Psalm 118:22-19** **“The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see. This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. Please, Lord, please save us. Please, Lord, please give us success. Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, shining upon us. Take the sacrifice and bind it with cords on the altar. You are my God, and I will praise you! You are my God, and I will exalt you! Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good! God’s faithful love endures forever.”**

Jesus is the stone. Jesus is the rock solid, unshakable, sure foundation that we can build our eternal life upon. Yet we often reject Jesus. Despite our rebellion our Gracious God forgives us and makes Jesus the corner stone of our life, of the church, of the world for all eternity. Justice, judgment, has been served Jesus the sacrifice was bound on the altar, the cross. On the third day Jesus rose to glorious resurrection. The psalmist declares **Psalm 118:23-24** **“This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see. This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.”**

Pastor King Oehmig writes “The parable ends with the Cross. Does God have a good idea that the sending of the son to the treasonous tenants will turn their hearts? Does God think the insurgents will do less to the heir than they did to the servant messengers? Of course not. Therein lies the majesty of enduring, risk-it-all Divine love. God takes the final freedom—to be not only rejected, but brutalized by the object of one’s love. It is a breath-stopping vulnerability. Anyone who says that the Christian God is ‘indifferent’ to the world, anyone who claims that we have a ‘watchmaker’ God, who started the world ticking and then backed off forever, better consider again. Actually, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants does not end with the Cross, but with the Resurrection. The Gospel must be proclaimed in the face of rebellion. God’s love—and our salvation—matter that much. The teaching here is that evil is not the final answer—nor is it violence driving out violence with greater violence. Resurrection, not retaliation, is the answer God gives to an insurgent world that refuses grace and prefers evil. When we comprehend that kind of sacrificial love, we come to understand the Gospel: **Romans 5:8** **‘God proves God’s love to us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.’”**

Jesus concludes **Matthew 21:43-44** **“I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on.”**

Pastor Anna Carter Florence writes “I wonder if Jesus is reminding us that what we would do...is not what God would do. In the realm of God, judgment will not look like it does in the human realm. The vineyard will bear another kind of fruit. The old ways will be crushed beneath an open tombstone—and death, where will thy sting be, then? All we can say is what we know: God will forgive seventy times seven. God will welcome the prodigal home. God will open the banquet to tax collectors and prostitutes. God will raise the dead to new life. What we know about what God would do is that it is completely incredible, unreasonable, and irrational; not at all what we would

do. Best not to compare. What has happened, what is coming, is the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes."

Recently we have explored how the Kingdom of God and heaven are interchangeable terms. The Kingdom is much more than eternal life in heaven, it is joy, love, peace today. It is forgiveness and the ability to forgive. It is healed relationships. It is huge blessings from small service. It is abundant life today and much, much more. Therefore, Jesus comment that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from those who do not produce fruit, from those who do not bless others with God's blessing, is not necessary a judgment regarding their eternal fate rather it is likely a description of what life is like for them on earth.

The invitation here is to be like Peter, to be a blessing to others. Peter was sinful and blatantly denied Jesus yet Peter accepted God's grace. Peter experienced that God's love and forgiveness is a free gift. Peter extended God's grace to others. It was Peter who preached that you can not earn salvation through keeping laws or living rituals rather Peter proclaimed God's grace freely given. Peter received the blessing of God's generous grace and proclaimed and shared it.

Today is world communion Sunday. We are invited to celebrate God's grace that resurrects rather than judges, that redeems rather than finding better tenants. We are invited to tear down every wall, barrier and division to unite in harmony around this table. Everyone is invited to feast, to receive God's blessings and share them, to receive God's grace and be gracious. We are invited to be fruitful. We are invited to use all that God has given us, including life itself, and share it with everyone and to return it to God in the good and perfect shape it was given to us. Amen