

“BAD TENANTS”

Matthew 21:33-46

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Matthew 21:33 - 46 *"Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. 34 "Now when*

vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. 35 "And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. 36 "Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. 37 "Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 "But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' 39 "So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" 41 They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD'S doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'? 43 "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. 44 "And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." 45 Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. 46 But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.

Lev 25:23 *"The land shall not be sold permanently, **for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me.**"*

Once again Jesus would go out of his way to paint a picture that would be understood by the common man. It was a story with intent that was hard to miss, although there are certainly plenty of folks out there who present themselves as abnormally “thick” so as to dodge the ramifications of the things Jesus said, and that includes what is herein to follow.

Repeatedly in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry, as well as the epistle letters which follow, we find not just *insinuations* but literal and blatant “throw-downs” concerning the call upon the true believer to “produce.” Again the Lord is reminding us that we have been saved for more than just eternity! For many of us, our flesh is easily put off by such a statement. For we have boiled our salvation and Christianity down to a couple of weekly church services where we listen to a pastoral lecture and sing a couple of songs. We embrace His love for us...we cling to His grace and His mercy. We just aren’t thankful and we aren’t motivated because of such. My faith is about *me*, and that’s where it stops!

Yes, God has blessed us because He *loves* us, but He loves *them* also, all those out there who yet do not know Him. He has clearly called us, over and over, to work to further the Kingdom. To “produce fruit *worthy of repentance*,” (Luke 3:8) There is indeed no question about His love for *me*, but it is rather my love for *Him* that is forever in question. It is a fact; if I have been changed by Him, I will produce fruit for Him. Not out of constraint but out of thankfulness and love. It happens naturally and organically. Birds fly, fish swim, and children of God produce for the kingdom.



The problem begins with the fact that few of us really embrace the idea that we aren't staying here! We are just passing through...a visitor...a sojourner...an ambassador. 1 Peter 2:11-12 (MSG) says "*Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they'll be won over to God's side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives.*" We are not the owners! We are merely "renters." Tenants here in the vineyard.

Many of us have a hard time relating to this story. We fail to see even the possibility of ourselves in this account. After all, the text records adamant rebellion and even violence! It's hard for us to imagine being complicit in such activity. It seems this reality is even harder to see when we are a tenant than it is from the eyes of those of us who are caretakers! Having borne witness to such a display multiple times, it's not a stretch for me at all!

Thus many of us are quite personally passive in our rejection of this story. We believe we would never exercise violence against the servants who have come to collect! We feel we "pay our rent." That we give what is required of us. And ironically, therein lies the problem! We "pay what is required." We attend church, contribute a little in the tithe box, and even serve some in the needs of the church. But is that true fruit? Or is that duty? Certainly the woman in Mark 12 who gave just a little albeit all she had, would dispute our common interpretations. There is no fruit to give unless we are producing. In many cases there would be nothing TO collect because there would be no fruit at all. For we were too busy pursuing a career and collecting just enough material possessions to keep us from paying any attention to the vineyard! And what IS the vineyard in this story? It is the kingdom of God.

These tenants in the parable never had it so good! The landlord was a handy, savvy, knowledgeable, flexible and thoughtful man. He was no slumlord and the property was a prime piece of property. It is evident that this was not a fixer-upper in a run-down area that required regular repair or renovation. The facilities on the rental property included a surrounding wall, a rock winepress, and a bonus watchtower. The Greek text implied that a fence enclosed the vineyard (v 33). Putting up a wall, partition or fence is hard work but it added value to the property, discouraged trespassing on the property, and gave farmers a sense of privacy.

Yet the tenants apparently didn't realize just how good they had it! It seems hard to believe that the owner of such a well-kept vineyard would put up with the kind of behavior we see in our text. Who would really send that many servants to those wicked tenants? You might think that beating the first servant would have been more than enough to move the owner of the vineyard to retaliatory action against those wicked landowners. Certainly no one of us would stand for having our servants and managers beaten, killed, or stoned! And certainly not after even more servants were sent and the same thing happened to them—*beaten and killed*. And then to top it all off, the owner of the vineyard sent his own son to those people after all that? **37** *Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.*" What incredible patience and care is being meted out here by the owner of the vineyard! He just **kept on trying...**

Pastor Tim Keller, citing CS Lewis, has made an apt description of such folks. He says that what we have today is 3 different kinds of people: the non-religious, the religious, and those who are genuinely moved by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Three different approaches to God, three different outcomes. Keller says that "*Irreligious people want what they want: sexual gratification, greater wealth, etc. They attempt to get what they want by ignoring God and his Law.*" He goes on to tell of the "religious people": those who also "*want what they want: a perfect marriage, better-behaved teens, good health, financial security, etc. They attempt to get what they want by following God and his rules.*" And lastly there are those who are truly new creatures in every way. Their lives and daily living revolve around the furtherance of the kingdom of God. Not just for themselves, but for all those who yet do not know Him. Everything is run through the sieve of Christ, and He is firmly in the position of first in all matters.

That third group is passionately motivated by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Keller says that they are the ones, “*who through the supernatural working of the Gospel, they have come to see that God’s love is always pure and his will is always wise. That person does not even think about what he desires, but only about what God desires because the only thing the Gospel-oriented person wants out of life is God himself.*”

That’s what we want—Jesus. That’s why we come to God’s house—for Jesus. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. And those who want Jesus can’t help but produce fruit for Jesus. Because when we have Jesus, we don’t need to selfishly gather up everything else to feel safe and secure, or to feel just and right before God. That’s what the irreligious and the religious do, selfishly doing things, hoarding the fruit for themselves. But the believer who has Jesus, doesn’t have to worry, because we have God himself. We have the one who wants to share his inheritance with us. We have the one who pours out blessings upon blessings upon us so that we can be generous and faithful with the things he has given to us—things that are really his to begin with. Even death itself shouldn’t scare us, because we have the cornerstone that the Father has chosen as precious and holy in his sight. Though he was put to death in the body, he was raised back to life.

Jesus said of them in his parable, “**38** *But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.'*” So those folks...akin to our “religious people” description, wanted what they wanted: to live in the kingdom, in a good vineyard, walls around them for protection, etc.; they wanted all the stuff for themselves and saw the owner of the vineyard as the way to achieve it. But their lust was not static...eventually it drove them to seek even for the **ownership** of the vineyard.

In time, they didn’t want to be mere tenants. They thought...and *we* think, that they would just live there forever! They wanted to **own** the house, and thus they moved to gain that possession by force and violence. And I have witnessed the same being manifested in folks who years earlier would have never imagined such a scenario! But there they were...throwing their brothers and sisters ...the owners bride, under the bus for the sake of personal, earthly, and temporal gain. In the end, they attempted the same with the “owner of the vineyard”, however that did not go down with the same ease! It got ugly. It got brutal.

You see, these folk do not really want the Father or the Son. They wanted the **stuff**...the inheritance—the kingdom. They didn’t want Jesus, just what Jesus could bring them. Keller said the religious people, “...*want what they want: a perfect marriage, better-behaved teens, good health, financial security, etc. They attempt to get what they want by following God and his Law.*” But Jesus shows us that those who attempt to get what they want by somehow making God indebted to them and trying to keep the rules will find themselves outside of the kingdom of God.

We must be careful that we don’t become those “religious people” as Pastor Keller defined them, and as Jesus showed these tenants of his day to be. Indeed both the irreligious and the religious end up not serving the Lord, but both ultimately and selfishly trying to serve themselves by getting what they want, whether by avoiding the vineyard labor, or trying to be in control of it. But the bottom line is, **neither group is saved.**

How long will those who profess to belong to Him fail to produce any fruit? Are we indeed “bad tenants?”

Scripture makes it very clear that this world and this life is not our home. We are truly just “passing through!” Everything we have will be left, everything we have done will be forgotten. Every pleasure and every experience will be like a puff of smoke...intangibly here one second but gone the next. Just ever fading memories.

The Scripture has reminded us repeatedly that a life reborn will be a life committed to God **and** the Kingdom. After all, we are told to “seek first the **KINGDOM** OF GOD.” It is not a matter of effort or will, but a matter of Spirit. Yet the story is quite current, in that many have indeed attempted to take of His bounty and not return fruit to the Kingdom. Yet again Jesus paints a very stark and anguished end for those who live this way! They are seen as “imposters”...not righteous “sojourners.”

One thing that our Bible will attest to, is that Jesus holds us to our promises. If you have ever tried to skip out on a lease or fudge in its contractual obligations, you know what this means. Revelation 2:5 says “*Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don’t repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.*” Not “*believe the things you did at first*” but “*do the works you did at first.*” Again we have the threat of not finishing...not completing the race. Not because we did not participate, but rather we are disqualified because we broke our contractual obligations.

1 Corinthians 9:27 – 10:5 says “*I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified. I don’t want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. All of them ate the same spiritual food, and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.*”

What are you saying pastor? That I can lose my salvation? No I’m not. But we must absolutely acknowledge that scripture is replete with examples of those who began this race and did not finish. While God is not done with His chosen people Israel, He has indeed “leased out the vineyard” to the Gentiles. That’s us! What will *we* do with His vineyard? Because the fact is, we are in truth only what we are at the end of the race. Galatians 5:4-6, Paul tells us “*For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, (or, ‘following the rules’) you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God’s grace....What is important is faith expressing itself in love. You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth? It certainly isn’t God, for he is the one who called you to freedom.*”

If it is true that Jesus cares this much about bearing fruit, then we might not be off the hook even yet. He says in the story that the landowner sent folks to get the produce. When he asks what the landowner will do after his son is killed, they said that he will put those wretches to a miserable death and then lease to folks who care about harvest. The landowner is rightly angry about how his representatives and his son have been treated, but he also continues to care about the harvest. He wants fruit if that is what a vineyard is supposed to produce: fruit, sweet, tangible, productive food.

Tim Keller, in his book *Center Church*, makes the case that fruitfulness is the way ministry should be evaluated. Not the corporate measures of success, counting members and giving and the like. But not just the measures of faithfulness, which he characterizes as a ministry of deep commitment “but nothing comes of it.” The biblical image, he argues, is not success or faithfulness but fruitfulness. (*Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, Timothy Keller, p.13)

Luke 12:48 “*When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.*” How much we have been given Christian! The landlord is waiting for His fruit...