The Parable of the Tenants

Luke 20:9-19

Luke 20:13 **“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’”**

Since my family moved in to Clayton, I send a check to a guy every month. I send him money not because he is particularly needy. In fact, I believe that he has more money than I have. So can you guess why I send him a certain amount of money every month? It’s because I owe it to him; he is my landlord of the apartment we live in.

This morning I’m going to speak about the most basic relationship. We are going to study the parable of the tenants. This is the last parable in Luke’s gospel. In fact there is some argument about whether this is a parable at all. Rather, it is more of an allegory where the meaning is barely hidden in details of the story itself. Let’s look at it to see what Jesus has to teach us.

It was Tuesday after Jesus entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. You may remember from last week that Jesus cleansed the Jerusalem temple by driving out the money changers and merchants from the temple courts. He rebuked them, “It is written, ‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’ “(Luke19:46). Jesus compared them to robbers. Of course, this didn’t make the chief priests very happy. And they were trying to kill him. But they were afraid of the people because Jesus had the people on his side so strongly. The chief priests and leaders challenged Jesus on where he got the authority for an act like that. But Jesus gave them a counter-question about how they understood John’s baptism: “Was it from heaven or was it from men?” That question put them in a bit of a spin. But again, they avoided the chance of repentance saying, “We don’t know where it was from.”

The tension was so thick between Jesus and the religious leadership, the outcome was still in doubt. With that background, our parable is easy and clear to understand. Jesus begins by saying, “**A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time” (9)**.

For Jesus’ hearers this would have rung loud bells. The vineyard was a well-known Old Testament metaphor for the nation of Israel. In Isaiah5, God tells them how he planted a vineyard but when he came to harvest it, all he found was bad fruit. It was such a famous song of failure of Israel that Jesus’ listeners must have thought of it as they heard this parable.

With that stage set, Jesus keeps going with the story. “**At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard”** (10).

So far, everything is working according to the plan. The landlord expects to receive some of the fruit of the vineyard. The tenants don’t own the land, so they owe the rent in the form of crops back to their landlord. But what happened? “**The tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed**.” We have a problem here. These are some unruly tenants, farmers who don’t even own the land they work. And yet they are acting as if the land belongs to them and the landlord is the unfair one daring to ask them for rent. They treated the owner’s servant like an intruder.

I myself am a tenant. Just imagine what my landlord would do if he knocked on our apartment door one day to give us a friendly reminder that we were 3 months behind in our rent, and I, after hearing that news, slap his face, and yelled, “Get out of here!” What would he do? He would immediately start legal proceedings to get us evicted, because I didn’t want to give him what I owed him. And he definitely wouldn’t be knocking on my door a month later with another friendly reminder.

But look at the landlord in the parable. After his first servant is mistreated, what did he do? “He sent another servant, but that one they beat and treated shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.” It’s the incredible patience of the Lord. No way would this happen in real life, that an owner shows that much patience to treacherous tenants.

At first the story only indicates their greed, rudeness, and rebellion. But as the story progresses we find the true motivation behind this incredible act of rebellion. In verse 14 we learn about it. Their true motivation is this: they didn’t want to acknowledge the true owner of the vineyard. They wanted to be the owners themselves. They wanted everything for themselves. Their hearts were darkened and they progressed in their wickedness to become robbers and even murderers.

So Jesus was saying to the Jewish leaders, “You rejected God’s rule over you and are about to reject the Son of God.” The people of Israel from the moment God liberated them from Egypt, kept on turning away from the true worship of God to idols. God sent the prophets to Israel over the centuries. And sadly, God’s people ignored their messages and killed them. For the most part, the kings of Israel present a long line of failure after failure to do what was right. It is said that prophets, poets, and pigs have one thing in common: they aren’t truly appreciated until they are dead.

The vineyard is a picture not just of Israel, but also of the whole world. All of us have been put on this earth as tenants in God’s vineyard. What should our response be? We sinners don’t want to be tenants paying rent. We want to be the owners. Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden and given the task of tending it. But they tried to become owners like God. And human beings have been doing the same thing ever since. We see wars happening with an increasing regularity, relationships breaking down at an alarming rate. And we wonder: how could things have gotten so bad? What’s gone wrong with this world? The answer is clear: We don’t want to be tenants, but owners. And I can add that this is just as much a problem in the church. Most conflicts and division happen because we want to be owners ourselves.

How do you treat the landlord when he comes looking to collect fruit from you? The basic sin of the tenants was that they refused to give the lord his fruits, and we often do the same thing. God has a right to expect the best from us. We don’t really own anything; we don’t own our jobs; we don’t own our houses; we don’t own even our bodies or times. We are tenants. God rents out these things to us for his purpose. But like those evil tenants, we often act as though these were our stuff.

If you have a landlord here on earth, you cannot get away with paying him only a fraction of the rent. So why do we act as if we can skimp on our Lord and expect him to be fine with it? Let’s think for a moment what happens if we failed to pay the rent. If you have a mortgage on your house and failed to pay it for 3 straight months, the bank will send their agent to your house and throw your family out without any questions asked.

God, however, is not like the bank. They need your money. But God doesn’t need your money or fruit. He doesn’t need it to make a living off of us; but rather, he wants to use it to restore our relationship with him. He desires to bless us by helping us maintain the proper relationship with God, the Creator. God owns your life and everything you have. We are tenants or stewards. Have you rejected his claim? If you have, you should be thankful God is patient.

The patience of the Lord seems to know no limits. Look at verse 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.’** ” The landlord didn’t give up on the evil tenants. He asked himself: Is there anything else I can do? He thought it over and took an astonishing step: He sent his son, whom he loved. It’s really shocking and amazing about the Lord. Why risk anymore? But it is God’s long-suffering, compassionate love. John3:16 testifies: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This is the heart of God. Do you grasp this? There is only one God and He has only one Son, and He loves us so much that he sent that only son to reconcile us to him. That is an amazing truth about God. God is slow to anger, compassionate, and abounding in love.

But what did sinners do? The parable reveals shocking truth about the wickedness of the human heart. The tenants of the vineyard made a calculated decision. They thought by killing the son, they could claim ownership of the vineyard. Then, they threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him. You see how foolish and wicked human heart is.

But what will those get, who still reject and kill even the son? The owner will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others (15b-16a). There will be a severe judgment. But people who reject God and his ownership never want to accept this outcome. So they said, “May this never be!” Imagine a lazy college student who never studied was warned that he would be kicked out if his grades didn’t improve. What should his response be? Either he should change and study harder or accept the consequence that he be removed from school.

Jesus looked directly at those people whose hearts were still stubborn, and he kept teaching patiently who he was. Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22 “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” People rejected Jesus and crucified him. But God raised him from the dead and exalted him to be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Jesus is the foundation and source of salvation. Salvation is found in no one else but Jesus! (Acts4:12). Jesus is also the judge. Whoever rejects him will be broken or crushed. God cannot be mocked. Nothing can frustrate God’s plan of salvation.

This parable reveals God’s broken heart weeping over his people. Jesus wept as he entered Jerusalem because judgment is not what God desires to bring on humankind (cf. 2Peter3:9). So this parable is Jesus’ urgent warning for the stubborn hearts and his appealing to us (cf. Lk19:41-44).

I heard about a story told by a pastor. Years ago in the early days of computers, the executives of Time magazine were concerned about their declining circulation. So they planned a campaign to send out thousands of letters making an emotional appeal to potential subscribers. Such mailings had been done manually at a great cost. So they began an incentive effort to cut costs. IBM made a proposal to install a fully automatic system that would write the letters, seal the envelopes, address them according to a selected database, stamp them and send them into the postal system without a human hand. The huge computer was installed with much expectation. However, there was an error, and as a result a poor sheepherder in Montana received 12,634 letters appealing to him to subscribe to Time magazine. The surprised sheepherder, who didn’t usually get much mail, opened the mail bags and started reading the letters. After reading a few dozen, he sent in a subscription order with a note that said, “I give up. I surrender.”

God himself has written thousands of letters to you. And each one of them says, “I love you.” On every page, God is expressing His love to you. How can you resist this kind of love? “God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom5:8). Today’s parable is from the mouth of Jesus who gave his life for us. When God sent his one and only Son, it was not about the business, but rather about love relationship. I am a sinner. Meditating on Jesus’ parable, I came to realize that I am sometimes a bad tenant. As a theology teacher I was like the expert in the law hypocritical and seeking recognition. I did not appreciate what God has rented out to me. But God still loves me, in spite of my sin. Thank God for bringing me back to him.

God’s plan cannot be annulled. God is the landlord. He owns everything including your life. Jesus has come to restore us to a right relationship with God. “Now choose life, so that you and your children may live!”(Deut30:19). It’s time to respond to Jesus’ broken heart. I pray that each of us make Jesus the Lord of our life. I pray that you may appreciate God’s compassionate love! May God bless you to surrender to him and to his love!