

Matthew 21:33-44

The Parable of the Tenants

³³ “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ ⁴¹ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.’”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

❖❖❖

Introduction

Today’s Gospel story of the tenants got me thinking about renters and landlords. Jani and I have been landlords, and we had our share of tenant problems, including a nearly completely destroyed kitchen. We’ve been tenants as well, and always tried to work with the landlords and sought to leave our apartment or rental house in good shape. But some renters aren’t so thoughtful.

Stupid Tenants.

I recently did a Google search on “stupid tenants” and got 514,000 entries. Here are three stories I got from a list of dozens on just one of those entries.

Brad is a landlord in Washington state. He got a call one night from a tenant complaining that the apartment was too cold and that he needed to come and do a better job in sealing the windows and doors. The next day, he visits the apartment—the doors and windows are fine. He goes to the thermostat to see if the selector is turned to “heat.” It’s not. “Why haven’t you turned the heat on?” “Well, electricity is too expensive, so I just turn the heat on every so often.”

Deborah lives in Arizona. She evicted a tenant for non-payment of rent. She sent her former tenant a bill for cleaning the apartment the renter had left in terrible condition. It took all the

deposit and more to fix. The tenant said, “I’m not paying it. You broke the terms of the lease when you evicted me.”

Dawn rents out property in Wisconsin. One day a tenant called and said there were mice in the rental house—a hole had mysteriously appeared in the floor next to a wall. The next day, Dawn inspected the hole—a small, perfectly round, 3/8” hole. “You had the cable company move the TV cable, didn’t you?” “Yes, but how did you know that?”

The tenants in Matthew 21 were also stupid, but not in a humorous way. They assaulted the landlord’s agents and then killed his son, thinking that by doing this they would get the son’s inheritance. How in the world did they come to that conclusion? Let’s find out.

The Parable of the Two Sons (Matt. 21:28-32)

Vs. 33 begins with Jesus saying, “Hear another parable.” Obviously, there’s a parable before today’s text, and the way Jesus words this indicates that the two are connected.

So what was the previous parable? In vss. 28-32, we have the parable of the two sons. The father goes to one son and says, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” The son says he won’t, but he later changes his mind and does so. The father goes to the other son, and asks the same thing of him. “I will go,” but he never did.

Jesus asks his audience, made up of priests and religious lawyers (also known as “scribes”), “Which of the two did the will of his father?” They replied, “Well, the first one.” Jesus said, “Let me tell you something—prostitutes and the traitors who collect taxes for the Romans are going to enter the kingdom of God before you. John the Baptizer came and preached repentance. You did not believe him and repent, but they did. And when you saw that tax collectors and prostitutes were coming to God, you still wouldn’t repent.”

Jesus is saying the tax collectors and prostitutes are like the first son. They made no claim to obey the Torah, God’s law, and yet when God commanded them to repent and believe through the prophet John, they did so. (By the way, the phrase “tax collectors and prostitutes” was a way of referring to all those who were grievous sinners, not just collaborators and sex-workers.)

The Jewish religious authorities of Jesus’ day are like the second son. They made great claims about how they were followers of the Torah, and yet, when one of the simplest commands is given—“Believe this—you must repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!”—they refused to obey.

Interpreting Parables

Now, a side note about how to interpret parables. When Jesus tells a story, each of the characters in the story represent different people in the audience. Jesus is implicitly asking his hearers, “Which of these are you?” So, in the parable of the prodigal son, the father is God, which left the crowd to decide, “Am I a wretched sinner who has wasted all that God gave me on sinful living, but now I come in repentance and God welcomes me with rejoicing? Or am I an ungrateful, self-righteous sinner who resents the mercy and grace of God?”

Let’s continue, and I want to be a little Pentecostal with this. I’m not asking for shouts and so on—just some interaction like our Pentecostal brother do.

Looking at the Text

Continuing with the rest of vs. 33:

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.

So here's the setting. There is the master, who is ...? [God] He's the father in the earlier parable of the two sons, right? And there's the vineyard for which he provided everything. This is ...? [Israel, which is the physical manifestation of God's kingdom on earth.]

And there are the tenants whom the master left in charge. They are supposed to take care of the vineyard, and they are ...? [The religious authorities—the priests and religious lawyers] They're the second son in the previous parable.

Vss. 34-36

When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.

So the time for harvest comes, and the master wants to receive his due. The fruit that the master was wanting represents ...? [The fruit of righteousness—they would worship God, him alone, and not the pagan gods. And they would love their neighbors by caring for the land, the poor, widows, orphans, strangers living among them.]

The servants he sent were the ...? [The prophets; they're new, they weren't in the earlier parable.] Did the tenants welcome them? [No!] That's right, just like God's prophets were often rejected, abused, and killed. And notice, this happened more than once, just as God sent his prophets more than once.

Vss. 37-39

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance." And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

So now the master sends his son. Again, who is the master? [God.] And who is his son? [Jesus.] The master says, "Okay, they wouldn't obey my will communicated by my servants." (Who are the servants? [The prophets.]) "Surely they will obey my will communicated by my son."

The tenants say, "Let's kill the son, then the vineyard will be ours." Let's remind ourselves, what is the vineyard? [Israel or the kingdom of God.] And who owns the vineyard? [God.] And did they obey the will of the master communicated through his son? [No.] Instead they ... [Killed him; the religious authorities killed Jesus by crucifying him.]

Why did they kill the son? [So they could get his inheritance.] Why did they think they'd get the vineyard once they killed the son? [Because they were stupid tenants.] But not like those we talked about in the introduction. Perhaps it would be better to say they were foolish tenants, or at least a kind of fools.

In the Bible, there different types of fools—the ignorant, the simple-minded, and the stupid. But the worst sort of fool was the kind the writer of Proverbs called “being wise in his own eyes.” Proverbs 3:7 says, “Do not be wise in your own eyes, but fear the Lord and turn from evil.” Proverbs 12:15 states, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” Like this sort of fool, the tenants would not listen to the servants, they killed the son, and thought they were doing the right thing.

Vss. 40-41

When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”

Jesus asks, when owner comes back, what will he do? Who’s the owner? [God.] And what will the owner do? [Kill the tenants horribly, and get new tenants, who will give him the fruit he deserves.]

Vs. 42

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes”?

Jesus quotes Ps 118, which says the very stone needed to complete God’s kingdom is rejected by the ones to whom God entrusted its building. The builders are the same as ... [The tenants.] And the stone is ...? [Jesus] And despite their disobedience, Jesus becomes the cornerstone anyhow.

Vss. 43-44

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.

Jesus says the kingdom of God will be taken away from whom? [The religious authorities.] That’s right, and they’re same as the ...? [The tenants and the second son, those who are self-righteous, wise in their own eyes, and refuse to repent and believe.] And it will be given to ...? [People who produce fruit of righteousness, which are the same as the first son—the tax collectors and prostitutes who repent and believe.]

The fate of the unrepentant is interesting. Refusing to repent and believe is like tripping over the cornerstone, which is not exactly a small building block. And that stone will flip over and crush everyone who stumbles over it.

Review

Now, let’s go back and remember the cast of characters in Jesus’ story. We have the master, who is ...? [God.] And his servants, who are ...? [The prophets] And the tenants, who are ...? [The religious authorities who refuse to repent and believe; they believe they are right.] And the ones who receive the kingdom, who are ...? [The repentant, believing tax collectors and prostitutes, who represent all repentant, believing sinners.]

Obviously, Jesus' original intent is to convict the priests, scribes, and other self-righteous religious people of their need to follow the example of the sinners, who listened to John the Baptizer and him, and repent and believe the Gospel. But they don't.

So What?

Yet, is the Gospel only given for the people of Jesus' day? [No, it's given to all.] So, here in the 21st century, we're in Jesus' audience, and we have to identify with one of two groups. There are the people who claim to be righteous and obey God, but don't truly do so. They don't produce the fruit of righteousness. They wise in their own eyes. They often look down on others, saying, "Those people are the true sinners," but don't see or refuse to see their own dreadful state.

Then, there are the people who acknowledge they are great sinners, and repent and believe the Gospel, and so do produce fruit of righteousness. Which are you? Which am I? Neither of these are good people, there are only those who falsely insist they are good and righteous, or those who know they need forgiveness and salvation.

I think perhaps there are ways in which we are all part first son and part second son. There are areas in our lives where we are in rebellion against God: addiction to alcohol; self-dependence because of our money or education or connections; unforgiveness toward a brother or sister in Christ because of some hurtful word or disagreed-with decision. Sometimes we just give in to that sin, wallow in it even, but then, by God's grace, we repent and believe in God's mercy.

Other times we pretend like everything's okay. We justify our behavior, even thinking it's the right thing to do. But, just as the condition of the second son is far worse than the first, so is the condition of those look down on the sins of others and refuse to see the sin in themselves.

Conclusion

One type of son or the other, one type of sinner or the other, we are one or the other. We are all great sinners, apart from God's grace. God is calling us to acknowledge *our own sins*, repent of *our own sins*, believe in God's forgiveness for *our own sins*, trust that the son died for *our own sins*, and, by his grace, become repentant tax collectors and prostitutes and other great sinners, and thereby inherit the kingdom of God.