

## **SERMON “TENANTS OF GOD’S BLESSINGS”**

(Matthew 21:33-46 Preached at MPC on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

Our parable from Matthew’s Gospel is called The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. If you have ever managed an apartment building or own a rental house, you might know about the phrase wicked tenants—but I hope not. You see, wicked tenants move in, but they won’t move out. They live in your apartment but refuse to pay rent. Sometimes they poke holes in the wallboard and stuff up the plumbing—and paint the bedroom purple.

Margie has told me some real horror stories in her early days as real estate manager up in the Bay Area. She learned not only was it difficult to evict tenants, it was even more difficult to make them pay.

In our parable today, the wicked tenants were even worse. The rental property was a vineyard, and the rent was grapes. The tenants were to share the fruit of the vineyard with the landowner. But before the landowner rented the vineyard, he fixed it up—made some great improvements. He put a fence around it, dug a wine press, built a watchtower. He made it as nice as a vineyard could be, and then he leased it to the tenants and went away.

At harvest time, the landowner sent servants to collect his share of the fruit—but the tenants beat one servant and killed another and stoned another. That’s even worse than poking holes in the wallboard or painting the room purple. So, the landowner sent more servants. The tenants beat and killed them too. Finally, the landowner sent his son, expecting that they would respect his son.

Now by this time, you are probably thinking that the landowner is not very smart. Why would he after the tenants killed the first servants send more servants? Why not call the police? Why not put the wicked tenants in jail? Above all, why would he finally send his son? If the tenants were violent twice, why would he think they would treat his son with respect? Was this landowner a bit thick in the head?

The answer is that the landowner was not thick in the head but was thick in the heart. The landowner as you can guess by now in this parable is God—and this is a parable about God’s longsuffering patience—His love and desire to redeem the wicked tenants.

That might not seem to make much sense, but God is like that. God loves us even when we least deserve it. God wants us to love him so that he can bless us. God keeps trying to win us even when we have proven that we are losers.

So, God, this landowner put it all on the line. He sent his son to collect the rent, hoping that the tenants would respect his son. But they didn't respect the son. When they saw the son, they said, "This is our chance. This is the heir to the vineyard. If we kill him, we can have the vineyard." And so, they forced the son out of the vineyard and killed him.

The Landowner's son, of course, was Jesus. Before Jesus began telling this parable, he had cleansed the temple—had used a whip to run off the moneychangers. He had made quite a nuisance of himself, and the religious leaders hated him. So, Jesus told them this parable about the wicked tenants killing the landowner's son.

Then he asked this question: "When therefore the lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those farmers?" (v. 40). They answered: "He will miserably destroy those miserable men, and will lease out the vineyard to other farmers, who will give him the fruit in its season" (v. 41).

Then Jesus quoted a verse from Isaiah that talked about the rejected stone becoming the chief cornerstone—the most important stone. And then Jesus said: "Therefore I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and will be given to a nation bringing forth its fruit" (v. 43). And finally Jesus said: "He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but on whomever it will fall, it will scatter him as dust." (v. 44).

That last sentence is a bit mysterious, but Jesus was warning them that God's patience has limits! Those who persist in rejecting God will find themselves crushed by the stone with which God had intended to help them. Jesus was warning us to be careful about stretching our rebellion too far because it will snap back in our face.

But it's even more serious than that. Jesus was telling us that our relationship to God is a matter of life and death. God has placed us in his vineyard, and wants nothing more than to see us do well. He is loving, patient, kind and forgiving. But there will come a time when his patience will come to an end. When that happens, the stone that he sent to be the cornerstone of our lives will crush us, and we will die.

We have seen it happen. We know it is true. We have seen young people who have burned out their brains using drugs. We have seen people who drink their breakfast from a bottle hidden in a brown paper bag. We have seen young women standing under streetlamps, selling both body and soul. We have seen gangs of young men in city streets living by the sword and dying by the sword. We have seen just recently a deranged man in Las Vegas using automatic weapons kill over 58 people and seriously injure several hundred!

We must not forget that God loves those people—even those people in rebellion. But we also must not forget that, at some point, God will abandon them to their rebellion. At that point, the stone that was meant to be the cornerstone of their lives will instead crush the life out of them.

We must remember all of this, in part, so that we will be motivated to carry the Gospel to those in rebellion. We must always be mindful because we too are tempted to rebel against God—to ignore God. And our children are tempted to rebel and ignore God. We must never forget the potential for death so that we will be motivated to raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We must always remember that it is critically important to give them a strong spiritual foundation and leave a legacy of God's love, patience, and mercy, so they will be able to resist the many temptations with which they are faced daily.

Rebellion against God is always deadly. As one example, we know that God has established certain physical laws, such as the law of gravity, which we know we must respect. We can't ignore the law of gravity, or it will crush us. We might find another law to counterbalance gravity so that we can fly, but we dare not ignore gravity. If we try to ignore that law or treat it too lightly, we are likely to find out a high price to be paid.

Almost a century ago when aviation was still young, the first air-to-air refueling took place over Long Beach, California. Wing walker Wesley May actually walked across the top wing of a biplane with a five-gallon can of gas strapped to his back. A second plane flew near, and May caught its wing and hoisted himself aboard. Then he poured the gas from the can into the second plane while in flight. It was a historic moment—but a dangerous one. Wesley May was toying with and pushing the limits on gravity.

May was a brave man, but kind of a foolish one. When another wing walker barely escaped a fatal fall, May sent a telegraph that said, "When present wing walker is killed, I want the job." The other wing walker fell and was killed, so they hired May—but he didn't last long. His chute malfunctioned, and he was killed when he hit the ground in of all places, a cemetery.

I doubt that there is a person in this congregation who will be tempted to ignore the law of gravity. I doubt that any of us are tempted to walk across the wing of an airplane with a five-gallon can of gas strapped to our back. But there are people here today who are tempted to toy with other things just as dangerous—drugs—excessive use of alcohol—promiscuous sex—gambling—and a host of other self-destructive behaviors.

There are people here and out in the world today who are tempted to ignore their families—tempted to spend their time making a living instead of making a life—tempted to major in minors—tempted to live their lives in such a way that when they are added up at the end of time, they will amount to little more than zero.

There are people here and out in the world today who are tempted to give the God short end of the stick or the scraps in their lives—they are tempted to give God an hour on Sunday morning and call it good—they are tempted to ignore God's call to love their neighbor and to serve those in need—they are tempted to believe God's promises, but to ignore God's claims on their lives.

We need to hear the warning and the promise of our parable. The warning is this. Jesus tells us that he is the chief cornerstone—He is intended to be the strength of our lives, but Jesus says to the unfaithful: "Therefore I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and will be given to a nation bringing forth its fruit" (v. 43).

That's the warning, but it's also the promise. It's a warning to the unfaithful and a promise to the faithful. If we're unfaithful, God will strip away the kingdom. But if we're faithful, God will give us the kingdom. He will bless us, and he will make us a blessing to others to fulfill the five purposes of the church!

In the scheme of the Purpose Driven Church, according to Acts 2:41-47, the first church fulfilled the five purposes of why the church exists! Those who accepted Christ's message were baptized—they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching (discipleship)

and to the (fellowship) or God's family, to the breaking of bread and prayer. All the believers were together as they gave to anyone as he had need (ministry). Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts as they broke bread together and ate with glad and sincere hearts praising God (worship). And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (evangelism).

Paul explained these five purposes in Ephesians 4:11-16. "God gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of ministry so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in faith and in the knowledge of God's Son."

As you go through this coming week, I invite you to remember the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard. We are tenants living in the Lord's vineyard. Assess your life. Ask yourself if you are paying your rent and giving God his due. Ask yourself whether you are rebelling against God or cooperating with him. Ask yourself if you're trying to obey the great commandment and fulfill the great commission.

Ask yourself whether you are giving your children a solid spiritual foundation. Are you serious about their Christian education? Are you raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? Do you pray with them? Do you read them Bible stories? Do you bring them to Sunday school and worship? Do you encourage them in the faith?

Ask yourself if you are trying to follow God's plan for your life through our becoming a purposeful church to celebrate God's presence in worship, to communicate God's word through evangelism, to incorporate new and estranged people to God and encourage our members in God's family through worship, to educate God's people in discipleship, and to demonstrate and equip for ministry through God's love. Friends, we are tenants in God's vineyard of blessings. If we will honor God through these purposes of the church, God will bless us mightily in such a way we will be become more than just tenants in his vineyard—we become heirs to God's promise through Christ in abundant life and blessing! Amen!