

Tale of the Terrible Tenants • Matthew 21:33-46

Tenants of a California apartment house won the day in court. They had complained about their landlord's lack of response to the awful conditions in their building—including rats, roaches and generally run-down conditions everywhere. The judge ruled against the physician who owned the building and passed a creative sentence. The owner had to live out his sentence in the apartment house that was rat and roach infested.

Tensions between landlords and tenants are nothing new. Most of us probably have a story to tell about such problems. The big difference depends on which side of the rent check we are on. Those who own rental property have their horror stories about damaging and delinquent tenants, while those who have been renters could tell about their terrible landlords.

It is no wonder Jesus captured the attention of his listeners when he told the “tale of the terrible tenants”. It is such a memorable story that it is told three times in the New Testament—in Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-2; Luke 20:9-18. In Matthew 21:33-46 it goes like this:

Once there was an industrious man who built a successful business. It was a vineyard in first century Palestine. It was a good business to have because grapes were used to make wine, the staple beverage of the popular diet.

The man did all of the work himself. He planted the vineyard. He built a thick hedge around it with thorns strong enough to keep out wild boars that might trample the vines and thick enough to discourage thieves who might steal the grapes. He dug a winepress. The typical winepress of that day could be very difficult to build. It was usually composed of two troughs, one higher than the other, sometimes hewn out of rock or dug out of the ground and lined with brick. One trough had a channel that flowed over into the other trough and in the upper one the grapes would be crushed and then the juice from the grapes would

flow down into the lower one. He built a tower that was high enough that a watchman could be in the top and look out for dangers but also broad enough so that it would have housing units within so that all the tenants and workers would have a place to live. It was a wonderful facility. State-of-the-art. The best of everything! The owner had put the best into it—his land, his money, his talent, his time.

Then the owner went on a long journey. It was the thing to do in those days when Palestine was so often torn apart by war and political turmoil. He headed away for quieter climes and left his vineyard in the care of tenants. He let them live in his

tower, enjoy his protection and work his vineyard. He entrusted to them his very best.

When grape harvest time came he sent some servants to get his fruit. He had considered all the standard methods of paying. Some landlords allowed their tenants to work for just room and board; others paid a flat wage; some charged the tenants rent; others took part of the crop as a payment. He chose the last. It was a generous thing for a landlord to do. It allowed the tenants to work hard and share the profit in a way they could not do under other arrangements.

Three servants were sent. But you're not going to believe what happened! The tenants grabbed one and beat him. Then they quickly killed the second. And then they slowly stoned to death the third.

The landlord must have been aghast. You would think he would call the police, send in an army and press the tenants rather than the grapes! They were ungrateful murderers! But instead he gave them the benefit of the doubt and tried again.

I doubt I could have been so generous and patient. I doubt I would have risked the lives of an even larger group of ser-

God revokes misused blessings!

vants. But, the owner did just that.

And the tenants did it again! This time they murdered every one! What was the matter with them anyway? Weren't they grateful to the landlord? Did they think they had built the business themselves, that they owned it outright? Or were they just so selfish that they wanted it all?

When the owner heard about it he thought it through and again gave them the benefit of the doubt. He decided that he would demonstrate his generosity and patience all the more. This time he would send his own son. He said to himself, "Surely they will respect my son."

Do you know what those terrible tenants did? They grabbed the owner's son, threw him outside the hedge and killed him. They killed the owner's son!

Let me ask you a question: When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? What do you think? What would you do?

Jesus asked the exact same question to the crowd who heard this story in the Temple courtyard that day. They said what most of you would say: *"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."*

As soon as they answered, Jesus did a strange thing. He quoted two verses from Psalm 118:22-23 saying, *"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."*

There were a lot of people standing around while Jesus was talking. They sensed that this was more than a clever little story. He was saying something far more than about the landlord and the tenants. They couldn't figure it out. There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Jesus spoke again saying, *"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."*

Many of the people still couldn't figure out what Jesus meant. But some could! Around the corner at the Temple that day were some high level religious leaders, the chief priests and the Pharisees. They didn't like Jesus but they listened any-

way, and they quickly figured out exactly what he was talking about! He was talking about Israel. Jesus was saying that the vineyard, the winepress, the hedge and the tower all represented Israel and the good things the nation enjoyed.

He was talking about God. Those chief priests and Pharisees clearly understood that this allegory-type parable had the landlord playing the role of God himself who gave all the good things to Israel.

He was talking about the prophets. Over the centuries God had sent prophets who were beaten and stoned and killed by the leaders of Israel.

He was talking about himself. Jesus was telling them that he was the Son whom God had finally sent as the last messenger to give them their last chance to repent and do right.

He was talking about them! The chief priests and Pharisees didn't like it but they knew he meant them when he talked about the terrible tenants. He was blaming them for killing the prophets and for rejecting Jesus! Verse 45 says, "They knew he was talking about them."

Yes, the chief priests and Pharisees figured it all out. And they were angry! They were so upset they wanted to arrest him right there on the spot. And they would have except it wasn't politically expedient. You see, the ordinary people (many of whom hadn't figured out the parable yet) thought Jesus was a real prophet from God. They couldn't arrest a real prophet lest the crowd turn against them. So, they had to sit tight for now and wait for a later opportunity.

Quite a parable! Quite a drama! All to tell them—and us—the message that God revokes misused blessings!

There are three approaches we may take as we think about this parable of the "tale of the terrible tenants". For example, we might approach the parable in terms of what Jesus said. Jesus was saying that God is generous. He made and owned everything in the vineyard that he readily shared with the tenants. So, we know that Jesus presented a generous God.

Jesus was also saying that God is patient. He did not strike back when his servants were beaten and killed. The landlord kept sending more and more of his representatives, hoping that the "next time" the tenants would respond differently.

Jesus presented a patient God. That's good to know because it means he is patient with us. He keeps coming back even when we reject him. He keeps sending even to those who keep rejecting.

And Jesus was saying that God is righteous. He does what is right even when others do what is wrong. But "right" requires judgment. Eventually the only right thing to do was to judge those terrible tenants. So, the time eventually comes when the landlord kicks them out and finds new tenants.

For Israel, it meant that the time was coming when God would take away the blessings and give them to someone else. And it happened. The nation of Israel is no longer the primary recipient of God's blessing and the primary tool for God's work. God revoked Israel's misused blessings and gave them to the church instead.

Jesus said a lot about God in this parable . . . a lot we need to hear. He said that God is generous. He said that God is patient. He said that God is righteous. But there is quite a different approach we might also take in terms of what the hearers heard, for you know well that there is often a great discrepancy between what someone says and what other people hear.

Those religious leaders, chief priests and Pharisees heard nothing of God's generosity, patience or righteousness. All they heard was that they were being accused. In this parable they readily recognized themselves. They knew they were being accused of killing the prophets. And they knew they were being blamed for rejecting the Son of God and wanting to kill Jesus.

In their defensiveness they missed a wonderful opportunity. Jesus was saying that this was their last chance. God had sent his Son as the landlord had sent his son—not primarily to judge but primarily to reconcile. There would be no more chances, no more projects, no more patience. This was their last chance, but they didn't hear anything except that they were indicted.

The same thing happens to us. The preacher says, "God loves sinners!" and we miss that "God loves" and become defensive because we are called

"sinners". We devote so much energy to all we have selectively heard that we miss all that has been said.

Indictment led to defensiveness and defensiveness led to the need to retaliate. They wanted to do just as the tenants in the parable had done. Instead of hearing the message they wanted to kill the messenger. They wanted to arrest Jesus and eventually to kill him.

The real reason for their retaliation was their self-centeredness. They could not begin to see all the generosity, patience and righteousness of God. Selfish like the tenants, these religious leaders so centered on themselves that they missed the message and dove deeper and deeper into their sins.

There is yet another approach that can be taken. The third approach is what *we* perceive. It is how this relates to *us*—you and me. In Matthew 21:45 we read, "*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them.*" For this they ought to be commended. At least they knew they were the focus of the story, although the way they responded was opposite from the way they should have responded.

But, what about us? When we hear this parable of Jesus that was important enough to be repeated in three Gospels, do we perceive that he is speaking to us? Are we smart enough to take the parable personally? Do we see ourselves in the circumstances of these tenants who were so richly blessed? Do we recognize that all the good we have is from God, that he is generous and patient and righteous with us?

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Let me be very specific in application. I speak specifically to those of us who have grown up in Christian homes and in Bible-teaching churches. Do we take

our blessings for granted?

I know individuals who have had the best. They have been blessed with godly parents, Christian friends, solid churches, camps, schools and everything else. But they are unimpressed. They are as casual toward God and spiritual truth as the pagan on the street who has never owned or read

a Bible. In some cases it is beyond casual and has become hostile!

What is our response to God's blessings? Do we cherish his goodness, delight in his patience and seek his righteousness? Or do we act as if all we have is ours? Do we treat God badly? Are we like the terrible tenants?

We must consider our accountability. The patient God will not forever tolerate our sinful treatment of him. He will not tolerate our rejection of his goodness forever. There will come a time when God will say, "You have had your chance. I will give your blessings to someone else who will produce its fruit."

What could be more tragic than having everything and then losing it? There are those who have been blessed with godly parents whose hearts they broke, Christian friends whom they repeatedly rejected, even godly husbands and/or wives whom they sinned against and alienated. Eventually God says, "The blessings will be taken away from you and given to someone who will use them wisely."

Let's not end like the priest, Pharisees and terrible tenants. Let us hear what Jesus has to say. And let us respond by saying, "God, thank you for all you have given to me. I will take all you have entrusted to me and will use it as you intended—for my benefit *and* for your glory."

May we never reject Jesus Christ, but may we lift him up as the centerpiece of our lives. And may we look to God and say, "Lord, by your grace I will receive your blessings, I will be grateful for your patience and I will conform to your righteousness for my own good and for your glory." Amen.

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