

The parable of the wicked tenants is a tough one to understand, and scholars struggle to decide how much of it actually came from Jesus himself and how much of it was given later, as Matthew's response to the situation of the early church. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, there tended to be a lot of animosity between Christians and Jews.

This parable has sometimes been used by Christians to encourage anti-Semitic feelings. Such use seems to contradict the calling of Jesus Christ, who taught us to love and pray even for our enemies, and who gave us the picture of the Father constantly hoping for the wayward child to return. The broad message of the Bible is that God is long-suffering, and that God does not give up on God's children no matter what they do or do not do.

So what is the story's message for us today? Rather than being material for us to claim and gloat over, taunting others that they "blew it" with God, it ought to bring us up sharply to honestly evaluate our *own* "tenanthood." How are *we* doing as tenants of the life God has given us?

The image of the vineyard is a common one in the scriptures, used to show God's relationship with God's people. God tends the vineyard, dresses it, watches over it; God expects the vines to bring forth fruit. So what is fruit? According to the Bible, fruit is obedience to God, where we do what God has asked us to do: The Ten Commandments, and "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) And Jesus made it clear: Love the Lord your God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22:36-40) If every Christian in the world would *do* this, as best he/she is able, to the best of our abilities, our world would be transformed...the Vineyard Owner would be on the receiving end of a huge return on his investment in us – FRUIT.

If the vineyard represents God's rule and intentions for this world, then anyone who would partake of the benefits of God's presence in this world is in some way related to the vineyard. **We do not own this earth, we have no deed to our life-span; we are tenants.**

The people of Jesus' day would have heard this parable with the understanding that the vineyard meant Israel, God's chosen people; and they would have seen the servants as the prophets. It was a fact that the prophets had met with considerable "beatings," for Elijah had been driven into the wilderness by the people, Jewish rabbinical tradition said Isaiah had been sawed in two, and John the Baptist had been beheaded. Jesus' hearers would have quickly associated the wicked tenants with the religious authorities of their day.

The story itself shows a ridiculously forgiving landlord, absurdly so. For he allowed his tenants to shamefully abuse his servants, and, instead of putting his foot down and showing who was boss, he kept on making attempts to win them over by sending more messengers. And finally, still refusing to think the worst, he sent his own son, the heir to the land... But wickedness prevailed.

The wicked tenants wanted to give nothing to the landowner. They wanted to be in charge, they wanted to claim everything as their own, they wanted to give no credit to anybody else. "We are the

ones who have produced this fruit. We refuse to give any of it away!" They were willing to kill in order to keep what they wanted to control.

Even more than a picture of the priesthood in Jesus' day, this is a prime example of humanity going through life. We want to be "master-of-the-house." We want to receive all the credit for what we've accomplished. WE want to be in charge of our lives. "I want what *I* want, and if God doesn't do what I want and give me what I demand, I won't believe in God any more." I cannot tell you how many times I have listened to folks say this when they are hurt or disappointed in life.

Theologian Helmut Thielicke wrote well about people wanting their own way: "Isn't this just what the people who built the Tower of Babel did? They quickly forgot that God had entrusted the earth to them. Swiftly they built their great this-worldly stronghold; they tried to evacuate God from heaven in order to be able, like Prometheus, to say of all they created and accomplished: "Hast not thou accomplished all things thyself, O holy glowing heart?" ... In the midst of our accomplishments, where is one who thinks in terms of Matthias Claudius's words: 'It went through our hands but it came from God'?" (From Thielicke's *How To Believe Again*) (Matthias Claudius was an 18th C German poet)

Jesus' parable pointed a penetrating judgment at the Jews, for sure, but it points just as much or more of a finger at us today, at anyone who would consider him/herself to be a Christian. Who is "owner" of our lives? Who gets the credit for the fruits of our living? And, if Jesus represents the absurdly sacrificial love of God given for us even now, how are we as tenants treating him??

We must take stock, people of God. Go through life, not just for your own sake, but for the sake of the TRUE OWNER of life. Make sure that what you are building in life is not your very own Tower of Babel, but treasure made firm by the fact that its cornerstone is no less than Jesus Christ, the One too often rejected even today, even in our own lives.

Our world is shaking from fear and the turmoil that comes when some hoard their stuff and will not show concern for the many who simply do not have enough for life. Our world shakes from political upheavals and from the fear of unmanageable illnesses. Threats abound... In the midst of this, we who are trying to follow Jesus Christ have more power than we know. For every day provides us opportunities to choose whether to honor the One who has given us life or to dishonor him. Do we offer God fruit by forgiving the hurts done to us, by welcoming the powerless, by feeding the hungry, by refusing to steal or cheat or delight in negatives, or do we focus on ourselves and hoard what we have been given? That's our every-day choice as a tenant: to honor God or to withhold what Jesus has told us God hopes for from us.

Once again we share the Communion meal. Today Christians around the world remember each other and pray for one another as we meet at the Lord's table. The scripture lesson couldn't be more appropriate! For we are all challenged to see ourselves as workers in a field that we do not own, bringing forth fruits that we did not create. God is owner. We serve God, and must serve no other. We're about to sing the Spiritual, "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me." This the song of folks who know who the Owner is, and it's a song that proclaims, as did Matthias Claudius: "It went through our hands, but it came from God." May our hearts remember this and our lives proclaim it as we seek to follow and honor our Lord. Amen.