

33 “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

35 “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

38 “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

40 “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

41 “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

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

“‘The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

the Lord has done this,

and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

43 “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. 44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. 46 They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

A Squatter’s Right

Over the years I spent moving from one rental to another I heard stories, rental nightmares. In fact one of my employers in owned an apartment complex that I had to repair. Why? The story usually went, “They stopped paying rent. They wouldn’t let us in.

We had to go through the courts to remove them from the property. When we finally got in the place was trashed. An entire year of profit is flushed down the drain.” I understand landlord rights and tenant rights but then I learned about Squatter’s Rights. You can’t just remove someone from your house if they’ve been living there. Somehow it doesn’t make sense. A squatter, someone who illegally occupies property is given rights? I understand that possession is 9/10ths of the law but possession is not ownership. A squatter takes advantage of others, neglects the apartment and wreaks havoc on property.

Jesus is confronted by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They question his authority. Last week, Jesus spoke the the Parable of the Sons. After pointing out they were not doing the will of the Father. He went on to call them squatters. They have occupied the temple for so long that they’ve begun to think they are the owners. But instead of caring for the vineyard, they’ve taken advantage of the people, they’ve neglected the harvest, and the fruit is rotten.

Have you ever felt that way? Religious leaders have taken advantage of the people. They’ve neglected their work and acted as owners rather than caretakers in the Vineyard of the Lord? When pastors let down people it may even lead some to question if God even cares for his church. This lesson offers a serious warning for all pastors but it also serves as a tremendous comfort for God’s people. God loves, cares, and patiently looks for the harvest.

Jesus uses familiar imagery from the OT. When Jesus begins his parable of the vineyard everyone is already thinking of Isaiah’s *Song of the Vineyard* (Isaiah 5). There God is at work. We see the loving care of the landowner. The joyful celebration as he prepares the land. Psalm 80 describes this work, *“You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.* God cleared the way into the Promised Land for his people. He drove out the Canaanites before them. Israel lacked nothing. Isaiah even goes as far as to say that God cut out a winepress looking forward to the future harvest. The Lord was with them and among them but then the sad story plays out. They didn’t want to recognize the giver of the gifts. Like squatters they thought they had a right to everything.

God then called out to his wayward people. He sent one messenger after another. They mistreated, beat, and stoned God’s prophets. *“Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.* The parable hinges on the question, “How much violence and insult against his servants will the owner tolerate?” To our surprise - the owner decides to send his beloved son. - no escort, no army, no protection to meet the vicious men who are waiting a response. This is unbelievable. *“They*

will respect my son," or more literally they will be moved to shame. In a society driven by honor and shame - the owner hopes the renters, the squatters will see the fruit of their work and restore humanity.

Their fruit is rotten. They say to themselves, *"This is the heir. Come let's kill him. And take his inheritance."* In California a squatter must pay property tax over a continuous 5-year period. In Jesus' time if they can maintain possession of a the land for three years the vineyard will be theirs. They are acting as if the owner doesn't exist because they haven't seen him in a while. The squatters set up shop in God's temple. Not the money changers but the religious leaders. In Jesus' parable the vineyard isn't the problem but the renters are. Jesus directly confronts them. God will not let the squatters have their way.

Jesus poses the question, "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" The leaders who are used to judging such situations condemn themselves, *"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end... and rent the vineyard to other tenants."* God will give his vineyard to those who will care for it. Their fruit is rotten and their intentions are obvious as Jesus goads them with these Words.

God still cares for us. He's built a vineyard. Some look at life and see the garden where God has placed us. God provides for us in many ways. He gives us all that we need to support this body and life. If we are to allegorize this parable we could say that God builds a hedge around us. He gives us the Ten Commandments not because he wants to make life miserable but because he loves us and knows how this world works. He built a tower - the church to look out for danger on the horizon. He then dug a winepress where we joyfully receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. God sends Pastors, teachers, and leaders to guide his church.

But when he comes for fruit, is it found? Are we found faithful? Do we recognize the giver of the gifts or take for granted everything we have? Sometimes we too behave like squatters in neglecting to give thanks, and or acting as if God doesn't exist because we've never seen him, and even assuming everything that we have is something we've earned or deserve. Possession 9/10ths of the law but it is not ownership.

And really if we keep the parable in its context then we find a strong warning for church leaders. This is condemnation for me and those who would let neglect the vineyard. and comfort for you. Because God cares for his people. He cares about you. Even when leaders take advantage of the people and live like squatters it's not that he's forgotten but rather he is patient to the extreme. Leading us to be ashamed of our actions and see ourselves as squatters.

God responds in Isaiah with destruction. What more could have been done? When God looked for grapes, it produced rotten fruit. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in 586 BC when God destroys the vineyard. He removes the hedge, knocks down the walls, and makes it a wasteland. Jerusalem is besieged, leveled, and carried off into captivity but God wasn't done. Even though Isaiah's warning had been fulfilled, the vine remained the object of God's care. In Jesus' parable the vineyard itself is preserved and placed under new management. The chief priests and elders of the people recognize that the parable is being told about them and still they plot to kill Jesus. Jesus will be deemed worthless a squatter in his own kingdom and he will be removed.

They hand down the verdict, "*He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and rent the vineyard to others who will give him a share of the harvest.*" This is not Jesus answer. We don't know what the Landlord did but we do know what God the Father did when his Son was rejected.

But instead of bringing those wretches to a wretched end, God does something different. Unlike 586 BC when God poured out his wrath on the vineyard in 33 AD God pours out his wrath on his son. Jesus says, "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*" This temple must be destroyed. God's wrath is poured out not upon the squatters who deserve it but upon his son who is killed and the inheritance is given to them. The words of the squatter's ring true, "*Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.*" Jesus is put to death and they are given his inheritance - the kingdom of God.

We don't understand this. God's patience with the squatters is absurd. That's why Paul refers to it as the foolishness of the cross. The foolishness that God would give rights to a squatter. Over and over He sends His servants and they are beaten or murdered. But he sends his son, He risks an even greater loss. The owner is not foolish in sending his Son. He knew exactly what he was doing. "*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.*" The temple is no longer necessary. Jesus has removed the need for a sacrificial system. The leadership was taken from them and given to others. Jesus is the stone the builders rejected and yet he has become the chief cornerstone. This was confirmed by the resurrection.

God has a different way of dealing with us as well. He brings us into his vineyard. He provides pastors and leaders to point you to Christ. He has given us his kingdom and instead of giving us what we deserve especially for all the times when we've behaved like squatter's - he gives us his son. He forgives our rebellion. God has not brought us wretches to a wretched end. He invites us into his family and gives us rights as his children. "What

more could he have done for his vineyard?" All we can answer is "Nothing." God has done all the work of saving us and it is marvelous.

It's sad that the religious leader didn't see it. Rather than fear God they were afraid of the people *because they held that Jesus was a prophet*. Jesus being called prophet is not a good thing. Jesus is so much more than just a prophet. It shows they didn't believe he is the Christ.

But you know and recognize Jesus' work and this serves as the motivation to be thankful, joyous, to seek justice and righteousness because you're not squatter's. You are the vineyard. The one God cares so much about. When his leaders neglect the harvest he sends more workers. Next week we celebrate the Reformation. When the Catholic church neglected the harvest God raised up leaders to point us back to his work for us.

Squatters may have rights but Jesus gave up his rights. Recognize the one who has given you all of this and then recognize at what cost. For a landowner, losing an entire year's worth of profit is a great loss but how much greater than the Creator and Ruler of this world giving up his beloved son. Our risen and ascended Lord, who gives and gives, and has given everything for his harvest. Amen.