

# BAD TENANTS

**READING: Matthew 21 verses 33-46**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A mother ran into the bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old son scream. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "There, there. She didn't mean it. She doesn't know that hurts." He nodded his acknowledgement, and she left the room. As she started down the hall the little girl screamed. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?" The little boy replied, "She knows now."

## **THE STORY**

Matthew records Jesus' very interesting and provocative story about a landowner and some tenant farmers. In the story, the landowner does all the initial work in planting a vineyard on his land. He digs a winepress where the grapes can be trampled and the juice extracted. He builds a wall and a watchtower so the crop will be protected and guarded. Everything is in order for a great crop of grapes. The twist in the story is that the landowner then leases the vineyard out to a group of tenant farmers and goes away. The landowner does not leave because he has lost interest, because the tenants understand that he will return. However, he gives them a great deal of freedom and will not be there to watch over their every move. The farmers are simply to tend to the crop and the land, and when it is time, give him his share of the harvest. It's a simple plan where everyone wins. The landowner gets what belongs to him, and the tenants are provided for and get what they have earned.

However, the tenant farmers rebel against the landowner. The issue is not that he has treated them unfairly. The problem is their greed. They no longer want to be the tenants of the vineyard, they want to own it. They want it all - the crop and all the land as well. So when the landowner sends his servants to collect his rightful share of the fruit, the tenants mistreat and beat the servants, even killing some of them. This happens several times until the landowner finally sends his son, expecting that they will respect him and give the landowner what is his due. But the farmers conspire even against the son. They say to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance. The land and the crops and everything else will be ours." Then they took him outside the vineyard and killed him.

## **THE MEANING**

Looking at the story, what Jesus is really doing is telling the world's story and predicting his own death due to the rebellion of God's creation. God is the landowner. He has created the world and everything in it, and entrusts humanity with its stewardship. In effect we are his tenants, not owners, but tenants who are well provided for. But the landowner seems to be away on a journey somewhere. That is to say, God seems to be out of sight. We have been given a good world and a great deal of freedom. The land is fruitful and we are blessed to have been given the privilege of being tenants here. God has been good to us. But a problem has arisen. A rebellion is fermenting among the tenants.

We, first of all, want to claim the Master's land and everything on it as our own, and we want him to stay out of it. We abuse those who come and remind us that this world is not our own. We refuse to recognize God's ownership of the world. Since the time that he appears to have gone on a journey, we have forgotten him and gotten used to the idea that all of this is ours.

And, secondly, we do not want to give to God what rightfully belongs to him. So when God sent the prophets to call the people of the world to recognize God's ownership and to give him what he is due, we not only became hostile to God, and as is often said, "If you don't like the message, shoot the messenger." This has happened throughout the history of the world, and is still happening now. In many places of the world today, to preach the good news of Jesus openly is to face the possibility of imprisonment or a death sentence – in many Arab controlled countries, in

China, in some parts of the former Soviet states, in parts of South America and Africa, and to a lesser yet worrying degree, even in parts of Europe including Britain.

In the end, God sent his Son to call the world to acknowledge the kingdom of God and recognize that God is the King of that kingdom. But humanity hated God, and hated God's Son. He was treated worse than the prophets who went before him, crucified outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. No doubt, if Jesus were to come to the streets of Pontypridd today, many people would still ridicule and try to get rid of Him. Today, we do not want to be accountable to anyone but ourselves. We don't want someone telling us what to do, as is very evident during this current pandemic. We do not want anyone telling us what kind of people we ought to be, even if that someone is God. As far as we are concerned the world belongs to us, and we convince ourselves that he may not exist after all. Our lives belong to us. We want to be free. In our thinking, to be free from God and free from His rules. We don't want to have to answer to God for anything. "It is our world. It is my life. And I will do as I please." Frank Sinatra sang "I did it my way", a theme which Bon Jovi also took up in his song "It's my life" – not wanting to live for anyone else, but to do what I want, when I want, how I want – no accountability. But the Bible says, **"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24 verse 1).**

Think about it, what if those tenants have been allowed to get by with their rebellion? I think we know, because we live in the world that the parable is about. The tenants would have first rebelled against the landowner and then fight among themselves. A fractured relationship with God always leads to fractured relationships with others. There would have been war among the tenants over who owned which part of the land, and as a result the vineyard would have been destroyed. There would have been great loss of life and suffering, but whoever the victor happened to be would think it was worth it all, even if all that was left was ashes and destruction. Sound familiar?

*In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's book "The Brothers Karamazov" is a chapter entitled "The Grand Inquisitor." Ivan Karamazov is telling his brother a story that he has just written. The setting is Spain, during the terrible Spanish Inquisition where many people were put to death by the church for almost any heretical belief — real or imagined. In the story, Christ decides to reappear on earth during the time of the Inquisition. He comes quietly and inconspicuously, but everyone recognizes him and many are excited about his appearance. He says almost nothing, but people are drawn to him by an irresistible force. He stretches his hand out to bless the people and they are healed as he touches them. Christ is walking by the great Cathedral of Seville just as a child's little coffin is taken in, followed by the grieving parents. Inside the casket is a lifeless little girl of seven. The child's mother implores Christ to bring her back. Without a word he touches the young girl and raises her from the dead. Meanwhile, the bishop is looking on disapprovingly. His face darkens and he orders the arrest of the stranger. But during the night, the Bishop descends the stairs into the cavern of the Sacred Court building where the stranger is being held in a dark, vaulted prison. The Bishop, who is the Grand Inquisitor, looks at Christ in the squalid cell and says, "Is it you? You? Do not answer, be silent... Why did you come to meddle with us? Tomorrow I shall condemn you and burn you at the stake as the vilest of heretics, and the same people who today kissed your feet, will at the first sign from me rush to rake up the coals at your stake tomorrow." But the Grand Inquisitor somehow changes his mind, and the story ends with these words: "When the Inquisitor finished speaking, he waited for some time for the Prisoner's reply. His silence distressed him. He saw that the Prisoner had been listening intently to him all the time, looking gently into his face and evidently not wishing to say anything in reply. The old man would have liked him to say something, however bitter and terrible. But the prisoner suddenly approached the old man and kissed him gently on his bloodless, aged lips. That was all his answer. The old man gave a start. There was an imperceptible movement at the corners of his mouth; he went to the door, opened it and said to him: 'Go, and come no more—don't come at all—never, never!' And he let him out into 'the dark streets and lanes of the city.' The Prisoner went away."*

That is the story of our Christ-rejecting world. It is how we treat the Landowner. The interesting thing is that both in Dostoyevsky's story and Jesus' parable, it is the religious folk who reject

Jesus. The Bible says that the Pharisees knew that he was talking about them. They were the religious leaders. Even in the arena of religion God is not welcome. He is too radical. He is too awesome. His person and power are overwhelming. We prefer a god we can understand, control and even manipulate.

This is the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. The parable of Jesus begins here where they are the tenants of the world God has made. They live in a wonderful garden paradise. But He goes away for a while and they are easily convinced that it is not enough to be a tenant. It is not good enough to be the friend of God, they want to be God. Like them, we begin to question the goodness of God, and we want to taste our independence. In our ears we hear the tempter's words: **"God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Genesis 3 verse 5)**. What a thought! We begin to look around us and we decide we want to be in control. We throw off the control of God and cast aside restraint. We stop worshipping the Creator and begin worshipping the creation. We kill the Giver and take his gifts. The vineyard will become our own.

In **Acts chapter 5**, Peter and the other apostles were about to be killed by the religious leaders, who had been handed religious power and they were not about to let go of their control. But Gamaliel, one of the honourable men among them said, **"I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5 verses 38-39)**. "Fighting against God" - that is what it is all about. We still resist and fight God himself. We don't want the Ten Commandments or any commandments, especially since they begin with the words: **"You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20 verse 3)**. We will worship anything and everything but the Landowner.

One of the interesting things about the parable is that the landowner does not demand everything, he only asks his share. He would have treated the tenants fairly, in fact more than fairly, but they did not want equity, they wanted it all. God has been rejected and his Son has been killed. They have been thrown out. But Jesus quoted the scripture that said: **"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes" (Psalm 118 verses 22-23; Matthew 21 verse 42)**. So Jesus gives us the real end of the story. It does not end in defeat, but victory. The very stone, this One who has been rejected and killed outside the city, will return and become the foundation of a new kingdom. The end of the story is found in the book of Revelation: **"The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever'" (Revelation 11 verse 15)**.

This "cornerstone", this "Rock of Ages", there are only two ways of approaching it — falling on it, or having it fall on you. Jesus said, **"He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed" (Matthew 21 verse 44)**. Fall on it and our pride, our stubbornness, our self-will shall be broken to pieces. Have it fall on us and we will be crushed. We must come in humility and submission, recognizing that the world and everything in it, including our personal lives, are the property of God. We need to acknowledge his ownership and give Him what He is due. That is one approach. The only other approach is to resist and ultimately have the rock fall on us and crush us — that is what it will be like at the judgment.

The Pharisees told Jesus what they thought the landowner in the parable would do to those who refused to recognize his leadership and kill his son: **"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end" (Matthew 21 verse 41)**. They felt he would kill them as they had killed his son. But God, the real Landowner, would do the exact opposite. He would use the death of his son as an atoning sacrifice so that he might forgive the rebels and ultimately give them a land that was beyond anything they had ever known. The Bible says, **"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8 verse 32)**.

## **PSALM 19**

<sup>1</sup>The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

<sup>2</sup>Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.

<sup>4</sup>Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.

<sup>5</sup>It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

<sup>6</sup>It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.

<sup>7</sup>The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

<sup>8</sup>The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

<sup>9</sup>The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring for ever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.

<sup>10</sup>They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

<sup>11</sup>By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>12</sup>But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

<sup>13</sup>Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

<sup>14</sup>May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

## **MATTHEW 21 verses 33 – 46**

<sup>33</sup> 'Listen to another parable: there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. <sup>34</sup> When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. <sup>35</sup> 'The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup> Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup> Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.

<sup>38</sup> '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." <sup>39</sup> So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

<sup>40</sup> 'Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'

<sup>41</sup> '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.'

<sup>42</sup> 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 marvellous in our eyes"?'

<sup>43</sup> '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. <sup>44</sup> Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'

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