

Tenants in God's Vineyard

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[0 : 0 0] Emile Callier was a philosophy professor at Princeton. And in his early life, even his early academic life, he was a consummate materialist, a naturalist.

In other words, he studied philosophy for a living and had rejected all possibility of the supernatural, the transcendent. He was more or less an atheist.

And this served him well, this worldview, until World War I. And following the horrors of such a war, his books, when he came back to them, didn't sustain him the way they had.

He found the philosophy that he had built his life on to be empty. He found it to be impotent. He found it to be incapable of helping him make sense of either the horror that he had seen in the war or of his own heart and soul.

Then one day, his wife brought home a Bible that she had unintentionally, sort of almost accidentally acquired at a used bookstore in town.

[1 : 1 6] And here's what he says about it. And this is after a long period of searching in his life, searching and searching and searching, and not finding what he was looking for.

He says, I literally grabbed the book and rushed to my study with it. And he opens to the teachings of Jesus, just randomly opens to a place where Jesus is teaching. And he says, I read and I read and I read, now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within.

I could not find words to express my awe and wonder, and suddenly the realization dawned upon me, this was the book that would understand me. I needed it so much, yet unaware, I had attempted to write my own in vain.

The more you spend time reading the Bible, and some of you know this, the more you spend time reading the Bible, the more you will find this to be true. That the more you read the Bible, the more it reads you.

It's the only book out there that the more you read it, the more you try to understand it, the more you will actually experience it reading you. And as Callie says, explaining you to yourself.

[2 : 3 0] It uncovers things in your heart. It illuminates things that you're not aware of, that you can't see, that you won't see.

It sometimes illuminates things that are uncomfortable, things that we don't like to admit. But the more you read it, the more you realize it's true. And one of the places this happens most is when you read the parables of Jesus, because that's what the parables are designed to do.

They're stories about everyday things, and yet they reveal deep, profound spiritual truth. And so this summer we've been looking at some of Jesus' parables, stories about everyday things and what they reveal.

And tonight we're looking at this parable that's commonly referred to as the parable of the wicked tenants in Luke chapter 20, verses 9 to 19. So what I want to do tonight is to look at a summary of this parable, and then we're going to look at what it shows us.

It shows us three things. It shows us first our motives, and then God's heart, and then lastly Jesus' mission. Our motives, God's heart, and Jesus' mission.

[3 : 39] Let's pray for God's guidance in this. Lord, we gather here tonight from all manner of backgrounds and assumptions and even beliefs.

Some of us have given our lives to you and endeavor to follow you in faith. Lord, others of us here are not sure what we think about you or if you're even there, but we know that of all your great promises, you've promised to make yourself known to those who seek you, to reveal yourself, to speak to us, Lord.

So we pray that these words would be for us your word. We pray that that would happen by your spirit, Lord, for our good and for your glory. And we ask this in your son's name. Amen. So first of all, let's just summarize this parable.

It's one that's probably familiar to many of you, but just to give you a quick summary of the context of this parable. Jesus presents us with a situation that is more or less a common situation really then and now.

Not much has changed with the kind of arrangement that we see here. A man buys some land with his own money and then he invests in that land and he tills the soil and he plants vines.

[4 : 52] And in another version of this story in one of the other Gospels, we hear that he sets up all of the things, all of the resources necessary to have a fully functioning vineyard to produce wine.

You know, he sets up a wine press and buildings and all, you know, storage bins and everything that you would need. And he sets all this up out of his own pocket and then he brings in, as was common, tenant farmers to work it.

And he goes on a long journey to a distant land. And the relationship that the tenant farmers would have to the owner is this. They were paid, you know, sort of an income, days' wages to work the vineyard.

And yet the vineyard belonged to the owner. And so the expectation is that they would oversee and care for the vineyard according to the owner's instructions, according to his guidance, and for his profit.

You know, ostensibly, we can assume that the owner hoped to turn a profit. That once he cleared all of his overhead, he would actually make some money off this. And so the tenants were there to govern according to his instructions and for his profit.

[6 : 03] And then look what happens. The owner goes away. Harvest time comes. The owner sends a servant to collect some of the fruit. And what happens? They beat the servant and they send him back empty-handed.

And so the owner sends another servant and they treat him even worse. They not only beat him, but they treat him shamefully. We can probably imagine some of the things that that would entail. And they send him back empty-handed. So the owner sends a third servant.

And it says they wounded him. It says that in the English, but the Greek word is *traumatizo*. In other words, they traumatized him. And they send him back empty-handed.

And the owner says, well, surely if I send my own son, they'll listen to my son. And we know how the story ends. When they see the son, they realize an opportunity and they capitalize on that opportunity by taking the son out of the vineyard and killing him.

So Jesus tells this parable and obviously his original listeners would have been shocked. It's a pretty appalling story. In fact, their initial reaction is to say, heavens no.

[7 : 04] So what we want to do is ask, what did this originally mean to them? And then how does this then apply to us? And as I said, we're going to ask this in three headers.

The first of which is, this story actually reveals something about our motives as human beings. See, on one level, this was about Israel. Right?

If you look back in the Old Testament, the prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, in the Psalms, they refer to, Hosea as well, they refer to Israel as God's vineyard.

So anytime you see a reference to a vineyard, think Israel. And so on one level, Jesus is talking about Israel. The leaders of Israel are like the tenants, the scribes and the Pharisees.

And Jesus is saying this, God has blessed Israel. God has given Israel everything to make it what it is. He's provided for his people. And Israel is like a vineyard. And the leaders were supposed to govern and lead Israel in accordance with God's law, his word, and for God's glory rather than their own glory, their own power, their own prominence.

[8 : 13] And so on one level, Jesus is illustrating that reality. But on a deeper level, this is actually revealing something deep about all human beings. And what it's revealing is sort of two realities that clash together in our hearts.

Two coexisting truths that can't coexist and they clash. And they are this. First of all, our life is meant to be God's vineyard in the world.

Your life is meant to be God's vineyard in the world. There's a beautiful kind of related reference in Ephesians 2 where the Greek is poema and Paul says our lives are God's poems in the world, God's poetry to the world.

Your life is meant to be God's vineyard. In other words, we are the tenants of our life. We're not the owners of our lives. We're the tenants. So all of your, I mean, think about your life for a second.

All of your intelligence, all of your talents, I mean, if you know anything about this congregation, this room is filled with some of the most intelligent, talented people I've ever personally known, the concentration of that in this room is unbelievable.

[9 : 29] But all of your intelligence, all of your talents, all of your learning, all of your education, all of your creativity, all of your, the privilege that got you to where you are in your life, all of the resources, that all of that is God's investment in this vineyard.

God set it up. And like any good tenant, we are meant to live and to use all of this according to God's instructions and for God's, not profit, but God's glory.

That's the design, that's the intention for his purposes and not our own. So that's the first thing that we see. Your life, my life, is meant to be God's vineyard in this world.

The second thing, here's what clashes with it. Knowing that we are tenants, we know deep down that we're tenants, we hate it. We hate it.

And you may say, well, I'm a Christian, I don't hate it. You hate it. You hate it. We all hate it. We hate it because we all want to be owners.

[10 : 38] And so we hate God because we're not. We hate God because every reminder, every reference to the very fact of God implicitly tells us you don't own your life.

You don't own this vineyard. You see the ultimate motive of the tenants in verse 15. It says, when the sun comes, they say, this is the air. Let us kill him.

Why? So that the inheritance may be ours, right? All human beings are tenants who live like owners. We're tenants and we live like owners.

Whenever you feel a sense of try as you might not to, superiority, whenever you feel a sense that, you know, we don't boast outright but we're really good at things like social media at kind of the humble brag, sort of very indirectly letting people know about our accomplishments, you know.

Whenever we're tempted to do that, we are being tempted to think like owners, you know. Those of you, and many of you, you know, you're right at this phase in life. Many of you, where you're beginning to arrive, you know.

[11 : 56] You know, I hear more and more, as opposed to eight years ago when we started, I hear more and more sort of people who are at the beginning of their careers are starting to get to the place that they wanted to be. You know, I studied, I went to school, I prepared, and now I'm arrived.

I'm where I wanted to be. I'm here. And I wonder if deep down when we realize that, we don't think, I made it because of me. I got here.

I did this. It's because I'm unique and I made it happen by the sweat of my brow. We don't think about the fact that your intelligence and your ability and the resources that brought you into the world and the education and all that you had, you have no more to do that than the color of your hair.

You had no say in that. Our anxiety, most of our anxiety is a result of what? Us trying to control things that we can't control.

Trying to control the future. Trying to control future outcomes. Trying to think through every possibility, every contingency and be ready for it. Or we try to control the opinion that other people have of us.

[12 : 57] We try to manage that. All of the reasons that we have anxiety and we could go on and on about that are ultimately about us trying to have control over things that we don't have control.

In other words, trying to live like owners rather than tenants. Our country was founded in part on ideals about liberty that can be traced back to the late 14th century.

William of Ockham, famous for Ockham's razor. And Ockham was one of the first people to articulate something called nominalism.

Nominalist philosophy. And via his influence on people like John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, these seed ideas have over the last several hundred years sloured into defining assumptions that shape all of us in how we think.

Assumptions that we don't even question. They're in the background. They're fundamental. But they're shaping our lives, they're shaping our worldviews, they're shaping our entire culture.

[14 : 07] This kind of view that Ockham sort of gets credit for first articulating is summarized perfectly actually in a Supreme Court decision written by Justice Kennedy way back in 1992.

He says this, at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.

This is back in 92. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.

In other words, by this definition, liberty means living like we own the place. Liberty, true freedom by this definition, is having the freedom to define the most fundamental aspects of existence, including existence, any way we choose.

it's living like we own the place. And the kind of corollary to this is it says, I can't be free unless, I can't be free unless I'm the owner of my life.

[15 : 22] Anything that tells me I'm not in charge, anything that would presume to define these things for me is a prison. And that's something that needs to be escaped from.

It needs to be, we need to break out of that. So freedom equals the freedom to choose at the deepest level. That is built into the DNA, that's not a liberal thing, it's not a conservative thing, that's built into the DNA of our culture, of our country.

It is so deep that we don't even question it. It's in our bones, it's in our marrow. And as technology advances, our confidence in this grows.

We have the rise of movements like the transhumanist movement, which I think the church needs to be talking a lot more about. Transhumanism, which is the belief that through technology we will improve upon humanity.

Humanity 2.0, 3.0, 10.0. Right? We can overcome death. It's everything from extending the life of human beings infinitely, which some people believe that we can do with enough money and enough technology.

[16 : 34] There's big money going into that, all the way to genetically engineering our children. The transhumanist movement. And the question is, if we're the owners of our lives, if we're the owners of the vineyard, then why not?

What's to stop us? What reason is there possibly not to do this if we're the owners, and if that's the only way we can be free? But, what the Bible says is the Bible shows us that this concept of human independence and autonomy didn't start with Ockham.

You go all the way back to Genesis chapter 3, the story of the fall, and this is exactly what happened. This is when this definition of freedom originated. When human beings said to God, we would rather decide for ourselves right from wrong.

We'll still worship you, but we want to do it on our terms. That's Genesis 3. Not on your terms, on our terms. We'll decide. And what the Bible says is that this human act of saying to God, we want the freedom to choose the most fundamental things for ourselves, that this is what's wrong with the world.

It's tenants saying to God, from now on, we want to be owners. We want to be co-owners with you. That was the promise that the serpent gave. You'll be like God. God. Simply put, this creates an enormous problem for us because we're not independent beings.

[18 : 05] We're not autonomous beings. We're fundamentally dependent beings, and we hate that. But we're ultimately powerless, not over just the world, but even our own lives.

You know, there are so many people who say, well, you know, look at my life, and look at all the stuff that's happened, and all this hard stuff that's happened, and all the stuff I've had to go through. My life is nothing like I thought it would be. It's nothing like I wanted it to be.

How could I believe in God? I think it's actually making an opposite point. My life is nothing like I want it to be, ergo, the only thing that you can derive from that is, you're not God.

Because if you were, your life would be exactly like you want it to be. But it's not, which means you're not in charge, which means somebody else must be. So this is the first point.

Our life, our life is God's vineyard. That's what it's designed to be. God's vineyard. But we prefer the illusion, and again, through things like technology, we have a very convincing illusion that in fact, we're the owners.

[19 : 08] And we hate, hate anyone or anything that reminds us otherwise. Right? So the second question is this. How does the owner of the parable, in the parable, respond to the tenants, and thus, what do we learn about God's heart?

How God responds to this? So second point, God's heart. What does the owner do? He sends the first servant, and the tenants physically assault him and send him back to the master, empty-handed.

Now, when this happens, first servant goes, they beat the crap out of him, they send him back. What would happen, in most cases, then and now? Not much difference. Right? Imagine you own a restaurant, and the manager of the restaurant does this, or imagine you own a property, and the property manager embezzles all the profits, right?

And you send somebody to kind of, you know, have there be a reckoning and send me some of the profits, and that person comes back in a wheelchair. What do you do? Well, in the least, you would fire that person and probably press charges.

But what does this owner do? He sends another servant. They do worse things to him. He sends another servant. They do worse things to him.

[20 : 15] And then he sends his son. What does this tell us about this owner and his heart? Look at this owner and look at his heart. Again, on one level, this is talking about Israel.

It's talking about all of the profits that God sent to his people over the ages. And if you want to look at the prophets. They were severely mistreated and rejected and hated. You know?

God is straight up honest with Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry. You're going to have this message and they're going to hate you for it and they're not going to believe you and they're going to beat you up and treat you shamefully. You know?

Bon voyage. You know? What we see here is a God of unimaginable patience and mercy. Unimaginable patience and mercy.

He sends messenger messenger after messenger after messenger after messenger over and over and over. Why? Because he loves the tenants. Because he loves us. Because he loves us.

[21 : 12] He gives them one chance after another. And he loves us that way. Don't you understand? He uses all of the circumstances in our lives in this very same way.

Not necessarily always the good stuff. Probably more often the hard stuff, the bad stuff, the stuff we don't want. all ways of trying to shake us and wake us up and make us realize we're not the owners, we're not in charge.

To go on pretending that we're in charge is an exercise in futility. They say to give somebody responsibility without authority is a recipe for insanity, right? That's bad management. But that's exactly what we're doing. We're trying to have responsibility over everything with absolutely no authority.

It will make us crazy if we insist on living that way. But just like in the parable, this is not something that we can be talked out of.

I mean, at the deepest level, we want to be the owners and nothing anyone says can convince us otherwise. That's why Romans 8 says that our minds on their own are hostile toward God. They are enmity toward God.

[22 : 20] So far, this parable has shown us these two things, right? First, our lives are God's vineyard, but we prefer to ignore that fact and live as though we're the owners instead of the tenants.

That's our motive. The second thing it shows us is that God's heart is incredibly patient, incredibly merciful, and he's the kind of God who gives chance after chance after chance.

But the problem is that nothing, none of the prophets, even the greatest prophet, right? John the Baptist, what happened to John the Baptist, right? He had the audacity to call out Herod Antipas over issues of sexual morality.

He confronted him because he was committing adultery. He got his head chopped off. That's what happens to the prophets. He was saying, your sex life isn't, you're not the owner of that.

That's part of God's vineyard. He got his head chopped off. Nothing can convince us of this or overcome this heart-level enmity that we have toward God.

[23 : 24] Thus, the final point, Jesus' mission. When you get to this part of the parable, you have to imagine the kind of dramatic irony and tension in the room as Jesus is telling this parable.

I mean, it's sort of layers of irony and tension because Jesus, there Jesus is, the Son of God in the flesh talking to the leaders of Israel. He's telling them a story about wicked tenants who, when the owner sends the Son, they kill him.

And as Jesus is telling this parable, what does verse 19 say? Even as he's telling the parable, you have the scribes and the Pharisees saying, we want to lay hands on him and kill him right now. But they can't, they won't, because they're afraid the people will riot.

So the parable is actually, the truth of the parable is being demonstrated even as Jesus tells it. And what this really does is it brings us to the majesty and the brilliance of the gospel.

Because it presents this question, what do you do if you're God and you love the world that you made and you love the people that you put in the world to take care of it in your name, the tenants?

[24 : 29] What do you do if you're God and you love those people and yet you know that those people hate you so much that no matter what you do, no matter what you do, they won't come back to you.

And they hate you so much that the moment you become vulnerable, they will grab you and kill you. And that's exactly what happens. So what do you do if you're God and you're in that situation? How do you save people who want to kill you?

That's the brilliance of the gospel. You use your own death as the means of salvation. You use your own death. Jesus' mission is to take our place by becoming our rebellion, becoming enmity, and then dying on our behalf.

In other words, what you see on the cross is God subverting the hatred of the tenants, using it, repurposing it, redefining it. So he used our rebellion as the means of our salvation.

It's beautiful. It's the only hope we ever could have had. And the only thing that can convince us to let go of this illusion of control, the only thing that will loosen the white-knuckle death grip that we have on our lives is when we look at the love of God on the cross.

[25 : 48] And when that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, begins to convince us that a God who would do that for us can better be trusted with our lives even than we can.

And it's that point that we cross where we're looking at the cross and through the power of the Spirit we begin to realize that our life is in better hands when God is in control.

That we can trust Him and His love and His power more than ourselves. And that's when that transition begins to happen. And Jesus leads us, as we're kind of bringing this to a close in verses 17 and 18, Jesus leads us with this choice.

He says, knowing these things that I've laid out, you can either continue living like an owner and that will eventually crush you. You will eventually be crushed doing that.

Or, or, He becomes the cornerstone of your life. It's either or. Either you continue pretending you're an owner and ultimately that's a dead end and you will be crushed by that because you're never meant to do that.

[27 : 02] Or He becomes the cornerstone. No middle ground. And when we talk about cornerstone, it's hard to get our minds around what that's talking about. Do you remember when we were kids and we were going to school and you first learned about plate tectonics?

Remember how you learned that this theory, this kind of geological theory that you have, you know, all the continents and you have the land masses and you have the mountains and the valleys and you have all the topography, the contours of the world that you can see, but the thing that really defines the shape of the world that we can see is actually way down deep where we can't see.

It's the kind of these plates that are floating on the mantle of the earth and they move and thus we have continental drift. Remember learning this? Plate tectonics.

You're like, yeah, I was just thinking about that. If you don't remember learning it, you should have learned it. That's what we learn. That's how our world works. On an ideological level, on an ideological level, just as the world that we see, the shape of that world is largely determined by the rock underneath, the bedrock that we can't see.

So our world views, our assumptions, the place from which we reason, not so much the reasoning itself but the place from which we reason, is almost entirely shaped by bedrock assumptions.

[28 : 35] These plates that are the bedrock at the very foundation upon which we build our world view. And we all have a world view. And what Jesus is saying is, you'll either be crushed because you're trying to be an owner in a world where you're the tenant, or I become that bedrock.

I become the plate underneath your world view. I become the foundation, the cornerstone upon which you build everything else. It's an entire redefining from the ground up of the entire way that you see yourself, God, meaning, purpose, existence, identity, flourishing, freedom.

So for example, for example, I'll just give you one example. For Jesus to become our cornerstone means that he becomes the bedrock upon which our definition of something like freedom rests, right?

Unlike Ockham or Locke or Justice Kennedy, there is a parallel understanding of freedom that goes all the way back through Aquinas, Augustine, all the way back to Jesus.

It's parallel and yet utterly distinct, but it runs all throughout history. From Genesis 3, you have this one definition of freedom, and then when Jesus comes, you have another definition of freedom.

[29 : 53] And what they would say is this, that freedom is not just the ability to choose, but to choose well. In other words, it's the freedom to choose that for which you were made.

That's freedom. And you were made, friends, you were made for the love of God. Like a fish was made for water and can only flourish when it is thoroughly immersed in water, you were made for the love of God.

And you will not flourish, you will not be free unless you are immersed in that love, unless you are immersed on the kind of love that we see on display on the cross of Christ. You will not be free unless you are able to choose that love, to plunge into it, to be immersed in it.

But the promise is this, the promise that Jesus gives to us in John chapter 15 is this, the more we are immersed in that love, the more we abide in that love, the more we will bear fruit, the more we will become and our lives will become God's vineyards in this world.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we have just said that these are things that we cannot be convinced of intellectually, Lord, that this is not ultimately an intellectual issue.

[31 : 21] It's a profoundly spiritual issue. We need your Holy Spirit to take these words to illuminate where this is true in our hearts and then to illuminate for us the compelling, otherworldly love of Jesus Christ to melt our hearts that we would see the beauty of the invitation to walk in freedom by plunging into that love just as you plunged into the world to show it to us.

And we pray this, Lord, in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.