

Tenants and Landlords

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Matt. 21: 33-46

Stewardship Series #1

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We are looking at one of Jesus' many parables today for our lesson. If you have studied the parables much, you might be familiar with this one. The heading in my Bible titles it *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants*. That, I believe is an appropriate title when this parable is read from the viewpoint of the landowner. I would like to retell this parable for you with a bit of a modern twist, and from a little different point of view.

You know the wine industry in Texas has become a really big business. Once there was this really rich guy who lived in California and decided to buy this run down vineyard over by Wimberley. There was somebody that had tried to make wine from the grapes there before and it never really made it and the vineyard was now in pretty sad shape. So—this businessman, having had experience with grapes before in California thought he would give it a shot here in Texas.

He found a bunch of workers—a family, really, to work the land and plant the grapes and tend them. The tenants didn't really know much about business but had always dreamed of having their own land, so the businessman leased the land to these tenant farmers for a price below the going rate and asked them for a portion—10% of the returns when the harvest came in and the wine was made. A handshake sealed the deal.

After doing his research, the businessman also found a really good winemaker and hired him, too, with the same conditions. They shook on the deal and the businessman went back to his place in California and didn't really think much about his newest little venture. Years went by before the tenants or winemaker ever heard from him again.

The tenants worked really hard taking care of the grapes. They loved the place like it was their own. They pruned and weeded and fertilized. And in the winter, if it got too cold, they sometimes had to go out and put covers on the plants so they wouldn't freeze. They felt right at home and were doing the work they loved to do. After about 4 or 5 years, they grapes were looking really good, and they were able to harvest enough grapes to actually begin making wine. It was an exciting time for all of them—a dream was finally coming true. They had a little party to celebrate,

The new winemaker had been busy these last several years building a tasting room and a nice outdoor area with picnic tables and fountains. He had the place landscaped just beautifully. A great place for folks to come and sip his wine and enjoy the views of the Hill Country. He loved his job, too and put his heart and soul into his work.

The winemaker then got to his task of actually making the wine. "Finally", he said, I am getting to make the wine after I have worked so hard to get this place in shape. The first wine that was produced from the grapes was actually pretty darn good, too. Sales were great, people were visiting, and life was good.

Well, one afternoon, the winemaker was getting the tasting glasses out of the dishwasher and setting out some more crackers for the folks who were coming in for the tastings—business had been pretty good lately—they had even started a wine club and mailed out cases of wine to people who joined. Well, the winemaker caught a glimpse of

something out of the corner of his eye, and when he looked out the cute little leaded glass window he had put in the year before, he noticed a big semi rig with California plates pulling up in front of the warehouse where they stored the bottles of wine. By the time the winemaker and the tenants, who had noticed the truck's arrival, too, could get to the warehouse, these two big, beefy guys were out of the truck and loading cases of wine into the back of their rig.

"What is going on," the tenants and the winemaker screamed, but the big guys didn't pay them any mind. They didn't even give them a chance to negotiate the 10% they had discussed with the businessman—they were just "stealing" the wine. Well, the tenants and the winemaker decided to show these guys just how folks like *them* are handled in Texas.

So, they pulled up the ole John Deere they used in the fields and the others grabbed pitchforks they used to put mulch around the plants, and they showed them who was boss around *that* winery! The two big guys didn't really say anything, but they got the picture real quick and left. Things went back to normal for several days, and then the same thing happened again.

We know the tenants and the winemaker were wrong, don't we? They never owned the land and they owed the landowner his share. BUT—something about this story just doesn't sit right with us, does it?

It's the American dream, isn't it-- To own your own place, to take care of the land and maybe grow your own crops, to work really hard and get to enjoy the fruits of your labors. The problem was, these folks forgot all about their absentee landowner. After all—*they* are the ones who did all the work. *They* are the ones who built the cute little tasting room and covered the grapes when it froze. Why shouldn't they be the ones to reap the rewards-the harvest?

Well you see, the point of this parable is not about ownership, and who has the legal right over the land. The issue *never* was about ownership—the land never was for sale—the businessman was looking for someone to take care of his land. The issue here is **stewardship—not ownership**. That is the deal the businessman struck up with the tenants and the winemaker. That was the deal that was shook on and agreed upon—that these tenants and the winemaker would be stewards of his land.

You know, the owner sent out his hired hands two or three times to try and collect his 10% and they were always run off. So, he decided to send his son. Surely, these folks would listen to his son!

He sent his son to remind them that they were only guests on the vineyard, that they had been asked to take care of what belonged to his Father with only a little of their proceeds in return.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes the son's visit to them this way: "He reminded them that being guests placed them in relationship with a host, who placed them into relationship with each other. The son reminded them that once they got over their delusions of *ownership*, those relationships could be based on gratitude, not competition. A life based on gratitude, so that everything necessary for life could be shared and there would no longer be too little for some because some others had too much.

The Son reminded them that, as guests, they had free access to far more than they could ever have earned for themselves. Instead of a vineyard full of one-acre tracts

divided by barbed wire, they had acres and acres at their disposal—not to own, but to enjoy—through the generosity of the owner. All he asked was that they take care of it and that they give him a portion of what they produced, not because he needed it—he turned right around and gave it away himself, but because *they* needed it. **They needed to give in order to remember who they were: grateful guests.**”

Let's shift gears here a little bit and think about this church. How many of us, and I am just as guilty as you are—have said, “Oh I just love my church.” Or have you heard pastors that have said, “This is my congregation?” This is the exact same situation as the tenants and winemaker of the vineyard and the absentee landlord.

We don't own the church, and you are not *my* congregation. This is **God's** church and we are **God's** people—here as guests, invited to tend the land, so to speak. We are to produce, not just consume. We are called to give and not merely take.

We are God's guests here on this earth and here in this church. We can love it like it was our own. We can tend it and take care of it like it was our own—and we should, but at the end of the day, this church, this earth and everything in it are God's and God's alone. We are not the owners, **we were never meant to be the owners**. We are God's tenant farmers, or maybe some of us are the winemakers. We are called to take care of the gift we have been given and to give back of portion of what we produce. Amen.