

⁹ He went on to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. ¹⁰ At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. ¹² He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.

¹³ “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’

¹⁴ “But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ ¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”

When the people heard this, they said, “God forbid!”

¹⁷ Jesus looked directly at them and asked, “Then what is the meaning of that which is written:

**“‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone’^[a]?**

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

¹⁹ The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

“What shall I do?” the owner of the vineyard asked himself. Jesus was halfway through the parable. And by asking the question, he wants us to ponder it: What should the owner have done?

Jesus said this man had planted a vineyard. Now, in Jesus’ day, that would have been a significant investment. It would have meant buying special soil to mix in with the dirt so it had the right pH. Buying good stock of grapevines. Building a wine-press. In Matthew’s account, Jesus says this landowner spared no expense. His vineyard had all the bells and whistles – even a wall around the whole thing and a tower for protection.

Then, he did what a lot of landowners did in Jesus’ day. It was kind of like sharecropping. He gave this vineyard to some tenants who didn’t build it or pay for it. No deposit or down payment. He just expected that, come harvest time, they’d give him some of the fruit. Pretty reasonable to expect that, right?

So when harvest time came, he sent a servant to receive what was due him. But instead of giving the owner that, they give his servant a beating and send him away empty-handed. The wickedness shocks us. But it gets worse. The owner sends another. This time they add insults to the beating and send him away empty-handed. So the owner sends a third servant. This time, they **wound** him – maim him for life – and kick him out.

“What shall I do?” the owner asks himself at that point. I don’t know. What would you do, if you were this owner? As I studied this, I found myself thinking I certainly wouldn’t have sent that third servant! Probably not even the second! I would have sent in shock-troops to get what they owed me and give those ungrateful tenants what they deserved.

But the more I studied it, the more I realized I was condemning myself. Maybe you have a hard time seeing yourself in this parable at first. But the people Jesus was talking to didn’t. Luke says the **chief priests and teachers of the law knew he had spoken this parable against them.**

God had planted a vineyard. It was his people Israel. And it was a significant investment. He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt with an outstretched arm. He had planted them in a land flowing with milk and honey. He had spared no expense – gave them his law, his word, his promises, even of a Savior from sin.

Then he handed that vineyard over to tenants. He placed over his people spiritual leaders – priests and teachers of the law. Wasn’t it only reasonable that these tenants produce fruit for the owner? Repentance and faith and lives that glorified him.

But they were ungrateful tenants. God had sent his servants, one after another, through the centuries – prophets, who called them to repentance and the fruitful kind of life God desired. Instead of giving it, they acted as if they were the owner, and God had no business telling them how to live. And so they did to the prophets what the tenants did to the servants in Jesus’ parable. No, they did worse! They beat Jeremiah to within an inch of his life. They sawed Isaiah the prophet in half.

And as Jesus was speaking the parable, some in that crowd were even plotting to kill the Son. Jesus was a threat to *their* place and *their* nation. So they reasoned, “Let’s kill the Son – then that inheritance will still be ours.”

But do you see them in you? Maybe it starts by remembering you’re tenants. Everything you have and are...it’s not really yours. It’s God’s. Start with life itself. You weren’t responsible for that. That was God’s doing. The body you have, God formed that in your mom’s womb. Every breath since, God’s been granting it. Now think of what’s in your life. “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” Whatever possessions you have, God created them. Your ability to work to acquire them, God gave you that too. God has invested in you, just like he did Israel. You’re tenants...he’s the owner. And isn’t it only reasonable that God would expect fruit from you? Use what he’s given you to love and serve and glorify him?

But is that what he finds? Or does he sometimes find what the owner in this parable did – tenants living as if they were the owners? Instead of thanking God, taking for granted. Instead of seeing as his, mine. Instead of living with the operating question, “How does he want me to use this,” it’s, ‘how do I wanna use it?’ Instead of seeking his glory and good, my own.

So what does the owner do? He sends messengers. Messengers who call us to account when we’re not producing the fruit God expects. A pastor. Spouse. Parent. Tells us life isn’t ours, it’s God’s, and we’re not producing fruit he wants. And maybe you’ve never killed the messenger. But we all have a sinful nature that responds negatively to that. At best, ignores it. At worst, gets angry and fires back. But they’re just the messenger. Really, the anger is directed at God, isn’t it? For having the gall to tell us how to live the life he’s given us.

“What shall I do?” the owner of the vineyard asked himself. And in asking the question, he showed himself to be a special kind of owner. If his only concern was a return on his investment, he wouldn't be asking the question! He'd have sent in the shock troops by now to get what he deserved and give the tenants what they deserved. Instead, he sends messenger after messenger because he cares most about the tenants. After they've rejected each one, he's asking, “What shall I do?” because he doesn't want to give them what they deserve. He wants a fruitful life for them, but not for his sake...for theirs.

God is not a businessman. He's the owner, and you're the tenant, but his primary concern isn't the fruit you produce for him. It's you! What he wants, more than anything else, is your life! A fruitful life now, but not for his benefit...for yours, and life with him in heaven forever.

And since messenger after messenger wasn't enough to give you that, he sent his Son. It's the most shocking detail in the parable – how he answers that question. **“What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.”** And here's where the parable just doesn't do the reality justice. This vineyard owner is willing to risk his own beloved son's life for the sake of the tenants. Perhaps finally they'll come around.

But God? God knew they wouldn't. There was no “perhaps” when God the Father sent his Son into this world. He knew exactly what would happen to him. He wasn't risking his Son for the tenants; he was sacrificing him for the tenants.

For you. That was his plan all along. We've been ungrateful tenants. But God didn't want to give us what we deserve. So his plan all along was to give Jesus what we deserve. Sure, it was the Jewish leaders who ultimately threw Jesus out of Jerusalem and had him nailed to a cross. But it was God the Father giving Jesus what your sins deserved there. Every last bit of the justice every wicked tenant deserved, the Father gave it to his beloved Son in your place. So that he could give you what you don't deserve – forgiveness for all of your sins. You're his by creation, but he spilled the blood of his Son to give you a place in his eternal kingdom, too – not just as a tenant. But as his child and heir.

Jesus wanted that for the tenants in the crowd that day, too. He's calling them to repentance. He's warning them of what will happen if they reject him. He quotes a psalm verse to do it: **“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”^[a] 18 Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”**

The builders had rejected Jesus as unfit for God's house. They were about to fall on him – kill him – but the only one ending up crushed would be them. Jesus would rise and become the chief cornerstone – the one on whom God's whole house rests.

The one on whom you rest. By God's grace, through the faith he's planted in your heart, you rest on Christ. Like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house, a people made holy by his sacrifice, a house that will stand forever. The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. Love that leads us asking the vineyard owner's question, doesn't it? What shall I do? Peter answers that, too. Offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In other words, let's live as grateful tenants. Amen.