

## Pay the Rent!

Matthew 21:33-46

When I read this parable of the Wicked Tenants I thought of my friend Lilla Sutherland. She and her husband purchased two houses adjacent to her family home. They wanted to diversify their income. They fixed up both houses, went through the process of allowing low-income families with HUD vouchers to have their rent subsidized, and rented the properties out. However, for the 17 years that we shared a ride to work, her greatest lament was that her tenants would not pay their rent on a regular basis. They would always start out well. She required them to pay first and last month's rent, plus a deposit; but as regular as clock work they would stop paying the rent and she would have to take them to court to evict them. They wanted the benefit of a safe and clean house, in a nice neighborhood, but they didn't want to pay the rent. They did not want to give the owners what they were due.

Matthew's version of the parable of the Wicked Tenants is the second in a series of three parables that Jesus told in the temple. Remember Jesus had entered Jerusalem riding on a colt and been acclaimed as the messianic Son of David, and "the whole city was in turmoil" (Matt. 21:6-10). This acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David continued when he went to the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, prompting the chief priests and scribes to ask angrily, "Do you hear what these are saying?" (21:16). Jesus left the city for the night. When he returned the next morning, he cursed a fruitless fig tree, symbolizing the coming destruction of Jerusalem and disempowerment of the temple leadership (21:18-19; cf. Matt. 3:10). After that he entered the temple and, not surprisingly, encountered a challenge to his authority from the chief priests and elders (21:23-27). The three

parables that followed responded to that challenge, and each spoke directly to those Jewish leaders. **Susan Grove Eastman**

To understand this parable we must understand that every word and image stands for something other than what is actually being said at the time. In this parable, God is the landowner, the land of Israel is the vineyard, the members of the Jewish religious establishment are the tenant farmers, the prophets of the Old Testament (former and latter prophets) are the representatives of God who came to collect what was due (the rent), Jesus is the son who finally came to collect and who was killed, and the church is the group invited to work in the vineyard at the end of the parable.

The idea of Israel rejecting God stands at the heart of this parable. This same problem of rejecting God takes many forms today. First, there are those people who simply declare that there is no God. They see the beauty and order of creation. They acknowledge the power and splendor of the universe. They do not deny the perfectly designed "vineyard" in which they are allowed to live. They simply deny that they have any obligation to whoever is responsible for this arrangement. They attribute creation to random chance and unregulated circumstances. We reject God when we reject the work of God as creator and sustainer of the universe.

Membership in all Christian denominations is declining as more and more people reject God in favor of "spirituality." People do not seem to want Jesus, the church, the Bible, regular forms of worship, or any form of discipleship or service. They just want some vague connection to some vague "spirit" that provides some vague benefit to their lives. They are partial to the practice of our youth in which people "went steady" for a while until one of them "quit" the other and then chose to "go steady" with someone else.

Of course, some people do not completely reject God as much as they two-time the Lord. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah confronted the people in the presence of the priests

of Baal and told them to stop limping between two opinions. If God is God, then serve God. If Baal is God, then serve Baal. This is a lesson the twenty-first-century world needs to hear and to heed.

Another way in which we reject God occurs when we reject some of God's people for reasons of our own. Human beings are capable of doing terrible things to other people whom they are somehow able to define as less worthy, less human, less valuable than themselves. If we can manage to turn another human being into the "other," there is no limit to what we will do or will allow to be done to them. We can be as brutal to one another as were the men who beat, stoned, and killed people in our parable.

This nation maintained slavery for 246 years and then practiced segregation for another 100 years, because America was able to define black people as the "other." We very nearly wiped out the Native American tribes and nations, simply by defining them as the "other." There have been other nations that have rejected God by way of rejecting some of God's people. Germany employed the Holocaust, and the Soviet Union used the gulags (work and labor camps in Siberia). It was called apartheid in South Africa and ethnic cleansing in the Balkan region of Europe and in central Africa. In twenty-first-century India, there is still a group called the untouchables, and in Australia there continues to be discrimination against the aboriginal people. The man who killed and wounded the people in Las Vegas last Sunday was only able to do such an act by labeling his victims as "other." In each of these instances, there were some people refusing to accept the humanity of other people. When we reject some of God's people, we are rejecting the God who made them.

The parable continues in Matthew 21:44. "The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces;" Jesus said, "and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." Anyone who turns away from Jesus and from his teachings will forfeit the

abundant and eternal life that God has in store for those who live in faithful obedience. The effects of the greed and avarice that we see all around us could have been avoided. People ruined their own lives and very nearly ruined the global economy because they turned away from the lessons of the stone; now the stone has fallen on them and crushed them to pieces.

When we turn to that stone that the builders rejected, it will break us down too—but only so that it can build us up again. The stone will take away our pride and prejudice, our sin and selfishness, our greed and guilt. Once we have been brought down, the stone begins to build our lives upon a strong spiritual foundation. Every floor of that new spiritual building will be stocked with the valuable fruits of the Spirit. The first floor will equip us with love. The second floor will fill us with joy. As the spiritual building goes up, we will see peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and finally self-control taking up residence in our lives ([Gal. 5:22-23](#)).

A recently glimpsed bumper sticker says, "*The world you desire comes not by chance but by change.*" What a difference one letter can make! The world God is attempting to shape through the ministry of the church will not be established by chance or coincidence. It will come only when people change how they live—no longer rejecting the will of the God who made them, but striving to live together in peace. **Marvin A. McMickle**

Jesus himself is the stone whom we may reject or stumble over; he is Immanuel, God with us. Let us not be found to be like the educated leaders of Israel who rejected him; but like the suffering, impoverished, and illiterate common people who rightly acclaim him Lord. Let us remember that we are not the landlord, but the tenants, who owe the owner his rent and authority in our lives. What we owe is faith, deeds of justice and loving-kindness (see [23:2-3](#)). **Susan Grove Eastman**

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