

***Faithful Tenants – Matthew 21:33-46***

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For those of you who have owned rental property before—apartments, homes, or office buildings—you probably have your own colorful stories to share of tenants who didn't exactly live up to the terms of their rental agreements. The day a tenant moves out is often the day when all that has gone on in a place really comes to light for the landlord.

I've heard stories from landlords who had to renovate an entire house, apartment, or business property because a tenant practically destroyed it during the length of their lease, had no regard for the fact that it wasn't their property, and didn't bother to take care of it. And it's after renting to a few bad tenants that a landlord asks him or herself whether being in the rental business is really worth the heartache.

My dad was a landlord in the later part of his life. He owned a series of storage units that he rented out to community members where I grew up. And I remember hearing the stories about the late payments (or no payments). And about the tenants who left town and didn't bother to clean out their unit. And upon opening the door, it would be a complete mess from floor to ceiling.

They weren't good tenants.

Certainly, the landowner in the parable we just read had to have felt the same frustration and disappointment with the tenants of his property. He leased his vineyard to them, and they promptly showed no regard for the landowner and his property. The absentee landlord sent his servants to check on the produce the vineyard had produced, and the servants were killed by the tenants. Then the landowner sent some more servants who were treated the same way. Finally, the landlord sent his own son to collect the produce the vineyard had produced, and the tenants killed even the landowner's son. And at the end of the parable, Jesus reminds his listening

audience that these evil tenants will get what's coming to them in light of the complete disregard they had for a property that wasn't theirs and for the owner who leased it to them.

No doubt, Jesus' telling of this story is designed to remind his audience of the landlord-tenant relationship that exists between God and the people God has chosen for caretaker service. We ultimately are not the owners of anything God has created. We are only tenants of a kingdom that is God's, and ultimately God will decide if we have fulfilled the role adequately.

In every category of life, every relationship we have, every identity we possess, we are tenants.

Consider our relationships. God has blessed us with the ability to be in relationship with other people. Dating back to God's creation of humanity, God desired for us to live in community. And so every relationship we have today is a reflection of God's desire for us to find strength, companionship, support, and love through the interactions we have with others.

Because these relationships we enjoy have been created by God, in essence we are the caretakers of them. And because of that, we have a responsibility—just as the tenants of the vineyard had—to care for them as the gifts they truly are.

In our marriages, in our relationships with our kids, in our friendships, we nurture those relationships because God has entrusted them to us for our enjoyment and so that they might bring glory to God.

As citizens of the world, we also have been entrusted to care for other people (people we don't necessarily have relationships with), because of the gift of life we have been given. This means remembering our brothers and sisters in all corners of the world. To work for justice on behalf of the oppressed and downtrodden here at home and abroad is part of being good tenants of the church universal. The mission co-workers in the Presbyterian Church USA that we support with our financial gifts is how we do our part to be good tenants of the broader world.

And when it comes to being good tenants, we can't not have a discussion about the importance of being good stewards of the earth. We can criticize a movement that perhaps has become too polarized and too political, but we can all agree that, as people of faith, we have to be good tenants of God's creation.

Maybe being good tenants, in the end, comes down to a simple concept that all of us could define: accountability. Roger Lovett, writing for *Pulpit Resource* magazine talks of accountability this way:

"Most of you who have jobs outside the home know what it is to constantly be held accountable for your work. Therefore, it seems strange indeed for us to come to church and expect no accountability. You know from firsthand experience how invigorating it is, how helpful to the quality of your work, how important it is for your own self-esteem to be held accountable, and to work for a boss who knows what you do.

"Throughout scripture it is a typical experience of having God's word intrude and ask simply, "What are you doing with what you have been given?"

"Our God loves us enough not only to give us good gifts but also loves us enough to hold us to account for what we have been given. God loves us enough to love us, even in our sin, but God loves us more than enough so as not to leave us self-satisfied and smug in our sin.

"There shall be that day, now or later, when we shall be held to account. The gospel itself demands it."

To be good tenants—tenants of an apartment, tenants of a relationship, tenants of the human community, of the earth, or tenants of the Gospel—requires accountability. And to gladly be accountable for all this is a reflection of the gratitude we have to a God who has given us so much. That love is why we should want to be held accountable. It's the least we can do in response to the abundance we've found through the great landlord of our lives.

A theologian I greatly respected once wrote, "In a world where so much emphasis is placed upon the material, there is grave danger

that our eyes become fixed at the downward position. A story is told about a man who one day found a dime along a sidewalk. From that moment to his dying day, he walked with eyes focused along the path's edge. It is said that he did find a few more coins but he missed beauties and glories around and over him who would have enriched his life far more than did the paltry coins. That man was not a rarity; there are thousands on life's road who become so obsessed with the earthly and material that they miss life's best.

"When our focus in life is instead to live "to the glory of God and in the service of God's children...a glorious radiance and a thrilling joy possesses the pilgrim. Life takes on a new meaning. A deep contentment floods the soul."

We live in gratitude and generosity because of how bountiful the vineyard is that God had entrusted to us.

I am always moved but not surprised at the vast ways in which all of you practice being good tenants of God's kingdom. And not least of which is the way you give financially to the work of the church.

Through September, your offerings to the church were \$15,000 above what they were last year, and \$40,000 ahead of our budget for this year. Coupled with the fact our Session has underspent our budget by a good amount, our income exceeded our expenses by nearly \$86,000 through September. And I know that through the end of the year, your generosity will only continue to grow.

You do this good work quietly and without fanfare. And I share this information not only to pat you on the back but also so that others will know of our commitment to being the church and being good tenants in the kingdom of God. And that's all because of a sense of gratitude we have to the God who has given us so much.

In Hong Kong, there was once an advertisement for Swiss watches, which is a good example of Christian stewardship. The picture is a father hugging his son with the caption: "You never actually own a Patek Philippe watch, you merely look after it for the next generation."

That's what being good tenants is about: looking after what's not ours for the next generation. Seems to be our calling.