

Read: *There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.*

Pray: Father, you plant, you water and you make all things grow. You do it in us and throughout the whole Christian church – which belongs to you. Lord in this short time now; show us again your all-surpassing greatness and the richness of your providence to each one of us. Holy Spirit, soften and guide our hearts and work in each person that we would leave here renewed, transformed and filled as people of your vineyard. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

1. I was reading a blog from the U.S. this week called 'slumlordwatch.'

This site and others like it have come to life over the last few years because of soaring rent prices in major cities.

What's happening is people who don't have a lot of money are forced to pay very high rental costs to live in rat infested apartments. People are reporting pantries that 'come to life' at night time, waking up with cockroaches in their beds, water damaged ceilings that allow people to see into the apartment above them, rat bites – all kinds of terrible stories.

For many people, living in a dangerous and disgusting apartment is a tough reality. They're finding themselves at the mercy of a slumlord - a building owner who holds his tenants hostage with cheaper (but still high) rent, yet refuses to protect their dignity or safety by maintaining buildings even to the most basic living standards.

This has resulted in some cities launching a watch list for its worst landlords. It's a website that allows angry, rat-bitten tenants to lodge official complaints, and prospective renters to search and see if the apartment of their dreams is actually a cockroach infested nightmare. I guess it's a way of exposing the nastiest slumlords so that people can avoid them, but it's also a way that the government can investigate these slumlords, and help the people who are exposed to these dangerous living conditions.

But there is always another side to the coin isn't there? You see for every slumlord that is out there, there is an equal amount of bad tenants to even things out. Tenants who are wild and cause problems for neighbours – not to mention tenants that fill yards with junk or even devastate the inside of the house or apartment.

2. There is nothing new under the sun when it comes to landlords and tenants!

Deep in the gospel of Matthew today, Jesus tells a parable about what? A rocky and tense relationship between a landlord and His tenants!

But here's the thing: in Jesus' story it's not the landlord who abuses his power and fails to care for those living on his land. It's the tenants who take complete advantage of the landowner's trust and generosity and suffer the consequences of their actions.

God is no slumlord when it comes to His people! Perhaps the question is what kind of tenants are we?

"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower"

This landowner – the Almighty Living God, does absolutely everything possible to provide a time of rejoicing with wine and gladness of heart for everyone in the vineyard. So he goes to a lot of trouble to make it happen.

He planted the vines, he put a wall around it to protect it, he dug a wine press – two holes, one deeper than the other with a canal running between them so you could trample the grapes in one and the juice would flow into the deeper hole. He built a watchtower for spotting any potential villains looking to harm the people in the vineyard or the crop. He did everything!

God carefully and lovingly prepared his vineyard. It's a product of his deep and caring love for his people. In Isaiah 5 today the Lord says, *"What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done for it?"* He planned, built and prepared everything – and it was good! **God is definitely no slumlord!** He spares no expense and doesn't overlook even the smallest detail when it comes to His people.

Then he lets the vineyard out to tenants. He entrusts his vineyard (which is a picture of the people of God), to tenants – Israel.

He could have spared himself so much pain if he just kept the vineyard for himself – its grapes and wine, the rejoicing and gladness and celebration, but God doesn't work that way does he? He wants to celebrate with his people.

- God as the landowner rightfully expects that His people are going to be excited and glad to be in His vineyard and will serve however they can to produce a rich harvest.
- He expects that they will be happy and rejoice in giving him his due.
- He expects that as he entrusts the work of his kingdom to serious disciples that he would harvest faith, trust and joyful, willing obedience to His will.
- He expects that everyone will celebrate and rejoice together. [PAUSE]

3. "Fat chance God – Not likely" comes the response from the tenants.

Instead of receiving a loving response from his tenants, they offer God something else.

³⁵ "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. ³⁸ "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. [PAUSE]

Have you ever shown someone a great deal of love; put in a big effort and then been rejected? **God has.** Have you gone all out and invested time and energy in a person because you can see their need – but instead of joy and appreciation you got shut out and cut off. Lots of parents will know exactly what that's like (but you don't have to be a parent to get this) – it hurts being rejected by someone you love.

God has been going through that for thousands upon thousands of generations. These tenants are doing it to Him again!

Instead of living in the vineyard, enjoying the fruit and wine; instead of tending the vines for the joy and salvation of others, these tenants conspire to steal the vineyard from the owner! They want to control their own kingdom and they reject the landowner's tenancy agreement.

What it all boils down to is that they want to be God and exercise their authority in the vineyard. They're not interested in being tenants or stewards of anything; they're interested in being slumlords; slumlords who mistreat anyone who comes onto the property. So their response to the love of God is to reject and kill His servants the prophets and now they conspire to reject and kill the Son thinking that they will get the legal claim to the vineyard.

At this point in the parable Jesus turns to the religious leaders and asks them, ⁴⁰ *"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"* Amazingly, their eyes are blinded to the fact that **they are** the evil tenants, so they condemn themselves saying, ⁴¹ *"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end...and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."*

4. Have you heard of the author Eugene Peterson? He said one day that parables are narrative time bombs.

That's certainly the case here isn't it?! They're stealthy stories that steal into people's hearts, confusing them, throwing them off balance for a while. But then the "Ah-ha!" moment arrives and the real meaning of the story suddenly explodes in people's minds like a time-bomb.

⁴² *Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?* ⁴³ *"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.* ⁴⁴ *Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."* ⁴⁵ ***When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them.*** [And the time bomb detonates!]

It might feel like we're all sitting around today watching this time bomb detonate in the hands of the religious leaders. But I've gotta be honest with you – you're in on this too. You're in the blast zone shoulder to shoulder with those religious leaders!

You know there are times in your own life when you've ignored or rejected the clear command of scripture. You knew it and you did it anyway – or you didn't know and then you were convicted – cut to the heart when you did.

Rejecting the word of God and living as ungrateful tenants isn't unique to the religious leaders of Jesus' day is it? We all need to hear Jesus' warning against rejection and unbelief. Just like we all need to hear that it wasn't only the sins of the religious leaders that nailed Jesus to the cross. We all played a part in the events of Good Friday.

5. The call of God to you today is to turn away from rejection and unbelief and return to a true and living faith in the landowner's Son – Jesus.

God is calling each one of you to see and marvel at what the Lord of the vineyard has done. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. God's own son came to the vineyard – sent by the Father in love to bear pure, sweet fruit in the midst of rotten, sour grapes.

Jesus came to the vineyard where there was one more act of bloodshed; one more cry of distress when He was nailed to the cross.

*But He rose from the dead and has become the cornerstone and foundation of **YOUR** living faith. God **HAS CHOSEN YOU IN CHRIST** and restored you as his precious vineyard today.*

And he's given you a purpose and a commission to live in the resurrection life you have in Jesus' name. The call isn't to idleness – the call is to come and serve in the vineyard of God!

You're invited to today to taste the fruit of the vine in Holy Communion.

To taste the depth of God's love as Jesus comes to you in a piece of bread and a mouthful of wine. In exchange for the bitter taste sin leaves in God's mouth, he gives you the sweet wine of his risen and glorified Son.

He gives you:

- The wine of gladness,
- The wine of rejoicing
- And the wine of Kingdom celebration.

God is no slumlord – **He gives you His all every single time.**

Will you give God the same in return? Will you give the Lord everything you've got?

What kind of tenant will you be? Will you harden yourself and reject the call of God today, or will you strive to live as a faithful steward in His vineyard?

- A vineyard where the celebrations never end – where the landowner and the tenants reside together in perfect unity.
- A vineyard that produces a harvest of faith and joyful, willing obedience to God.