

INTRODUCTION

If you're like me, you enjoy a good mystery novel once in a while. Agatha Christi is probably the most prolific crime novelist in history. She wrote 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections. Her works have sold over 2 billion copies, an amount surpassed only by the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. Although this message title could have well been one of her novel titles, there's not much of a mystery in this story. It's an open and shut case.

Jesus was the master storyteller. We have over 50 parables recorded in the four Gospel accounts, although Mark only includes six. Jesus spoke in parables because He wanted His listeners to dig a little below the surface to find the hidden truth. In the previous passage the Jewish leaders demanded to know the source of His authority. In East Texas lingo they were saying, "Just who do you think you are, anyway? Who gave you the right to go through our temple and bust up our racket? Jesus didn't give them a straight answer. He answered their question with a question of his own. But then He went beyond giving them a simple answer; instead He answered their question with a parable. And the Jewish leaders were in the story. Before we read the full parable, let's jump ahead to the end. I know this is a spoiler alert, but I want you to know up front the point Jesus was making in this parable.

Mark 12:12. "Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away."

Now, let's go back and pick up the story.

Mark 12:1-12. "He then began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

I've said many times that to understand Jesus' parables, you have to peel off the layers like an onion. There is the actual story itself, which should be appreciated simply for its literary value. This is a stand-alone story of the crime of tenants refusing to pay rent to the owner of the

vineyard. They eventually murder the owner's son, and the owner brings them to justice for their crime.

But when you peel off one of the layers, we see that Jesus was using the parable to deliver a message to the nation of Israel. In order to understand this layer you must identify the characters. (1) The owner is God. He created the vineyard. (2) The vineyard represents Israel. God placed them in their own land flowing with milk and honey. (3) The tenants represent the Jewish leaders. They had forgotten God and had turned His temple into a den of thieves. (4) The servants represent the Old Testament prophets. God sent many prophets to warn Israel; the last prophet who was wounded in the head surely is a reference to John the Baptist who was beheaded. (5) Of course, the only son represents Jesus.

We tend to study the parables of Jesus from a human perspective rather from God's perspective. You can see this tendency in how we name the parables. None of the parables had names in the original text, but some of the newer translations add titles. For instance, we all have heard of the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," but when you look at it from God's perspective, it really should be called the "Parable of the Forgiving Father."

If you have an NIV translation, the parable we read today is labeled, "The Parable of the Tenants." When you look at it from God's perspective we should call it the "Parable of the Patient Landowner." In this story Jesus teaches four foundational truths about the character of God. And once we uncover those truths, then we will find a corresponding personal lesson that we can apply to our lives.

1. GOD IS THE OWNER

The Psalmist proclaims, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." (Psalm 24:1) Like the owner in the parable, God is the Creator and He owns all of Planet Earth and beyond. The tenants didn't own the vineyard; the owner placed them there expecting to receive some of the grapes harvested. He didn't demand all of the grapes, just a portion of them at harvest time. But the tenants rejected the owner's request and acted as if they owned the vineyard. The essence of sin is declaring independence from your Creator—refusing to acknowledge God's ownership of this world and rejecting His claim on your life. The essence of sin is saying, "I don't need God. I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul."

PERSONAL LESSON: I don't own anything; I just manage some of God's property

If you grew up in the South, you probably heard the term "sharecroppers." Sharecroppers were families who lived on and farmed land that didn't belong to them. They plowed the owner's land, planted the owner's seeds, and picked the owner's harvest. In return for their hard work, they kept some of the food they produced and gave the rest to the landowner.

In a real sense, each one of us is a sharecropper for the Lord. We don't own anything; we just manage a part of God's creation. But sometimes we make the same mistake the tenants in the parable made. We start imagining we own the vineyard.

Have you ever seen a little toddler grab a toy from another child and shout, "Mine!" We realize the child didn't purchase the toy and he or she really doesn't own it. They just have possession until another kid takes it from them.

I wonder how our Heavenly Father must feel when we walk into our house and say, "Mine!" Or when we get in our nice car and say, "Mine!" Or when we go online and check our account balance and say, "Mine!" No, it's not yours. Every good thing you have is a gift from God. Everything in this world is temporary except the Word of God and the souls of people.

The original job description God gave to Adam and Eve was to be good managers of His Creation. The Bible says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2:15) What kind of job are you doing taking care of the portion of God's Creation that He has entrusted to you?

2. GOD IS PATIENT

The Bible says, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." (Psalm 103:8) The owner of the vineyard sent a messenger to collect what was due him, but the sharecroppers beat him up and kicked him out. Now if this had been like an episode of Law and Order, the owner would have called the cops and sworn out an arrest warrant for the criminal sharecroppers. Can't you see it? The Jewish police would have galloped up to the vineyard on their souped-up camels with their blue lanterns flashing. But this owner simply sent other servants—and they kicked all of them off the vineyard—even killing some of them. What is the main thing we learn about God from this part of the story? He is patient with us.

PERSONAL LESSON: He sends many messengers to remind us to obey Him

This parable is about each one of us. God has prepared a vineyard for us to manage. That great job you have didn't come by your talent or good looks. God put you there. God is the Creator and He owns it all. He expects a good return from you. He's not asking for you to give him 90% of what you have, or even half. He's says 10% is a good start, but He's not primarily interested in your money. He wants you. He's asking you to first acknowledge His ownership, His Lordship over your life.

The greatest mistake you can make is to think that you are personally responsible for attaining any of the wealth or property that you oversee. My favorite verse from Deuteronomy is a great reminder from God. "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth." (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

God is patiently reaching out to you to acknowledge His Lordship over your life. He has sent you plenty of messengers. You have the Bible. You have Christian radio and television. You have a World Wide Web filled with millions of Bible studies. There are reminders all around you that you have a date with death and you'd better prepare to meet your Creator. When you open the newspaper and read the obituaries, God is sending a message to you. When you drive by a cemetery, another messenger.

God is so patient with you that if you have rejected His offer a dozen times, or a hundred times, or a thousand times, He keeps sending you messengers. Today, I'm just the most recent messenger your Creator has sent to lovingly reach out to you to respond to the Owner's gracious offer.

In the 19th Century, before radio or television, people in America found entertainment by listening to public speakers, called orators. One of the most infamous was gifted atheist Robert Ingersoll. He traveled around the country delivering speeches on the foolishness of believing in God. He often concluded his speech with a dramatic challenge. He would shake his fist to heaven and say, "If there is a God, I dare Him to strike me dead in ten seconds!" Then he slowly counted to ten. Women fainted and God-fearing people rushed for the exits, fully expecting God to send a fireball and consume Robert Ingersoll. Of course, nothing happened. Then Ingersoll would finish by saying, "Now how can anyone believe in God?"

When reporters asked Pastor Joseph Parker about Ingersoll's challenge, he laughed and said, "Does Mr. Ingersoll presume that he can exhaust God's wonderful patience in just 10 seconds?" Ingersoll later died at the age of 65 from heart failure. God was patient with him for many years. And He is patient with you.

3. GOD IS LOVING

The Bible says, "For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." (Psalm 100:5)

In the parable, after the owner's servants had been rejected and abused, he takes an astonishing step—he sent his only son, whom he loved. He hoped the tenants would respect His son, and instead they killed him.

This parable not only highlights the love of God, it also reveals the utter wickedness of the human heart. The tenants of vineyard didn't kill the owner's son in the spontaneous heat of emotion; they made a calculated decision. They thought by killing the son, they could claim ownership of the vineyard.

PERSONAL LESSON: He sent His only Son to offer us the gift of life

As you listen to this parable, you're probably thinking it doesn't make any sense for the owner to send his son. He should have already realized the tenants were wicked. Didn't he realize they would kill his son, too? It doesn't make any sense in human terms. But in the heart and mind of God, Jesus was the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world.

The Bible says, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." (1 John 4:9)

How can you resist that kind of love? In the early 1960s, the publishers of *Time Magazine* were concerned about their declining circulation, so they designed a campaign to send out thousands of letters making an emotional appeal to potential subscribers. In the past, such mailings had

been done manually, at a great cost in human resources. IBM was developing something called a computer, so they made a proposal to install a fully automated system that would write the letters, seal the envelopes, address them according to a selected database, stamp them and send them into the postal system without the letters ever being touched by a human hand. The huge computer was installed with much fanfare and anticipation. However, as is still the case with computers, there was a glitch, and as a result a poor rancher in Wyoming received 12,634 letters appealing to him to subscribe to *Time Magazine*. The surprised rancher, who didn't ordinarily get much mail, opened the mail-bags and started reading the letters. After reading a few dozen, he sent in a \$6 check for a subscription with a note that said, "I give up!" That's the kind of persuasion that's hard to resist! God's love for you is so powerful that it is hard to resist it!

4. GOD IS THE FINAL JUDGE

God is perfect in His love, but He is also perfect in His justice. The Bible says, "But the LORD abides forever; He has established His throne for judgment, And He will judge the world in righteousness." (Psalm 9:7-8 NASB)

When Jesus finished the parable, He asked the question, "What do you think the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants who killed his only son?" It wasn't a rhetorical question. Jesus answered it for them. He said, "He will come and execute those wicked tenants and take the vineyard from them and give it to other tenants who will be faithful." The Jewish leaders were enraged because they knew Jesus was speaking about them rejecting Him as the Messiah.

As Jesus finished this parable He asked the religious leaders, "Have you never read, 'the stone which the builders rejected shall become the capstone: the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" Jesus was quoting from Psalm 118. Some translations say "cornerstone," and in Ephesians 2:20 Jesus is called the chief cornerstone. But a cornerstone is not the same as a capstone. A cornerstone is used for a foundation. It's the first stone laid and it determines the alignment of all the other stones, but a capstone is the last stone laid. We often call it a keystone.

The "stone which the builders rejected" is a reference to the building of Solomon's Temple. It took over 30,000 workmen seven years to complete the first temple. According to 1 Kings 6, all the stones were quarried far away from the building site, so there was no sound of hammering heard on the holy hill. Jewish tradition says in the early days of construction the chief builder saw a large stone with an unusual shape rolled on logs into the construction site. The stone was neither square nor rectangular. Because it was cut in an odd shape, the chief builder thought it was flawed. He had the workers roll it down the side of the hill into the Kidron Valley where it lay untouched and unnoticed for years.

As he neared the completion of the Temple, the chief builder sent word to the quarry that he was ready for the main capstone to finish the arch marking the entrance to the Temple of God. The quarry master came and reported, "Why, I had that capstone delivered years ago." When they began to search, they discovered the discarded stone in the valley was the capstone. It was covered with debris and dirt. It took many men to raise the massive stone out of the valley. When they raised it and set it, it fit perfectly! The capstone was the very stone they had rejected! What a parable about Jesus!

PERSONAL LESSON: Those who reject God's Son/Stone will fall under His judgment

Whenever you hear someone speak about the United States Supreme Court, be reminded that they aren't the true Supreme Court. Human judges are prone to make mistakes, but God is the perfect judge. The Bible says, "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." (2 Thessalonians 1:6-8)

CONCLUSION

During the settling of the Old West, pioneers flocked across the country to California and Oregon. In one particular spot on the Eastern slopes of the Rockies there was a large, dirt covered rock protruding in the middle of the trail. Wagon wheels were broken on it and men tripped over it. Finally someone dug up the odd stone and rolled it off trail into a nearby stream. The stream was too wide to jump over, but people used the stone as a step to cross the cold creek. It was used for years, until finally one settler built his cabin near the stream. He moved the odd stone out of the stream and placed it in his cabin to serve as a doorstep.

As years passed, railroads were built and towns sprang up. The old settler's grandson went East to study geology. On a visit to his grandfather's cabin, the grandson happened to examine the old lump of stone and discovered within that lump of dirt and rock was the largest pure gold nugget ever discovered on the Eastern slope of the Rockies. It had been there for three generations, and people never recognized its value. To some it was a stumbling stone to be removed. To others it was a stepping-stone, and to others it was just a heavy rock. But only the grandson saw it for what it really was—a lump of pure gold. Jesus is the precious rock God has given us to be the both the cornerstone and the capstone of our lives. Will you come to the rock today? Will you build your life upon Him? One day, you will discover Jesus will either be a stepping-stone that gives you access to God, or He will be a rock over which you stumble...so close and yet so far. The choice is yours.

So what are our take-away truths? First, have you acknowledged God's claim to your life? Have you accepted His Son? Is your life build upon the Rock of Ages? Second, are you being a good steward of the vineyard where God has placed you? Do you constantly remember that you don't own anything, that He owns it all and He has the right to it all? Will you adopt a sharecropper's attitude when it comes to your possessions? We are entering God's vineyard when we walk out these doors. Let's go and be faithful sharecroppers for the Lord!

OUTLINE

Characters in the parable

1. The owner: God
2. The vineyard: Israel
3. The tenants: Jewish leaders
4. The servants: Old Testament prophets
5. The son: Jesus



1. GOD IS THE OWNER

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"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."
Genesis 2:15

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"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." *Psalm 103:8*

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"You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth."
Deuteronomy 8:17-18

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Psalm 100:5

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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