

# Stories that Change the World

## **“On Unbelief: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants”**

Luke 20:9-19

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on June 4, 2017

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Luke 20.
- If the message of Christianity is such good news why do so many people reject it?
  - There is one dominant reason that people give today for why they do not believe: they say they are simply following the evidence where it leads.
    - For instance, the most popular atheist of our day, Richard Dawkins, states in his book *The God Delusion* that he holds his beliefs **“not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied the evidence.”**<sup>1</sup>
- The message people want you to hear behind such statements is that they reject Jesus for entirely responsible reasons that have to do with intellectual honesty, with rationality, and with moral conviction. They say that they are just courageously following the evidence wherever it leads in an unbiased manner.
  - But is this true? Do people reject Jesus because the evidence demands it?
- In our parable today Jesus says that all such statements are simply masks that cover up the real reason why people refuse to believe. In this parable Jesus unmasks unbelief.
  - Jesus says that under it all the reason we do not believe is because we don't like God. Now we may say, **“That is way too harsh!”** The people Jesus told this parable to were so offended by Jesus' response that we read in verse 19 **“The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them.”**
    - In fact, this parable shows us that under all of our problems with other people, under our bursts of anger, under our marriage problems, under our addictions, under our lust and jealousy there is fundamental problem with how we view God.
- We cannot see it because we put on masks to cover it but Jesus says, **“I love you so much that I won't let you go on destroying your life and living in delusion. I will unmask you. You will not like what you see underneath but you cannot be free until you see who you really are.”**
  - Let's tackle this wildly unpopular subject. In this parable Jesus says that people do not believe because they dislike three things about God: they don't like God's Godness, God's messengers, and God's judgement.

### A HOSTILITY TOWARD GOD'S GODNESS

- In the first place then, **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** people do not believe because they dislike God's Godness. Not God's goodness, but God's Godness. That is, we don't like the fact that He is God and we are not. Let me show you this.
  - **READ 9** – *And he began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while.* Now culturally this was a common thing. The owner of a vineyard would often rent his vineyard to tenants. Their responsibilities were obvious. To borrow a phrase from one man, they were responsible to tend it by his policies and for his profit.
    - This is perfectly fair for the owner has put up all the money for the vineyard. He owns the land, the grapes, and the winepress. The tenants are not free to rip down the grapes and put up a shopping mall because it is not their vineyard. They must act according to the owner's policies and are rightly expected as tenants to bring him a profit out of which the owner will give them a part.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 282.

- Jesus' hearers knew exactly what He was getting at with this parable. Jesus is basically quoting Isaiah 5:1-7 in which God says that He planted a vineyard. God says the vineyard represents His people whom He has planted and cared for.
  - So the owner is God, the vineyard is the people of God, and the tenants are the leaders of God's people who have been entrusted to lead the people by God's policies and for God's profit.

## GOD IS THE OWNER AND WE ARE THE TENANTS

- Let me draw out three broader principles from this for us today. First, **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** God is the owner, which means we are tenants. Because God created all things, He is the owner of all things including you. You are His tenant living on His earth. He has provided you with life, health, intelligence, abilities, time, money, and influence.
  - Because He is the owner and you are the tenant, God fairly expects you to live by His policies and for His profit – to follow His policies for life and to use all He has given you for His glory.

## WE ACT LIKE OWNERS NOT LIKE TENANTS

- Despite the fact that we are tenants, we see in the second place that just like the tenants in the story **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** we act like owners, not like tenants.
  - Frank Sinatra declared it for the older generation when he sang, *"I did it my way."* Gwen Stefani declares it for the younger generation when she sings, *"It's my life."*
    - We speak about "my money, my car, my family, my job, my body, and my time" even though every one of these are gifts given to us. You did not create your life and therefore you do not own it anymore than you own the sun or the moon.
- In his famous book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis portrays an elder demon named Screwtape writing to a younger demon named Wormwood on how to destroy the man's life he has been assigned. Screwtape takes an entire chapter on how to destroy this man through making him think he is an owner.
  - Screwtape writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** *"The sense of ownership in general is always to be encouraged. The humans are always putting up claims of ownership which sound equally funny in Heaven and Hell and we must keep them doing so...all the time the joke is that the word 'mine' in its fullest possessive sense cannot be uttered by any human being about anything...the assumption which you want him to go on making is so absurd that, if once questioned, even we cannot find a shred of argument in its defense...they will find out in the end, never fear, to whom their time, their souls, and their bodies really belong."*<sup>2</sup>
    - So although it is obvious that we are tenants who do not own anything we suppress this idea and act like owners. Why?

## WHY WE SUPPRESS WHO WE ARE AND ACT LIKE OWNERS

- This brings us to the third principle, which is the heart of it all: **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** we suppress the fact that we are tenants (and we act like owners) because we don't like the idea that we must live by God's policies and for His profit.
  - All the trouble started when the tenants started acting like owners. They wanted to live for themselves and for their profit. Isn't that exactly what they say in verse 14? **READ 14** - *But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.'*
    - Can you see the mask coming off then? Under it all Jesus says that the reason people do not believe is because they cannot stand the Godness of God. It is not because the evidence demands it. Rather, they cannot stand the fact that God is their owner to whom they owe all obedience and allegiance and so they revolt.
- The most honest and thoughtful atheists have always admitted this. The philosopher Thomas Nagel of NYU candidly admits:

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, chapter 21.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** *“I want atheism to be true...It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God...I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”*<sup>3</sup>
  - C.S. Lewis admitted the same thing before he became a Christian. He said, **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** *“I had always wanted, above all things, not to be ‘interfered with’.”*<sup>4</sup>
- Aldous Huxley, the humanist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was honest about why he rejected God. In his book *Ends and Means* Huxley writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** *“I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption.”*
  - So he frankly confesses that He had reasons for not wanting the world to have a God. What is that reason? **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** *“The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics, he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do.”*
    - He says the motive that drove him to disprove God’s existence was so that he could live how he wanted to live. But he is more specific about which area of life he wanted God out of. Can you guess? **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** *“For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.”*<sup>5</sup>
- So Huxley admits that he wanted the world to be meaningless. He wanted there to be no God so that he could live how he wants specifically in his sexuality.
  - Dinesh D’Souza, a Christian author, puts it like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** *“When an atheist gives elaborate justification for why God does not exist and why traditional morality is an illusion, he is very likely thinking of his sex organs. It may well be that if it weren’t for that single commandment against adultery, Western man would be still be Christian!...[humanity’s rejection of God is], one may say, a pelvic revolt against God.”*<sup>6</sup>
- Let me tie this whole first point together. We learn here that people do not reject Christianity because they have looked carefully into the evidence and it is the only rational conclusion they are led to. That is a mask. Jesus says they reject it because they do not want to believe it. They want to be left alone to do what they want to do and sleep with whom they want to sleep with. The only way to have this is to get rid of any concept of a God and be our own owners. People do not believe then because they don’t like the Godness of God.
  - So you can see the positive side then? You know you are a Christian if you have come to God and said, *“Have mercy on me for I have tried to act as if I gave myself life and breath and everything else. Have mercy on me for I have not lived according to your policies or for your profit. I bow the knee admitting that I am your tenant and that you are a good owner. Have mercy and teach me how to be a faithful tenant.”*

## A HOSTILITY TOWARD GOD’S SERVANTS

- Remember, Jesus is unmasking our unbelief because he loves us. We need to see the ugly truth that lies beneath our masks so we can take them off and be free. So let’s move now to the second point. In the second place, our loving Saviour shows us that people do not believe because they cannot stand **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** God’s servants.
  - Really this is just the natural consequence of the first point. **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** Our rejection of God’s servants simply reveals our hostility to God. Look at verse 10. **READ 10-12** - *When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of*

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, 130.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228

<sup>5</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means*, 270-272.

<sup>6</sup> Dinesh D’Souza, *What’s So Great About Christianity*, 268-269.

*the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out.*

- Their treatment of the servants revealed their dislike for the owner and their desire to live for themselves. And yet look at the unbelievable patience the owner has toward his wicked tenants.
  - Even though the owner had every right to punish the tenants and kick them out he sends servants. Not just one but many – ***“He sent another servant...he sent a third servant.”***
- Jesus is saying to the Jewish leaders that even though they have rejected God, God has shown unbelievable patience and mercy to them. God did not reject Israel but had sent countless prophets to call them back to God whom they beat, rejected and killed.<sup>7</sup>
  - We hear God’s loving patience in Jesus’ words in Luke 13: ***“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”***
- **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** The fact that God sends countless servants reveals His extreme patience toward us. Even though we have rejected Him he does not just give us one chance to repent. He sends many servants to show us that we are not owners.
  - Think of all the servants God has sent into your life. Perhaps it was your parents who taught you the gospel. There are the churches like this one that hold the truth out to you. There are the people God has providentially brought into your life. Anyone can buy a copy of the Bible or view it online and hear its message that you are not an owner.
    - So how are you treating the servants that God has brought into your life? Do you beat them away or do you allow them to speak to you?
- If you still do not believe me that the root of all unbelief is dislike of God, not simply a lack of evidence, then notice with me how the tenants treated the last and supreme servant the owner sent. **READ 13-15** - ***Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?***
  - So far the story has been pretty realistic. But at this point any owner would have gone to the law and had the tenants ejected. But as Leon Morris says the point of Jesus’ story is not ***“the way a businessman would act to protect his investment”*** but ***“the way a compassionate and loving God acts toward sinners.”***<sup>8</sup>
    - Out of patience and love for us God sent Jesus – His Son whom he loves. But did the world receive God’s Son with open arms? No, he was despised and rejected by men.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** The clearest evidence that we are hostile to God is what we did with His most beloved Son when he visited us. We crucified Him.
- The clearest evidence that people are hostile to God is how they treat Jesus.
  - When Jesus says that his crown rule extends to every part of our lives, people react with hostility. When Jesus says that we are sinners and he alone can rescue us, people react with hostility.
    - Why? Because Jesus is saying we are not owners but are rather wicked tenants. This evokes great hostility from people but listen, the fact that people are hostile to God’s Son is the chief evidence that you are, in fact, hostile to God.
- Positively speaking then a Christian is one who sees this anger in their hearts and says, ***“Jesus forgive me and give me a new heart.”*** A Christian is one who welcomes God’s supreme servant and strives to submit to his authority in all things.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance: II Chron 24:19; Jer 7:25-26; 25:4, beaten Jer 20:2 and killed Jer 26:21-23

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *Luke*, 541.



## A HOSTILITY TOWARD GOD'S JUDGEMENT

- So the reason people do not believe is not because of the evidence but because they do not want to. They want to own their own lives and so they dislike God's Godness and God's servants. But finally people do not believe because they (**SHOW SLIDE 17**) do not like God's judgement. People do not like the idea that God will judge them. This is the final proof that we do not like God himself.
  - **READ 15b-16** - *What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.* When they heard this, they said, *"Surely not!"*
    - The Jewish leaders knew exactly what Jesus was saying. Jesus was saying that because they rejected Him, God's judgment was coming upon them. When they hear Jesus speak about God judging them and taking away their leadership their anger only increases. They say, *"Surely not!"*
- Then we read verse 17. **READ 17a** - *But he looked directly at them.* What was in Jesus' eyes? Fire? Pity? Anger? Sadness?
  - Jesus then quotes Psalm 118. **READ 17** - *But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?"*
- There is a dispute over whether this should be translated as capstone or cornerstone. I think it should be cornerstone but it actually makes no difference because both are critical.
  - In the ancient world a cornerstone had to be a perfectly cut stone because it bore the weight of two intersecting walls. The picture here is of workers searching through the stones for that perfect cornerstone and the very one they reject ends up being the perfect stone. Jesus is saying, *"although you reject me, God has given me the chief place of honour as the cornerstone."*
    - For those who reject Jesus as the stone to build their lives on Jesus says in verse 18, **READ 18** - *Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.* Those who trip over such a stone are either broken to pieces or are crushed to bits. Jesus is saying, *"I am the stone and those who reject me will be destroyed just as those who reject the owners Son will be destroyed."*
- Do the Jewish leaders fall on the ground and cry out for mercy when they hear Jesus saying that He is God's Son and the cornerstone? No, their anger only increases and they looked to arrest him. Three days later they did arrest Jesus and they killed him.
  - Their hostility toward Jesus' declaration of judgment simply unmasks them revealing how much they do in fact hate God. They do not cry out for mercy. They harden themselves. What about us today?
- Paul declares in Acts 17 that *"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*
  - How do you react when you hear that God will bring judgment upon you if you do not turn to Jesus for salvation? If you react with increased hostility to this idea of God's judgment it simply reveals that you don't like the idea that God is your owner and you are accountable to Him.
    - But let me ask you this: after enduring such hostility and showing such extreme patience, was the owner not perfectly just to judge and punish the wicked tenants?
- Is God not just in judging humanity? Has he not given us our very lives? Have we not revolted against His ownership? Has He not send endless servants to us and even His own Son? Have we not rejected Jesus?
  - Do you see it then? The fact that humanity can't stand God's judgement is simply the final evidence that the reason we do not believe is because we hate the idea that we are not owners, that we are in fact wicked tenants who have revolted against God and sought to live by our own policies and for our own profit?

## HOW GOD MADE HIS ENEMIES HIS FRIENDS

- That is how the parable ends. Not very fun or encouraging is it? Jesus has unmasked us. But He has shown us the ugly truth about ourselves so that we can be free. Only when you have seen your hostility to God will you cry out, ***“Is there any way for me to be saved?”***
  - This is where the rest of the Bible’s story gives an answer. The answer is good news for the Bible is the story of how God found a way for his enemies to become his friends; how God found a way to reconcile us back to Himself. It all has to do with the cross and resurrection of Jesus.
    - On the cross God treated Jesus, His own Son, as we deserve to be treated. On the cross God treated Jesus as He would treat His enemies so that we do not have to be treated as enemies. On the cross Jesus was punished as we deserve to be punished so that we do not have to be. In raising Jesus from the dead God was saying, ***“The punishment is complete and you can now be free.”***
      - Colossians 1:20 says it well, ***“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.”***
  - So the question is will you remain an enemy of God or will you receive the mercy he offers? Will you grasp hold of the ownership of your life or will you give it over to God? What will you do with Jesus? Will you receive God’s last messenger or will you reject him as the Jewish leaders did?
    - God is patient with you because he does not want you to perish. Will you allow that patience to lead you to repentance?

### (Show Slide 18)

Father in heaven,

I confess that I have acted like an owner when I am actually a tenant. I bow my knee to you and ask that, because of what Jesus has done, you would forgive me of my sins. Thank you for the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation that you have given in Jesus. It is in his name I pray. Amen.