

# "Responding to the Owner"

Matthew 21:33-46

October 5, 2008

**Did you have an opportunity to watch the Vice Presidential debate this past Thursday? I was fascinated. Now if you think I am going to talk politics - you're wrong. I am certainly not daring enough to debate some of those things with you. But I was fascinated. Specifically, I was fascinated by the graphic display that ran at the bottom of the screen on CNN while the debate was going on. It was great - a constant barometer of how people were feeling about what the candidates were saying and how they were saying it. I thought - I've got to get me one of those. Wouldn't it be great if you could each have a little dial to constantly indicate how you were feeling about the sermon. When you were really excited or entertained by what was being said you could turn the dial way up and I would know things were going well. And then when you were really upset or even bored with what I was saying, you could turn it way down to indicate your displeasure and maybe I would stop talking!!! Well .... maybe, I would.**

**It would be really interesting to see where you would have 'dialed' such an indicator during the reading of the Gospel. It is a fascinating parable - a good story - as such you might dial really high. But then it is really strange - people are abused and killed - it really does not make much sense. And worse yet, if you were to think beyond it being an ancient story to the possibility of it being real - tenants refusing to pay the owner the debt they owe .... it could make you angry enough to dial really low or even throw the little dial machine down and rise up in angry protest of such actions.**

**Now, we come to the place in the sermon where you will start to get bored and turn your dials low and even start to drift off to thinking about other things. Let me tell you a little about the parable you heard. The basics are simple - you all caught them. A land owner has beautiful land. He works it, does a million dollars worth of improvements to the land, he thinks of everything .... then when it is perfect he decides to rent it out. The parable is often referred to as the parable of the 'wicked tenants' and, boy are they ever. But the thing is that they are not just wicked - they just are not thinking straight. Imagine thinking that they don't have to pay the minimal rent ... and then actually believing that they can get away with killing the bill collectors .... and then, most incredibly, thinking that if they don't pay and then kill the owners rightful heir, they might be next in line to inherit it all.**

**I tried to imagine what such perverted logic looks like. Imagine this situation. A man is rushing to get to an appointment in Minot, get out on the highway and steps on the gas. He knows his speedometer isn't working right but he is in a hurry and doesn't pay too much attention to the fact that he is passing most of the traffic on**

the road with him - 'after all,' he might think to himself, 'most people here in North Dakota really stay well under the speed limit.' But as he drives along he soon notices that there is a police car approaching from the rear. He watches as the distance between the police car and his gets shorter and shorter. The man thinks about it for a moment and comes to the conclusion that a policeman certainly wouldn't be speeding. They are sworn to uphold the law and therefore, he could judge his speed by the police car in his rear view mirror. Logically, he thought, if the policeman was gaining on him, he must be going too slow. So he gives the car a little more gas just to maintain the distance between them. But the policeman seems to still be gaining on him so the man simply followed his logic one more time and gave 're a little more gas. --- Now for a little while this man might make great time traveling down the freeway - and there might even be some logic to the rational he had used in determining that he could drive a little faster - but somewhere along the line he had better figure out that there is something faulty with his logic. Such absolutely faulty logic could cost a great deal - it might even cost his very life!

No one could ever come to the belief that if you refuse to pay, mistreat the collectors and then kill the son, that somehow you will end up inheriting everything. .... but my contention is that the faulty logic goes much deeper in the parable and in our lives. If you listened closely to the parable maybe you caught it before it ever came to the son being sent. But before we get there .... and before you start dialing down on your attention meters, I've got to tell you a story I love [even though I know I have told it to you before].

It is a story about some scientists that got together one day and decided that we had progressed far beyond the need for a belief in or a dependance on God. They decided to send a representative to speak with God about the fact that we no longer needed Him. The person that was chosen set up a meeting with God and told Him about the decision of the scientists. The scientist simply said, "We no longer need you. After all we have come a long way, baby! We understand so much and can do so many things - we can even clone human beings." God was very patient as He listened to all of this but finally said, "That\*s wonderful - but before I go, let\*s have a little test of your human making abilities just so I will know that you can continue to have life here if something happened to the normal method of reproducing. And let\*s do it the old fashioned way. I created man out of the dust of the earth." The scientist confidently said, "Fine!" And he knelt down and scooped up a handful of dirt. But God said, "Wait a minute - you go and get your own dirt!"

I don't remember what point I tried to make the last time I shared that story, but what strikes me is that it is very easy for us to make a logical assumption .... but a fatally faulty one. The dirt isn't ours. The tenants in the parable certainly forgot. I marvel at the beauty of this parable. In a sense it tells the whole Biblical story of God and His people right back to the Genesis creation story. God - the owner plants a vineyard, a productive

**garden and then when about providing everything that that garden needed ... incredible, beautiful, productive. And then He put us in the midst of that garden and with time, we forgot that we did not own it all. We stopped honoring God and responding to His call - over and over that is the story of the Old Testament. Over and over God sends prophets to call us back to faith but the Biblical story is filled with the stories of how the people ignored the prophets ... even tried put some to death. Then of course there was Jesus the Son - crucified. The parable seems so incredible. Such unimaginable illogic seems almost impossible. Still I know how easy it is to forget who the owner is. Do we still forget? Have we forgotten? It is a tough parable. I would love to dial it down real low and indicate my displeasure with it - maybe God could come up with some better material for me to use. Still I can not help but see the beauty. Imagine how much abuse the owner has endured over the generations and yet He has graciously allowed me to be a tenant on a part of His vineyard. God has prepared it perfectly and invited us to live on His land. Still He comes to see that we remember the owner and invites our appropriate response.**

**AMEN**