

FLIPPED: Something for Nothing
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Mark 12:1-12

He was, by all accounts, a successful man. A builder of fine homes in an upscale American suburb he was known by all to be a creative craftsman, a shrewd businessman, a fair-minded employer, and a generous benefactor. But he was aging now, so before he set out for Florida for the winter, he approached his top construction manager and told him that he was retiring. *"I want you to build me a retirement home, the finest our company has ever built. Spare no expense, use the finest materials, hire the most gifted tradesmen, and build me a masterpiece before I return next spring."*

The very next day, the manager began to plan. He knew what he should do to get the job done right. He knew the skilled labor he would need to hire. He knew the top quality materials it would take, and the designers he should consult.

But later that night, the manager lay awake. Images of his early days with the company, when things were so tight some weeks he wasn't sure if his paycheck would clear, came to mind. He recalled all the family gatherings he had missed over the last 20 years, because a pipe on the job site burst or because the correct tile never came in and he had to be the one on site to fix it. There were so many moments when this manager sacrificed something important just to keep his commitment to his boss.

He figured that if the big guy was indeed retiring, he would probably liquidate the business. Soon, the manager would be out of a job. The resentment already inside him grew. He better prepare himself for the inevitable.

So he decided he better get started. He began with ordering inferior concrete blocks for the foundation. He charged the project for premium materials, and pocketed the difference. They looked almost the same; no one could really tell!

The architect he chose was straight out of school – did it really matter if this was her first design gig? Next, he subcontracted with less experienced carpenters, plumbers, electricians, roofers and landscapers. No one but him would be around to see the work, certainly they would be adequate. Hiring cheap labor allowed him the opportunity to charge his boss for master craftsman level wages and place the difference in his own bank account.

Next, the manager ordered and installed cheap appliances and lighting, insufficient insulation, inferior carpet, and drafty windows. He created receipts showing the materials cost three times what he paid for them, and again, he pocketed the difference.

When the home was finally finished, it looked spectacular – despite all the shortcuts. It would probably be a couple years before the cracks in the foundation would begin. The draftiness around the windows wouldn't be felt until the cold weather came. And by then, he would be long gone.

The house looked so good, that it became the signature home in the development. The only thing that made the manager happier than how the project looked was the bottom line in his personal finances. His nest egg had grown by hundreds of thousands of dollars.

When the boss arrived back home, he toured this mansion fit for a king. He was ecstatic. The manager handed him the keys and thanked his boss for the privilege of working for him for 20 years.

But then the owner did an unthinkable thing: he said to the manager *"You have been a trusted friend and a loyal partner in my business for all of these years; you deserve a home like this."* And he handed him back the keys.

You might hear this story and think "Karma" – what goes around comes around. And you'd be right. But I'm curious about who you empathized with.

Let's begin with the Manager. You've worked hard for 20 years. You think you know where this partnership is headed, but one day you're blindsided with news of a change. You're surprised and hurt. You do what you think you need to do in order to protect yourself. It's so easy to go down the road of fear and self-preservation. It's survival of the fittest, and no one can fault you for that. Your biggest fear in the end is that you will be stuck with nothing.

Or perhaps you empathize more with the Boss. It's true; you have required much from the people who work with you. On the other hand, you couldn't very well be who you are today without pushing them to greatness. Most of your employees – the hardworking ones anyway – will eventually earn what they are worth. This manager has proven that he is a guy you can trust. He's earned this house, and you are quite happy to give it away. Now, isn't that something?

Let's turn to today's parable... who do you empathize with in that story? It's a little more challenging to decide, don't you think?

Certainly not the tenants: what an awful group of folks! Jesus' audience would have understood this group to represent the religious leadership of the day. They're outrageous and violent; and in it for themselves. They disrespect the landowner who has hired them, they're full of dishonesty as they beat and even murder the ones sent to collect his share of the harvest. While their actions may not have been surprising to a first century audience, they sure seem crazy to us.

Then there are the slaves—the landowner's messengers. People listening to Jesus would have understood them to be the prophets of Israel; people like Joel, Amos, Habakkuk, Zechariah and John the Baptist. These messengers represented the landlord who was off doing business in other parts of the kingdom. One by one they come. And one by one they are beaten, chased off and in some cases even killed.

But the story isn't even about all those messengers who must have heard about what was going on with THAT Vineyard. They certainly wouldn't have wanted to be THAT guy who goes into THAT situation knowing that THAT would happen to them too.

It seems a bit crazy, doesn't it? That the landowner would continue to send his trusted servants into this kind of difficulty and darkness? Have you ever heard that one definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results? This story reads like a police report of continued plotting, dishonesty, assault and murder. Is the landlord insane for sending these well-meaning messengers, one after another, into the jaws of death ... and hoping each time for a better result?

Finally he sends his son, assuming the tenants will respect him... what a mistake. Maybe he hadn't considered just how desperate and depraved those tenants really were. They kill his son, somehow convincing themselves that with no heir in the picture the land will pass to them when the landlord dies.

And then there is the landlord—who is, after all, the point of the story. The enduring, tenacious, unrelenting and in some ways, kind of crazy second-third-fourth chances that he gives when he sends slave after slave only to have them beaten and thrown out on their ear? And then after all of that to send his very own son? What makes the landlord think his son will fare any better?

It turns out that the only one in this story crazier than the tenants is the landlord, who, it turns out, has an enduring, tenacious, unrelenting and in some ways, kind of crazy kind of love for them, who gives them chance after chance to do the right thing even when all signs point to their lack of ability to behave with justice and peace.

So there you have it: a wild story about hate and violence and death which points to an even wilder story of extravagant love and abundant life.

The parable is simple enough for anyone to interpret. God has sent prophet after prophet to call God's people to faithfulness, but the people of God abused and murdered them. Finally, God sends Jesus to deliver the message...or perhaps claim the justice and righteousness that is rightly his. But the people crucify the Son.

We hear a word of judgment at the end about how God will come and destroy those wicked tenants. Except, God never does. And perhaps that's the whole point of the story that Jesus was trying to tell... to persuade us to believe that God is so crazy in love with humanity and will go to such extraordinary lengths to reach out to us.

It is a love song about the God of the universe who loves us beyond our imagination — all of us, no exceptions— all of us, whether confused or crazy or comfortable or somewhere in between — enough to send messenger after messenger and, when all else fails, to send God's precious Son.

If God is willing to go to such extravagant lengths to loves us, what do we do with that? It seems to me that this love demands a response. Will we respond to this gift with faith and trust that leads us to act in responsible and generous ways towards others?

Or are we content, like those wicked tenants, to wait in fear, to jealously guard what we believe to be ours, to batten down our hatches, raise our defenses, build taller walls of protection, to claim something for nothing?

When I think about the things that bring me the deepest sense of wonder and awe, I think about the enduring, tenacious, unrelenting and in some ways, kind of crazy love I have experienced in my lifetime. I think of how much I am cared for by my family and friends in spite of myself, which creates in me a need to love others with that same kind of recklessness.

Think about someone in your life who loves and cares for you. When you consider what you know about yourself and how they love you anyway, how does that make you live more fully?

Here's the most important thing for us to take away today: God never gives up on us. This is the amazing part of this story. Certainly the attitude of the tenants is hair-brained. Do they really think they can get away with their evil plot? But through it all, the landowner never seems to give up trying to establish a relationship with them. Well, that is kind of crazy too, given their behavior. But that's the thing about God's grace – it isn't sensible, it isn't logical – it's something for nothing. Amen.