

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree – Luke 13:6–9

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Introduction

As with all parables (indeed, with all statements of Scripture), consideration of context is most important in arriving at the correct understanding and application of this parable. The Jews had come to Jesus with the news that Pilate's soldiers had slain some Galilean worshipers while they were in the very act of offering sacrifices and the Roman governor of Judea had mingled the blood of those slain with that of the slain animals (Luke 13:1). Jesus, reading their minds, knew that they had taken this atrocity to be proof that those Galileans were exceedingly sinful and were chosen recipients of God's just retribution. Their words perhaps hint of self-justification, since they had not met with such a calamity. Did this not prove that they were not so wicked? Foolish men are yet wont to blame God for tragedies of various kinds. The Lord plainly denied their *immediate retribution* philosophy and told them of another calamity in which eighteen people were killed beneath the Siloam tower. "Were these worse than all other men in Jerusalem?" Jesus asked, and then answered, "No" (v. 3a). In response to both cases, Jesus warned those impenitent, self-justifying Jews, "...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (vv. 3, 5). The message yet reverberates: all who live and die in impenitence will eventually—not necessarily immediately perish. This was the motivation behind Paul's urgent plea to the Athenians: God "commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent" in light of the certain impending righteous Judgment (Acts 17:30–31). Jesus then told the company the parable of the barren fig tree.

The Parable and Its Primary Application

A man had planted a fig tree in his vineyard and came to gather fruit from it. When he found no fruit on it he told the keeper of his vineyard that since he had found no fruit on the tree for three successive years, he should cut it down. He did not want it further draining of the soil the nutrients that a fruitful tree could use. But the vinedresser interceded with the owner on behalf of the tree, begging for another year in which he would loosen and fertilize the soil around the tree, hopefully spurring it to fruitfulness. If not fruitful then, the vinedresser agreed, it should indeed be given no more grace—or space.

A vineyard or an orchard (*ampelon* may refer to either) is a place where fruit trees or vines are purposely planted and cared for to produce desired fruit. Just so, God had specially "planted" Israel and had nurtured and cared for her for fifteen centuries. He had made of her a

great nation; she was His chosen people. She had been exalted above all the nations by being given a direct revelation of Divine will, begun through Moses and continued through the prophets, even down the centuries to John, the Lord's forerunner. He had made her the conduit through which He had sent His Son, the Savior of mankind, into the world. Yet as God observed Israel, He saw repeatedly in her a rebellious people whose hearts had become gross, whose ears they had covered, and whose eyes they had closed to His Will (Mat. 13:15). Just as three years was ample time for a fig tree to prove its fruitfulness, 1500 years was surely ample time for Israel to prove her faithfulness. Yet, on the whole, God continued to find unfaithfulness and unfruitfulness in His chosen people. He had every justification to cut them off and give them up at that very moment with no further time of grace.

However, the "vinedresser," (likely representing Christ) begs for more time and additional treatment of the fruitless tree, if by any means it can be made to produce. This plea is reminiscent of an earlier day in Israel's history when God's decision to destroy the entire nation was changed by Moses' fervent intercession (Ex. 32:9–14, 30–32). Not only had Israel, typified by Jerusalem, killed the prophets and stoned the messengers God had sent to call her to repentance, the Jews were, at the time Jesus spoke this parable, in a state of such hardness and impenitence that eventually would lead them to crucify their Messiah (Mat. 23:37). The vinedresser knew and agreed that the tree was not worthy to stand, and Jesus knew that Israel was unworthy of further overtures of mercy. He warned them just before speaking this parable that they should not be comforted by the mere fact that catastrophe had not befallen them. Rather, he plainly warned that their hard, impenitent spirit, if persisted in, would bring calamitous destruction down upon them. Yet, he loved his people and yearned for their repentance. Even as His spirit was departing His body on the cross to which they had nailed Him, he prayed that further grace would be extended to them (Luke 23:34).

The chronicle of this final overture to the Jews, in which they had multiplied opportunities to repent and be forgiven by hearing and obeying the Gospel, may be read in the first seven chapters of Acts. During this time the work of the apostles was centered in Jerusalem. How did the Jews react to the extra "digging" and "fertilizing" that were designed to produce the fruit of repentance? Admittedly, several thousand of them, including some of the priests, obeyed the Gospel (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7). However, the general reaction of the leaders of Israel is seen in the repeated arrests of the apostles and the orders to cease their Gospel preaching (4:18; 5:40). The Jews' hardness of heart was nowhere more evident than in their stoning of Stephen and the wave of persecution led by Saul of Tarsus which it prompted (7:51–8:3).

Even after this turning point that soon saw the Gospel being taken more and more to the Gentiles, the Jews were still not neglected. Paul's habit upon entering the Gentile cities was to first seek out the Jews and preach to them as long as they would hear. The usual—almost universal—occurrence was for the Jews to drive him from their synagogues and even their cities, if possible, proving themselves unworthy of the Gospel (13:44–51; 14:1–7, 19; 17:1–8, et al.). Israel's miserable failure to penitently respond to God's ultimate overture of grace through His Son sealed their doom. The final year of “digging” and “dunging” ran out in A.D. 70 when the Romans overran Jerusalem, tearing down its walls and laying desolate the temple. The order to cut down the fruitless, burdensome tree was executed. Just as Jesus had warned, because the Jews (except in isolated, individual cases) did not repent, a calamity of which the Lord warned them, did befall them. Tens of thousands died in the terrible, months-long siege of the city. Thousands more perished when the city fell, and most of the survivors became slaves. Very possibly, some were in the temple offering sacrifices when they were slain, causing their blood to be mingled with that of the animals. Certainly, some were crushed beneath the great walls, towers and buildings that were pulled down, even as the Siloam tower had fallen upon the eighteen. The Lord's warning of repentance went unheeded and His dire promise was fulfilled. The parable graphically depicts Israel's final opportunity to repent, which she ingloriously spurned.

Additional Applications of the Parable

Application to All Nations

What this parable teaches specifically concerning the awful end of the once-exalted theocracy of first century Israel, it also teaches generally concerning other nations and cities. Even after God determined to wash the world clean of the filth of Noah's generation, He still gave them 120 years to repent at the preaching of the patriarch (Gen. 6:3; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5). Likewise, after God had determined to destroy the wicked cities of the plain, he was still open to Abraham's pleas for the cities and would have graciously spared them had only ten righteous souls been discoverable in them (Gen. 18:20–33). When God sent Jonah to Nineveh, it was already wicked enough to deserve destruction, but God mercifully sent His prophet to warn them, giving them forty days to repent (Jon. 3:1–4). Incidentally, Nineveh did repent, “...from the greatest of them even to the least...,” and God changed His mind about destroying them (vv. 5–10). How does history illustrate the principle that God blesses abundantly a nation or city that honors Him, but sooner or later, destruction, doom, and disaster must overtake those that forget God (Psa. 11:6–7).

While not wishing to join the prophets of doom concerning our own great nation and its future, we dare not ignore some ominous signs. Two hundred years ago our republic was given birth by God-fearing, Bible-believing men who served God as best they knew how. It is evident from the Constitution and the Bill of Rights penned by those men that this is so. For many generations, until fairly recent times, the "frame of reference" of most Americans was belief in God and respect for the Bible. We now live in times when Secular Humanism and emboldened Atheism seem to dominate political, educational, and personal philosophy, and to some degree, theology as well.

These ungodly philosophies have stripped our citizens of their moral restraints and have taught them to "do what feels good" and "what is right in their own eyes." They have also produced soaring rates for all types of crime (especially violent crime), considerable reduction in penalties against the convicted criminal, a flood of filth from movie and TV producers and publishers, loss of respect for human life (tax-funded abortion), the glorification of homosexuality as merely an "alternate lifestyle," the proliferation of profanity in everyday speech and much, much more. While these corrupt practices abound, those who seek to serve God and who must oppose such evils, are being pushed more and more into a corner and are gradually seeing their civil rights eroded. One can scarcely help but wonder how much longer the Lord can forbear exercising His just wrath against our nation without apologizing to Noah's generation, Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel—and all the other nations and cities that have forgotten Him! Could it be that He is now sparing our nation only for the sake of His people who are its citizens? How sorely does our nation need to hear the prophetic warning of Christ, "Repent or perish"!

The Application to the Church

The meaning of this parable must not be lost as it applies to the church. The Lord can no more tolerate a dead, lifeless, unfruitful church that will not change its ways than he can a nation that forgets Him and will not hear His calls to repentance. Laodicea was a "respectable" church with a large contribution that thought it "had need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17a). In reality, it was poor, blind, and naked and in a wretched and miserable state (v. 17b). It was apparently **too** respectable, perhaps neither opposing evil and error nor advancing the Truth sufficiently to stir up any opposition: "Neither cold nor hot." Because of its lukewarm condition the Lord was sickened to the point of threatening to vomit them up (vv. 15–16). They were urged to revive their zeal and repent (vv. 18–19). The Lord warned Ephesus to repent and do her first works or the He would withdraw His fellowship from her (Rev. 2:4–5). The Lord's church has the greatest

treasure ever entrusted to men and is given the whole creation with whom to share it. There is no excuse for the inertia, inactivity, laziness, unconcern, carelessness, and consequent unfruitfulness seen in so many “respectable” churches. Someday the Lord will say of leaders of such churches, “Cut them down.”

The Application to Individuals

The great lesson of this parable must also be addressed and applied to individuals. After all, nations, cities, and churches can act only through the persons who compose them. In the great “Vine and Branches” allegory of John 15, Jesus stressed that He expected his disciples, individually, to bear fruit. Otherwise, the unfruitful branch will be pruned from the vine and destroyed. An unfruitful tree has no right to burden the soil and an unfruitful branch has no right to burden the vine and all the other branches. Neither does an unfruitful, unproductive, unfaithful, disciple have a right to burden the rest of the church with his or her dead weight; yet one sees so much of it. The only thing some see in being a Christian is obeying a few initial requirements and then attending worship to partake of the Lord’s Supper when it’s convenient. Far too many want little or nothing to do with the church unless they need something (sickness, death, marriage, financial need). When it’s time to work, give their money and time for the greatest of all causes, or really sacrifice and inconvenience themselves in the Lord’s work, they are “no-shows.”

As in society in general, many members of the church are “free-loaders,” trying to live on sort of a “religious welfare” program. They don’t want any of the responsibilities, but they are always there for the “hand-outs.” The Lord cannot be patient with such “fig trees” forever. One day He is going to have to cease the special “digging” and “fertilizing” He continues to do through faithful preachers, teachers, and elders and say to the vinedresser concerning that unfruitful and unfaithful follower, “Cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground?” Our task is still the same that the Lord set for Himself: “We must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4). The only way we can bear fruit for the Lord is to follow His lead in faithful service. Even if an abundant harvest never results from our labors, are faithful “labor is not vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Conclusion

We must not overlook the insight into the nature and will of God this parable provides. Because God is perfectly holy, pure, and has no moral imperfections, His righteous judgment is against all sin. Were this not true, He would not be God. However, He is a God of mercy, forbearance, patience, and love. In the conversation between the owner and the caretaker of

the vineyard one sees a picture of the just wrath of God against sin, tempered by His sublime love and mercy for the sinner. He "...is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9b). At the same time, the parable also shows that "The Lord is not slack, concerning his promise" (v. 9a); He has promised judgment of all men by His Son at which time sin must be punished (Acts 17:30–31). There will come a time when further patience and mercy for man's impenitent rejection of God's Word would be a vice rather than a virtue. There will come a time, in God's own infinite wisdom, when sin, unfruitfulness and impenitence must be and shall be "cut down." God's New Testament "Israel" dare not forget this!

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