

Fruitless Fig Tree • Luke 13:6-9

We can't help but wonder why some people die when others live. Several years ago a Northwest Airline DC-9 flight crashed shortly after take off in Detroit taking the lives of 156 people. I have often flown on DC-9s out of Detroit and yet my planes have always taken off and landed without difficulty. Why is it that those lives were taken and my life has been spared? On that particular flight one 4-year-old girl survived while everyone else died. Why?

On another occasion a one-ton boulder careened down Berthoud Pass in Colorado hitting a tour bus and taking the lives of unsuspecting people. I have driven Berthoud Pass many times and never dreamed that my life was at risk. I lived. They died. Why?

Or why was it that some people survived the collapse of the World Trade Center when others did not?

Could it be that the victims of these tragedies somehow had it coming? Was it because of some mistakes they made or sins they committed that their plane crashed, their bus was hit or they were in the World Trade Center when it collapsed?

That's not a new question. Actually the same thing was asked of Jesus in Luke 13:1-5:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

There is no other historical reference to the events referred to here so we can only guess at what happened. Apparently Jews from northern Palestine had come to Jerusalem and were offer-

ing sacrifices in the temple when soldiers under the command of Pilate, the Roman governor, attacked and murdered them. Their blood actually ran down the altar and mingled with the blood of those animal sacrifices. It was an ugly and unnecessary tragedy.

Then there was the tower of Siloam. This was probably a lookout tower on the wall of Jerusalem near the Pool of Siloam. For some reason it collapsed, crushing and killing 18 people.

Many people thought these had died because they were worse sinners than everyone else. It

wasn't that they knew of any sins these people had committed. They could have been secret sins. After all, if it wasn't God's judgment for super sins, why did they die so miserably? But Jesus was emphatic when he said, "I tell

you, NO!" In fact he repeated it twice, in verse 3 and then again in verse 5: "I tell you, NO!" That is not the way God operates.

But then Jesus sort of changed the subject. You have to give special attention to follow what he did. He switched from talking about individual sin to talking about national sin when he said in verses 3 and 5, ". . . unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Let's try to get the gist of what he was saying. It was true that people died tragically, but it wasn't because of any particular sins they committed. However, the nation of Israel was on a course for trouble. The whole country was going to end up dead unless they changed. They were on a collision course with the Roman government and with God. If they didn't repent and change their ways blood would be shed just like it was at the altar and they would be crushed just like with the tower. And that is exactly what happened. In A.D. 70 the Romans under Titus destroyed Jerusalem, killed the residents and even chopped down the trees and leveled the buildings. Israel ceased to exist as a nation.

What a sad story. Too bad they didn't listen to Jesus and repent while they had the chance.

God gives us good and we should respond to his goodness with growth.

Let me guess that not all of you followed all of that. Some of you are thinking, “Sounds like one of my old history classes and I got a D in history. I did better in Short Stories.” Well, it was the same when Jesus was teaching. He figured that not everyone understood so he switched his teaching approach from history to story and told them a parable in Luke 13:6-9:

A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

“Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

This parable was about the nation of Israel. Jesus was saying that the nation was blessed but unresponsive. It deserved to be chopped down, but God would give it one more chance . . . a chance that was rejected.

But what’s in this parable for us? Surely there is some modern personal truth that goes beyond ancient historical truth. So let’s find that truth and apply it to our lives.

It all begins with the message to “grow in grace”. To understand this, let’s look at o 2 Peter 3:18 where we are told to “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*” It’s a simple and sensible principle. God gives us good and we should respond to his goodness with growth. We should flourish in God’s grace and grow big and strong, bear fruit galore and be everything God wants us to be.

But, what if we don’t? What if we don’t grow at all? What if there is no fruit? Then, Jesus says in the parable that God gives us his warning and his patience.

The warning is in verses 6 and 7. In the parable, when the owner of the vineyard came visiting, he had one expectation of his fig tree: FRUIT. He had every reason to expect fruit. The tree had plenty of time. The normal time for a fig tree to mature and begin to bear figs is three years or less. The tree in the parable had the full and normal amount of time. It should have figs.

The tree had good conditions. Much of the soil in Palestine is shallow and poor. The best soil was used for vineyards. Often vineyards had fruit trees planted in them among the grape vines. The parable tree had the best soil and the best attention. There was no better placed in Palestine for growing figs than in a vineyard.

The tree was a fig tree. That seems obvious. But it is equally obvious that what a fig tree is supposed to do is grow figs! It’s no wonder he came looking for fruit. The tree had time to grow fruit, the conditions were right for fruit and it was a fruit tree. The expectation was as normal as could be.

All of this is rather like people. As individuals we have the best of conditions to grow spiritually and be the kind of people God wants us to be. In our country we have religious freedom, lots of churches, Christian radio stations, conferences, tapes, books, Bible studies and more. All of this is fertile soil with lots of nutrients for spiritual growth.

The time we have had to grow will be different for each person, but God does give us the time we need to grow spiritually. How long has it been for you? Have you begun your spiritual journey yet? If not, begin your life with Christ now and start growing in him today.

Those who are Christians are supposed to bear the fruit of Christians. God expects us to grow spiritually, to know the Bible and to live the good, productive, joyful lives he wants for us.

We’re all okay with this expectation, aren’t we? I mean, it certainly makes sense, doesn’t it? If we are Christians, God expects us to bear the fruit of being Christians.

But now comes the scary part. The man in the parable saw that the tree had gone three years and hadn’t grown a single fig. So he came to a quick conclusion: “*Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?*”

That may seem heartless to some, but fig trees are not for growing leaves and giving shade, they are for growing figs. A fig tree that did not grow figs did not deserve to remain. Farming then was difficult. Good soil was scarce. Trees taking nutrients and depleting the precious soil couldn’t be tolerated if they were fruitless. The only sensible thing was to cut it down and make room for a tree that would do what a fig tree is supposed to do.

We understand that because we do the same kind of thing. If we have a shade tree that doesn't give shade or an evergreen tree that turns brown, we cut it down. If we have a car that won't run, an air-conditioner that won't cool or a stove that won't cook we get rid of it. The same goes for an employee. If he or she is given all the tools, all the training and all the time but still won't produce that employee gets fired to make room for someone who will produce.

But we are talking here about something much more serious and significant than trees or appliances or even employees. We are talking about a person's relationship to God! We are talking about men and women who have been loaded with God's grace but just won't grow! They have been taught from heaven but have a lifestyle more reflective of hell. They have been nurtured by God but refuse to grow. They have had year after year of God's expectations but are no different now than they were three years ago. The warning is plain: "*Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?*"

Earlier this year, while on a trip to another state, I had a conversation with the mother of a fruitless fig tree. He had grown up in a Christian home where the spiritual nutrients in the soil were plentiful. He married a woman who wants their marriage to center on Jesus Christ and evidence the principles of the Bible. He would say he is a Christian, but there is no fruit. His life is barren, sterile and empty. God has no place in his life. His profession is all-important. He is a fig tree without fruit. And he is not the only one!

Maybe that's you, too. You've had it all. God has given you abundant blessings but there is no fruit. He's given you lots of time, but still no fruit. Eventually the past begins to predict the future and the conclusion becomes obvious: "*Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?*"

It's a serious warning. God who gives us grace expects us to grow in grace. He expects Christians to have the fruit of a Christian. He warns us about the dangers and consequences of fruitlessness. But that's only half the parable. The gardener in this short story pleads for the tree, saying in verse 8,

"Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down." Remember, this tree has already had the best soil, the best care and the best nutrients. But the caretaker wants to give it more.

In John 15:1 Jesus said, "*... my Father is the gardener.*" And the gardener is just like God! When we fail to respond to his grace he gives us more grace. He heaps on the care and the fertilizer that make us want to grow. I've seen it so often that I've lost track. God is gracious to a man who responds with total fruitlessness. He even swears profusely in the name of the God who has been so good. So God responds with more goodness. God gives his grace to a teenager who isn't the least bit interested in Christianity, the Bible, church, prayer or godliness. She makes every effort to completely close God out of her life—and God gives more grace. I've seen people who have tried every sin imaginable to defy and hurt the God who loves them and gave his Son for them. But instead of cutting them down like a fruitless fig tree, God tries once more.

...the good news is that God gives those of us who are fruitless trees more time as well! He is the God of the second chance!

By the way, there is something I must mention even at the risk of offending a few people. Did you notice what got heaped on the tree to make it grow? Manure! Does that sound like real life? Experience

tells me that that is just what God sometimes has to heap on us to get us growing! God's grace is what is best for us, even though we may not always appreciate the way it looks and smells and feels!

Yes, he is the patient God of more grace. And more time! "One more year," the gardener asks. "One more year! If there is no fruit after one more year, then cut it down."

God gave the extra time to Israel around A.D. 30. It was actually far more than a year. It was 40 years—another generation. Tragically, there was no repentance. There was no fruit. And the Romans cut Israel down.

But the good news is that God gives those of us who are fruitless trees more time as well! He is the God of the second chance! I hope we all hear

that well. To those who have ignored his message, resisted his grace and sinned against him and others he will give more time, a second chance. To those whose lives have been a wreck, filled with sin and disaster, he gives more time. He is the God of beginning again. To men and women whose hearts have been hard, who deserved to be chopped down long ago—he is patient; he waits; he tries for one more year.

This is not to say that God will be patient forever. Even second chances can run out. But that's not today's issue. Today's issue is whether those of us confronted by the patient God will say, "yes!" to our second chance. How about it? Have you been running from God? Is your life a mess? Are you missing the fruit for which you were designed? Do you feel like you are about to be cut down? Will you take your second chance and begin again?

The parable ends with the outcome untold. We never learn what happens a year later when the tree is checked for fruit—if it is full of figs or chopped to the ground. Just as we don't know what will happen when God comes checking our lives a year from today. What will he find? What will he do?

Let me propose an epilogue to your version of the parable. Insert your name if you choose. He told this parable:

A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"

"Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

And when the man returned one year later, he found the tree full of fruit and he rejoiced greatly in the change that had come. So shall it be for all who turn from their sins and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Are you a fruitless tree? Is it time for you to change, to repent of sin and grow with God? Is this your second chance? Take the opportunity. Tell God. Confess your sin to him and commit yourself to a new beginning with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
©Leith Anderson