

The Parables of Jesus

- The Unfruitful Fig Tree

(Luke 13:8-9)

The parable of the “Unfruitful Fig Tree” is found only in the Gospel of Luke. It was given by Jesus as He was teaching in the region of Galilee. He had stated in Luke 12:54-59 that people were able to discern “natural signs” but were unable to discern “spiritual things.” They were looking at people and events from a distorted “spiritual” viewpoint which had been brought about

by the misinterpretation of the scriptures by their religious leaders. They were busy looking at what they had determined was the “sinfulness” of others while becoming blind to their own sin and wickedness. Jesus bluntly called them hypocrites. The context of our parable is based on the continuation of this discussion.

Jesus was asked by some in the crowd about an event that had recently taken place at the Temple in which Pontius Pilate murdered some Jews who were from Galilee and then mixed their blood along with that of their sacrifices. (Luke 13:1) This would be considered not only heinous but also sacrilegious to the Jewish people. Being that they were in Galilee, this would have been big news to those to whom Jesus was speaking to. Based on Jesus’ answer and the following parable we can safely say that the real reason why this issue was brought up was concerning the “sin and wickedness” of those murdered.

The Jewish people were long under the impression that the greater the tragedy or calamity that may have befallen a person, it would be indicative of the greater sin they were in or had committed within their lives. They had also thought this way about people who had diseases or physical ailments. In other words they had judged those afflicted as “cursed” and sinful because of their physical condition or because of the tragedies they experienced. Therefore, the idea of how “sinful” those who were murdered by Pilate were was actually at the heart of what the crowd was inferring when they came to Jesus with their remarks.

It is interesting to note that the people who were involved in this discussion seemed to be more concerned about how bad and sinful those people who were murdered by Pilate were than the fact that their own countrymen were murdered and the Temple was desecrated by Pilate. Hmmm...

Jesus went straight to the point. He knew what they were thinking. He went on to bring up another event that they would have been familiar with - the collapse of the Tower of Siloam that killed eighteen people. The cause of the tower collapsing was likely a small earthquake or tremor which were common in that area in those days. The first calamity was caused by human intervention (Pilate) the other by natural causes (a small earthquake and tremor).

In Jewish thought, it did not matter what the cause may have been; it was the result that mattered. The thinking of that day was that any calamity that happened to a person was always caused by that person's sin. Unfortunately, in the Body of Christ today we have “picked up” this same mentality. In some churches it is openly spoken and taught while in others it is quietly implied with “pointing fingers.” Hmmm...

Unfortunately, just as it did then and as it does today, this kind of generalization, that everything and anything bad that happens to a person, is used by some in the Body of Christ as a barometer of sin within that person's life. This kind of incorrect thinking only brings guilt and condemnation to many in the Body of Christ. Yes, we know that there is a wage to all sin. Yes, we live in a fallen world. But that doesn't mean that when bad things befall people it is because of sin. As they say, "bad things can happen to good people."

Jesus warned those listening not to “assume” that the victims of those tragedies had been “judged by God” for any great evil that they may have done. It is always a temptation for people to assign sudden, unexplainable deaths to the “judgment of God” in response to secret (or open) sin. Jesus makes it clear that it is a mistake to automatically attribute such tragedies to the “vengeance of God.” No one is to “assume” that these or any other victims are somehow worse sinners therefore deserving to be afflicted or die as a punishment from God.

Jesus comes right to the heart of the issue as he asked them very bluntly in Luke 13:2-4 *"...Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."* Notice, to both of these rhetorical questions Jesus answered, *"Nay: but, except **ye repent**, ye shall all **likewise perish**."* This is important. When anything is repeated within the same context it is meant to give an exponential importance to the comment. Jesus, in repeating this answer twice was specifically pointing the listeners to a very specific topic for them to understand.

Through the giving of this answer twice, Jesus expresses the real issue at hand. It was the incorrect attitude of heart by all of those who were present. They were looking at those who were murdered or killed as sinners. After all that was what they were taught by their leaders. Unfortunately, they lacked the understanding that they too were sinners. They were all in danger of "perishing" – eternally because of their own sin. But they were too blind to see it.

It is the classic case of self-righteousness. Self-righteousness looks at the faults or possible faults of others because of situations, events, etc. Even though the self righteous one may not have all the facts, they jump to the quick and easy conclusion that everyone else is in sin. As Jesus would teach, they would be quick to look at the splinter that would be in their brother's eye but neglect to take care of the beam that is in their own eye. Self-righteousness looks and points the finger at others but lacks the understanding of the need for their own repentance of the sin lurking within their own life.

However, there is even a greater issue at hand that Jesus wanted to reveal and let His listeners know about. This whole issue concerning sin was not just about individuals or even groups of people. The real issue was the sin of and the need for repentance by the entire nation of Israel – individually, as a people and as a nation. Jesus was teaching on the need for the entire Jewish nation, every one of them, to recognize how far they have strayed from the God who loved them. To do so, Jesus then proceeded to give the parable.

The Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree - Luke 13:6-9

"He spoke also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shall cut it down."

Let's first review the "Characters" involved in this parable

- The "fig tree" - We must take note here that fig trees were common trees in the land. However, they would rarely be planted in vineyards because their deep, long ranging roots and large branches would take up much ground that would otherwise be used for the vine. This fig tree was specifically planted in the midst of this "vineyard." It was totally different and out of the ordinary for this tree to be in the midst of a vineyard. Therefore, the fig tree in our parable represents a very special tree that the owner had planted. The "fig tree" in scripture is always symbolic of the nation of Israel as a whole or each individual, personally.
- The "vineyard" – A vineyard is a large area where certain crops, such as grapes, berries, etc., that only grew on vines would be grown. There would rarely be any other type of tree or bush planted in the vineyard that might take nutrients away from the vines. This "vineyard" represents all of the rest of creation and Man.

- The "owner of the vineyard" – Obviously, this would be the owner of the entire vineyard. This owner would have been the one who would have planted or given permission to plant, this lone but yet very special "fig tree" in the midst of His vineyard. He had planted it in the midst of his vineyard having great expectations that this tree would be fruitful. It also suggests that the owner had a "taste" for the fruit that would come from this very specific tree placed in the midst of this vineyard. Obviously, the "fruit" of this tree would give this owner great delight. This "owner" was representative of God, the Father
- The "dresser" or "keeper of the vineyard" – This was the person whose responsibility it was to tend to and care for the entire vineyard. It was his life. This included all the vines in the vineyard as well as this fig tree. This "dresser" was representative of Jesus. This is showing us that it was Jesus' function and purpose to "tend" to and care for the souls of all of God's most precious of creation – both Jew and Gentile.
- The "fruit" (figs) that, unfortunately, were not found on the fig tree. The use of figs in the Bible seems to be something of a barometer of the "spiritual health" of the Israel. We see in the scriptures that when Israel is doing bad and walking away from God or in rebellion against Him, the figs are "taken away" as the wage of their rebellious and wicked actions. When Israel is walking in the ways of the Lord, figs are flourishing, thereby representing times of restoration and prosperity. Unfortunately, in our parable, the fig tree was bearing no fruit which symbolically meant that Israel, as a people and nation were not walking in the ways of the Lord. They were not producing the fruit that God had intended for them to bring forth.

The parable itself is self explanatory in itself. The owner of a vineyard came and saw that the fig tree he had planted three years ago has not produced any fruit. The use of the time period of "three years" is a key point of information. The fig tree is a tree known in the Middle East region for its abundance of fruit that produces at least ten months out of the year. The use of the term "three years" suggests that this fig tree was not planted from seed in this vineyard. It was most likely started as seed somewhere else and then transplanted into this vineyard where it would become established and begin to do what a fig tree does - bear fruit. Typically, after transplanting a fig tree such as this one, it would normally begin to produce fruit within the first year or at the latest, the second year. This one had not produced even in its third year!!!

The owner came and said that it was beyond its time. It was time to cut it down because it was not bearing any fruit. The "dresser" or keeper of the vineyard asked for more time – another year. He would try to nurture it and fertilize it and try to get it to produce fruit. The "keeper" however, did say that if the tree had not borne fruit after one more year, then it would be cut down. The point was that the tree was living "on borrowed time" because of the owner's grace and mercy in allowing it more time.

Jesus was teaching, through the use of this parable, that the Jewish people were "living on borrowed time" and that the time was near that "the axe would be laid to the root." (Matthew 3:10; Luke 3:9) They, as a nation, as well as individually, needed to repent (change their heart and turn towards their God) and "prepare for the way of the Lord," their Messiah, to come within their own heart, individually as well as nationally. They needed to start bearing some "fruit" – the first being the "fruit of repentance." The "fruit of repentance" is what prepares the way for Messiah to come – within a person's life and/or a nation.

This was the message of John the Baptist as he was "crying in the wilderness" as the forerunner to Messiah. His message was a call to repentance. His baptism was a "baptism of repentance."

- Matthew 3:1,2 - *"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, **Repent** ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"*

- Mark 1:3, 4 - *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the **baptism of repentance** for the remission of sins."*
- Luke 3:2, 4 - *"...the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness... As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, **Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.**"*
- John 1:23 - *"He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, **Make straight the way of the Lord**, as said the prophet Esaias."*

This was Jesus' message as well - Repent (change your heart and turn towards your God) in preparation for me, your Messiah. It was really His first message as He began His ministry. John was to "decrease" and Jesus was to "increase." However, their message was the same – repent, prepare for the way of the Lord and His Kingdom as Messiah will bring salvation to all those who repent and turn towards Him. The message was for both, the individual's heart and the nation.

- Matthew 4:17 - *"From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, **Repent**: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*
- Mark 1:4,15 - *"Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: **repent** ye, and believe the gospel."*

Jesus, through this parable, was telling those who "had ears to hear," that the time was getting short. The real issue at hand was the issue of the condition of their heart. The real issue was the sin that was in all men – including the Jewish people. They could no longer be able to hold on to the notion of their salvation just because they were the children of Abraham. The time had come for them to repent from their wicked ways of not being prepared, of not being watchful, of self-righteousness, of sin, of not treating their fellow people correctly with love and mercy, etc.

It is only because of Jesus' intercession that the time has been prolonged. It is only because of God, the Father's, love, grace and mercy that judgment has been put off for a time. 2Peter 3:9 tell us this as it states, *"The Lord does not delay {and} is not tardy {or} slow about what He promises, according to some people's conception of slowness, but **He is long-suffering** (extraordinarily patient) toward you, not desiring that any should perish, but that all should turn to repentance."* (Amplified) However, that "day" will come.

The "fruit" that the Father is looking for upon His "fig tree," the Jewish people, as well as all people, is the "fruit of a repentant heart" - a heart that recognizes that it needs God. It is a heart that recognizes their sinful, wicked ways and then chooses to turn from that sinful way (repent) and turn towards a loving, merciful, Heavenly, Father. This is accomplished through Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ.

- Luke 3:8 - *"Bring forth therefore **fruits worthy of repentance**, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."*
- Matthew 5:3, 4 - *"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."* This is a person who recognizes their need for God and cries out to Him. Their reward is true salvation - everything within the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. They recognize and mourn over their sinful, wicked heart. Their reward is that they will be comforted through receiving the full forgiveness of their loving Father, God.

The message of the "Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree" is clear and succinct. Jesus was referring to the Jewish people and their need to repent - every single one of them. And the time was now!!!

Horrible events that may take place are not a barometer of a person's sinfulness. Neither is a person's life that may be blessed and prospering, a barometer of that individual's lack of sin in their lives. This was also, a common belief by the Jewish leaders and teachers. Unfortunately, both of the above are incorrect messages that are given in many churches today. It does not matter. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) No one's sin is greater or less than anyone else's sin. Sin is sin and all sin needs to be repented of. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to wicked people. The rain falls on the just and the unjust.

It was time for all of the Jewish people to stop looking and judging the sins of others and to begin looking inwardly concerning their own sinful, wicked ways. It was time for them to recognize the incorrect "attitude of their own heart" towards God and His ways. The sin that Jesus was referring to was their hardened heart towards their God and the rejection of their Messiah. They had left their "first love," their "Abba Father." They had turned towards other gods, the chief being the "god of the traditions of men." It was the god of self-righteousness and arrogance.

Through this parable Jesus was teaching His disciples the need for an "attitude of heart" that is truly geared towards desiring to repent and turn from their sinful and wicked lifestyle. The Jewish people needed to hear the message of the parable. The time was getting short. The "axe was ready and aimed at the root." It was only through the intercession of Jesus, the "keeper and dresser of the vineyard," that they were not yet "cut off."

There needed to be a true repentance to come within the hearts of the people, both individually, as well as a nation. The time was **now!!!** Jesus was giving them the supreme opportunity before it was too late. Jesus' message, and as we know the Apostles' message, was always to be to the "Jew first" because the Jewish people were that "special fig tree" planted by the Father, personally, in the midst of the entire vineyard. They were to be the ones whose "fruit" would bless the heart of the Father and thereby bless the entire vineyard (all creation and all of Man). It was to be their lifestyle of obedience and surrender to Yahweh and His ways that would bring blessings upon them for the world to see who Yahweh truly is so that the world would see, repent of their wickedness, and turn towards Him.

Therefore, this message is true, not just for the Jewish people but for everyone - Jew and Gentile. We all need to recognize our need for God and recognize that the time is short. We must continually recognize the need to repent from our hardness of heart concerning God. We must take the opportunity given to us, in and through Jesus, and choose to turn towards Him and acknowledge His calling out to us to "*repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*" We must live this lifestyle, 24/7 – not in condemnation but with true conviction for the purpose of presenting our lives as a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable unto Him.

We must never take the tremendous gift of salvation, which has been so mercifully provided to those who believe, for granted. We must never fall into complacency. We must always, as Paul exhorts in his letters, to continually "work out" our salvation with "fear and trembling." (Philippians 2:12) The parable of "The Unfruitful Fig Tree" is just as relevant to believers today as it was to the Jewish people at the time that Jesus presented and taught it. Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear!!!