

The Fruitless Fig Tree

by John Edmiston

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Luke 13:6-9 ESV *And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. (7) And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' (8) And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. (9) Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

This is a parable of impending and devastating judgment. The "man" who owns the vineyard and seeks its fruit is God Almighty; the fig-tree is national Israel; the vineyard in which the fig-tree is planted is the land of Israel and particularly Judea; and fruit that is sought is righteousness, mercy, humility and truth. In John 15 the vine-dresser is the Father but in this passage it appears to be Christ in His intercessory role. "Cut it down" = give it over to the Romans (Adam Clarke's commentary). The 'one year more' is a limited time for repentance.

Apparently the time was up for national Israel. Even John the Baptist warned that the tree was soon to be chopped down:

Matthew 3:8-10 MKJV *Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance; (9) and do not think to say within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. (10) And now also, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bring forth good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.*

God's patience with the impenitent is long but is nonetheless limited:

Romans 2:4-6 MKJV *Or do you despise the riches of His kindness, and the forbearance and long-suffering, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? (5) But according to your hardness and your impenitent heart, do you treasure up wrath for yourself in a day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, (6) who will render to each according to his works;*

God came three times to Israel expecting fruit - the three years represented in the parable. Three chances had been given, a fourth was sheer grace. The tree was well cared for, it was in the midst of a vineyard, was in good soil, and was taken care of by a vine-dresser. It was not a wild tree by the wayside. Fruit was a reasonable expectation. One more chance would be given, the next Divine visit would be for judgment:

Luke 12:48 MKJV *For to whomever much is given, of him much shall be required. And to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.*

In another parable Jesus indicates that the rejection of the Messiah, the Son of God, would be the last straw, the final act that would mark Israel as a fruitless nation:

Matthew 21:33-43 MKJV *Hear another parable. There was a certain housemaster who planted a vineyard and hedged it round about, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and rented it to vinedressers, and went into a far country. (34) And when the season of the fruits drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers to receive its fruits. (35) And the vinedressers took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. (36) Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them. (37) But last of all he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son. (38) But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and get hold of his inheritance. (39) And taking him, they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. (40) Therefore when the lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers? (41) They said to Him, Bad men! He will miserably destroy them and will rent out his vineyard to other vinedressers who will give him the fruits in their seasons. (42) Jesus said to them, Did you never read in the Scriptures, "The stone which the builders rejected, this One has become the head of the corner; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" (43) Therefore I say to you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing out its fruits.*

What is plain from these parables and others like them is that God expects 'fruit' from His people. He is not content with lip-service, rituals, empty religion or with fake faith that does not produce any good works. Getting baptized by John was not enough, there had to be a lifestyle change, a bearing of fruit in keeping with repentance.

No fruit is different from bad fruit. Bad fruit (such as thorns and brambles) indicate that you have entirely the wrong species in your garden:

Matthew 7:16-17 MKJV *You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? (17) Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit.*

Bad fruit comes from unbelievers such as false prophets, hypocrites and so on. It is the toxic fruit of false religion. Those who produce bad fruit show they are not even Christians in the first place, they are the wrong spiritual species. They are the heretics who have ceased abiding in Christ and thus are gathered up and cast into the fire.

John 15:6 MKJV *If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered. And they gather and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.*

While the parable refers to Israel I believe it is of much wider application. Nations and empires come to an end when they cease to bear fruit for God. The Roman, British and Russian Empires all eventually collapsed once they decisively turned away from God. I fear that the post-Christian West (England, Europe, Australia, Canada, some parts of the USA etc) is in great danger of being 'cut down' unless it soon repents and bears fruit.

The need to bear fruit also applies to the Church and to Christian leaders such as the apostles who are expected to 'bear much fruit':

John 15:5 EMTV *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; because apart from Me you can do nothing.*

Christians in general are expected to 'bear fruit':

Colossians 1:10 EMTV *that you should walk worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit and increasing in the full knowledge of God;*

Now this creates a theological quandary for some people. If God expects us to bear fruit – is that salvation by works? And will God sent unfruitful Christians to Hell?

The first and most basic fruit is faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. If we have true faith then we are acceptable to God and do not pass into judgment:

John 5:24 MKJV *Truly, truly, I say to you, He who hears My Word and believes on Him who sent Me has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed from death to life.*

Romans 8:1 MKJV *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

The Spirit-led believer is not condemned, and is not cast into Hell. They are saved by faith alone! Yet though saved by faith, they are expected to do good works, in fact Christians are created to do good works!

Ephesians 2:8-10 MKJV *For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.*

So while we are not saved by good works, we are saved in order to do good works. The outcome of our faith should be a constructive life (James 2:14-26). What happens then to the believer who produces little or no fruit? They go to Heaven but have no reward:

1 Corinthians 3:15 MKJV *(15) If anyone's work shall be burned up, he shall suffer loss. But he shall be saved, yet so as by fire.*

Do not be too casual about your Christianity. Do not sit there like the unproductive fig tree thinking you have a right to your 'place' in the ministry vineyard. If you are unfruitful God may remove you from your ministry (but not from the Book of Life). Abide in Christ and make the decision to walk in holiness and to bear fruit for God. This does not mean you have to be frantic and over-zealous. But it does mean that you should pay attention to your spiritual life so that you produce love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23).

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