Text: Luke 13:6-9
Title: A Fruitless Fig Tree
Truth: God assigns judgment for those who bear no fruit
Date/Location: September 15, 2024 at FBC

Introduction

As often He did, the Lord Jesus spoke in a parable to teach an important lesson. The parable did reveal truth to those who looked into it, but probably seemed cryptic to others who listened with a critical ear. "What is this babbler talking about fig trees for?"

The background of this parable was easily understandable to the audience. I hope it is not too foreign for us today, even though most of us do not keep vineyards, fig trees, and many do not even have gardens! I suppose I should think about other ways to illustrate the teaching of Jesus with modern illustrations—from office work or modern service-type jobs?

I. The Agricultural Parable

A. In this parable we have a man who owns a vineyard/farm. He planted a fig tree there that has been in place for at least three years. It may have been planted earlier and has been in probation for three years to see if it would produce fruit. But it was barren, meaning it was fruitless. When it realistically should have started bearing fruit, there was none.

The keeper was the gardener, the steward who oversaw the operation.

B. The fig tree was planted, but not in a fig tree grove. It was planted in a vineyard that would produce grapes and grape juice/wine. This might catch your eye because it does not seem to fit in. But the practice of multi-cropping was well-known in the culture and made it so that all the crops in the shared area could benefit from one another. They formed a symbiotic relationship, including nutrient production and sharing, shade, weed reduction, etc.

C. Notice that the certain man he came seeking fruit. He was watching and waiting for the tree to do what trees normally do. Maybe several times a year he would take particular care to look at

the tree, maybe have it pruned some, make sure it was being watered, look to see if it had any disease, etc.

D. He observed finally that the tree was not bearing fruit, so he told the vinedresser to chop it down. The problem with a fruitless tree is two-fold:

1. It is useless. It is not doing what it was supposed to do.

2. It takes up space, nutrients, water, etc. which could be used more efficiently by another potential fruit-bearer to actually do something. It was "using up the ground" in the language of the man.

E. The final end of the useless tree is to be cut down. This is a very bad destiny. It does not picture anything good or comforting in terms of the lessons conveyed by the parable. It immediately calls to mind Matthew 3:10 // Luke 3:9.

F. In view of the finality of the chopping process, the gardener asks for more time. He would take special steps to try to encourage fruitfulness. The fertilizer (NKJV) is simply manure, or *dung* (KJV). It was not scientifically formulated like our artificial fertilizers are today, but it had the advantage of being readily available and totally organic! At the end of the time, say another year until fruit-bearing season, they would see what happened. If it was better, then it was recovered and would be kept. If not, after that he advised the certain man that he could cut it down.

II. The Direct Application: Fruitless Israel

A. We now consider the meaning of what Jesus was saying to his audience. The man who planted represents God. The keeper or vinedresser or gardener represents Jesus.[1] The fig tree represents Israel. In fact, Israel is pictured as a vineyard (Isaiah 5).

B. God planted Israel in its place (Isaiah 5:7, Jer. 11:17), and replanted them after the captivity, and in the future He will plant them there again (2 Samuel 7:10 // 1 Chronicles 17:9).

[1] Jesus was mistaken for a gardener (John 20:15). He was depicted as a vine (John 15).

C. God also observed the nation over a prolonged period. We read about it in our Old Testament and in the gospels. Did you notice in Isaiah 5:7 that God "looked" for various qualities, but found the opposite? Like God sent the angels to go down to Sodom and Gomorrah to observe their wickedness directly, He sent His Son to be present on earth with His people. He came to His own, but His own did not receive him (John 1:11). He looked for faithfulness but found little of it. In fact, he found some among Gentiles (Luke 7:9)!

D. Finding little to no fruit of repentance, nor fruit of good works, God decided to initiate the curses promised in Deuteronomy 28 and elsewhere. We read of this in the Kings and Chronicles as well as the major and minor prophets.[2] Eventually these curses led to an almost complete chopping down of the nation to a stump. It had some shoots grow up while the north was carted off to Assyrian captivity never to return, and the southern kingdom (Judah mainly) was in Babylon. Some remnant was left behind, but the tree was pretty much dead.

E. God exercised grace and permitted the nation to come back after 70 years. And then he *repeated* the experiment, so to speak. Really, the history of Israel is a history of several starts and stops in this process where God observed to see if the nation would bear fruit. Sadly, the history was not replete with good examples, although we can find some.

F. In effect, God Himself interceded for the people of Israel and gave them periods of grace over the course of centuries. Daniel the prophet interceded for the wise men of Nebuchadnezzar's court. Moses interceded for the rebellious people so that God would not destroy them. From this, God is *proved* to be gracious and longsuffering. God is patient…to a measure. There comes a time when the axe will start swinging.

G. Like the parable, the gardener must like that tree. So too God likes His nation of Israel. He chose them, after all. Their being "cut down" does not imply that the nation is cut off forever in a

[2] Spend some time thinking about the big picture of the Bible. It all holds together in a cohesive way in telling the story of history from God's perspective.

"replacement theology" way. They have stumbled, but not so as to fall permanently.

III. An Indirect Application: You

A. Can we draw an application from this for us? Indeed, easily. The man is God, the keeper is Jesus, and the fig tree is…us, me, you.

B. God "planted" you on this earth. And if you are a Christian, He planted you into His family.

C. God now "comes seeking fruit." What is he finding? He keeps constant watch. He gives you years. Is He finding the fruit of repentance? Is He finding the works that are fitting for someone who claims repentance (Luke 3:8-9)? Fruit is anything that is a good work, done out of faith and love for God, in obedience to His word. There are all kinds of spiritual fruit.

D. God is very gracious to us, is He not? This grace offers a delay of judgment for those who do not know the Lord. Truly, His longsuffering amounts to salvation. It is an opportunity to be more fruitful.

E. The theme of judgment permeates the surrounding context. We see 13:1-5 has it. 12:58-59 has it. For an individual to be cut down (and thrown into the fire?) is a very bad outcome.

Conclusion

Your heart's desire should be, as much as humanly possible, to be like the tree in Psalm 1:1-3 and Jeremiah 17:7-8. You do not want to be like the person described in Jeremiah 17:5-6. The nation of Israel should also want to be a fruitful tree, planted in its homeland, but instead Ezekiel 19:10-13 held true for the nation for centuries and still is largely true to this day.

Are you fruitful for the Lord? Or just existing? Every genuine Christian bears some fruit. The parable is not meant to tell all the specifics such as, "what if I'm backslidden…what happens then?" The point is to urge you on to fruitfulness. Move forward for the Lord!

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