



Luke 13:6-9
“Is there any fruit?”

6 He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

7 "Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?'

8 "But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it.

9 'And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' "

As technology marches on, we make many gains, but we also lose many things, sometimes without even being aware of their passing. I was just reflecting recently about how much we have lost now that analog mechanical clocks are a thing of the past. For instance, those of you who are older, try to remember the house you grew up in – do you remember what you heard if you were standing in say the kitchen or the living room or lying in bed and there was no one else around and the radio or television wasn't on? Chances are you heard a ticking sound.

I grew up in a house with old clocks in virtually every room, the loudest was in the kitchen. It was an old cabinet style clock with a pendulum. And its constant tick-tock was audible throughout the house. Ok, they kept lousy time, and they needed to be wound up on a daily basis and those of you who have ever really had insomnia know that a clock ticking can gradually drive you nuts. But they had one great feature that I think we are impoverished by losing. *They made you aware of the passing of time.*

With each swing of the pendulum, each tick of the clock, each movement of the hands, and each hourly chime, you were made aware that the seconds, and minutes, and hours of your life were gradually passing into eternity.

Digital clocks aren't like that, unless you happen to be looking at it when the digits change, it always just tells you the current time. It tells you the time, but without imparting any sense of the passing of time.

Now why do I bring that up? Well for a number of reasons, but mostly because the awareness of the passing of time is critical to this parable of Christ. And I really want you to keep that idea in mind as we examine this parable in particular.

The parables of Christ, as you know are "earthly stories with heavenly meanings" and this one has two particular applications. **First** to Israel at the time of Christ, and **then** to the each and every member of the visible church since that time.

Lets look first at the earthly side of the parable. In it we have a vineyard owner, who plants a fig tree. That was fairly common at that time, you would often have a mix of grape vines and fruit trees in a vineyard, particularly because grapes are seasonal and figs are pretty much year round. It made good economic sense.

Now why does the vineyard owner plant the tree in the first place? ***Because he wants an ornamental fig tree to round off his landscaping?*** No, the man is hoping to get figs. He plants the tree looking for fruit. Now it took 4 years for a fig to grow to maturity, but after it matured it would bear fruit with the exception of April and May, year round. The first year of its maturity, he comes to the tree and every time he examines it, there is no fruit. The second year, still no fruit. The third year, comes and no matter how many times he examines it, no matter how he lifts the leaves and searches, there is no fruit.

Now, does the owner have a right to be highly disappointed? Absolutely! It is seven years since he planted this tree and he has yet to get one single, solitary fig from it. His reaction at this point is to tell the keeper of the vineyard to cut the useless thing down, and he is not simply being vindictive in that. Not only is just, but the tree itself is using up valuable resources that could be utilized by productive plants. The roots of the fig go deeper than those of the grape vines and thus water and minerals that his vines could be using are being sapped by a tree that is not profitable in any way.

The keeper of the vineyard though, isn't willing to give up on the fig tree yet, so he implores the owner to let him have another year to work with the tree, he will dig around it, to air out the soil and allow the water to penetrate more easily, and he will fertilize it, giving it extra nutrients. The owner agrees, he will be patient with the tree for another year, but he stipulates, that if it still doesn't bear fruit, the keeper himself must cut the tree down. The condition of fruitlessness cannot be allowed to go on forever.

So much for the earthly story. What of the heavenly meaning? Well the fig tree obviously symbolizes the people of Israel, and the owner of the vineyard is God the Father. God gave Israel massive advantages that the people around them simply never had. Nehemiah recounts them in his great prayer in Nehemiah 9. Amongst those advantages were being entrusted with the oracles of God, being nurtured, delivered, provided for, being given the land and the promises, and having the prophets sent to them again and again. And yet they rebelled. Nehemiah sums it up with:

Neh. 9:30 Yet for many years You had patience with them, And testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

Now, 400 years after they had once again been delivered by God, this time from exile in Babylon, God has gone to the greatest possible length. He has sent them His own Son. Will they listen? Well as Jesus is testifying here – not so far. As you have been reading, God has made good on all his promises, even sending the promised seed, the long awaited Messiah they have yet to repent and believe in Him. It may be coincidence, but at this point Jesus had probably been publicly ministering for about three years.

Time was passing, there had been abundant opportunity for the people to repent, and yet there were still no widespread signs of the fruit God was looking for. The fruit he had a right to expect. So Jesus, the keeper of the Vineyard, intercedes on their behalf. Just a year more. Give them more time, more

mercy. The Father is as the Psalmist put it in Psalm 86:15 *"a God full of compassion, and gracious, Longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth."* So he agrees. However, even after these solemn warnings, and then the crucifixion and the resurrection, and pentecost, still Israel will not repent and believe. And eventually the time limit is reached, God's mercy and longsuffering is exhausted, and the time comes when the fruitless tree must be cut off that it no longer sap the strength of the other plants. So in 66 AD Israel started a suicidal rebellion against the Romans and after 4 years of grim war in 70 AD Jerusalem was utterly destroyed. The warning of this parable went unheeded by Israel.

But as you know, the heavenly meaning of this parable does not end with Israel, for Jesus is conveying a truth here that applies to every member of the visible church in every age. In fact, it perhaps applies even more strongly to you because you have even more advantages than Israel did. For that matter you have more advantages than the vast majority of present day Christendom:

- 1) You are not like your brothers and sisters in Uzbekistan, there is no present danger of your bible studies being raided by the police, of being asked to sign a papers, of being subjected to imprisonment or torture.
- 2) You are not like your brothers and sisters in Sudan, you have a church to gather in, and abundant supplies of food and clothing and every creature comfort.
- 3) You are not like the Chinese, you have more bibles, and books of theology, and seminaries and tapes, and radio stations than you know what to do with.
- 4) You are not even like the majority of *American Christians*, for you have long been under the ministry of orthodox faithful messengers, you sit under the preaching of the doctrines of grace not limp and man exalting Arminianism, you are in a church and a denomination that for all its failings maintains all three marks of the true church and Sunday after Sunday you are given the gospel, and exhorted to close with Christ.

There may never have been a people to whom the message of this parable applies more than you.

You sit in the vineyard of the visible church, you have been dug around with the law, and fertilized with the Gospel, and so what is expected of you? *FRUIT!*

That fruit should be the inevitable harvest of regeneration. It is so that you might bear fruit that you are saved: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:8-10)

What is the nature of the fruit? "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law."

These things are the polar opposite of the works of the flesh, the deeds of the natural unconverted man:

"Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

How many of you though, despite your being in the vineyard, and the subject of the vine-dressers special care have yet to put off the old man and put on the new? Does it not bother you?

I heard Joel Beeke preach on this passage a little while ago, and I was moved to tears, oh not only by my own conviction at the relative scarcity of fruit in my own life but because I realized in the midst of it how direct and frank he was being with his congregation because he loved them so. I was convicted that I have so often been a coward with you. I have not been so direct with you, and this was not loving I was reminded of Horatius Bonar's dire assessment of ministers who have a learned but not a soul winning ministry, he wrote - *"Men lived, and it was never asked of them by their minister whether they were born again! Men sickened, sent for the minister and received a prayer upon their death-beds as their passport into heaven. Men died, and were buried where all their fathers had been laid; there was a prayer at their funeral and decent respects to their remains; but their souls went up to the judgment seat unthought of, uncared for; no man, not even the minister who had vowed to watch for them, having said to them, Are you ready ? -- or warned them to flee from the wrath to come."*

Though my own fruit has been feeble and there have been many times, when I have cursed myself for my own lack of love to Christ, I know that by God's grace there is some. But friends I have been in your homes, and you have been in mine, and I have too seldom asked you the title of this sermon *"Is there any fruit?"* I have turned over leaves myself, and finding none, have not wanted to go on with the process. In those moments I have ceased to be a shepherd, and have become merely a time server. This too I must repent of.

Spurgeon even preaching as he did in the middle of the huge Metropolitan Tabernacle, would sometimes pause in the middle of a sermon and say "listen for a moment to the ticking of that clock" and the assembly would be silent and hear nothing but that old clock going **tick, tick, tick and he would say to them "it is the beating pulse of eternity"**. I wish I could do that, because for the fruitless every second as it goes by is *mercy, mercy, mercy*.

There was another old custom, that when a person died, at that moment they would stop the clock in their sick room. It showed that time had ended for that person. For the unconverted the stopping of the clock is the end of that steady ticking of *mercy, mercy, mercy*. The time for repentance is at an end, the tree is hewn down and cast into the fire. [Spurgeon Quote]

So before that day when the ticking of your clock comes to its appointed end, I pray you would take to heart Christ's warning and Peter's precious encouragement: *"1 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."*