

The barren fig tree

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[0 : 00] Turn now to the gospel according to Luke chapter 13. Our parable for study this morning is the parable of the barren fig tree. Luke chapter 13 at verse 6.

He spake also this parable. A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came and sought fruit thereon and found none, and so on.

Some of the Jews, probably Pharisees, came to Jesus, and they reminded him of that occasion when a number of Galileans died there in the precincts of the temple in Jerusalem.

Those people had come from the province of Galilee down into Judea, to Jerusalem itself, and while they were there in the temple offering their sacrifices to God, engaged in the worship of God, on the orders of the cruel and unscrupulous Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, they were done to death.

This catastrophe clearly burned its way into the consciousness of the people. We don't know why it took place.

[1 : 24] We know no details other than those that are given to us here in Luke chapter 13. But clearly the attitude of those Jews who came and reminded Jesus of this incident was wrong.

They regarded what had happened as the judgment of God upon those particular Galileans for their particular sins. They were in effect saying, those Galileans must have been very scandalous sinners, worse than we are.

They were taking a self-righteous attitude. Now, when disasters occur in our day, sometimes we hear people talk in this way too, they see those particular disasters as judgments upon the people, in particular who have suffered in them because of their particular sins.

And when we hear people talk like that, we shudder. Of course, all disasters are linked with sin in general.

All the miseries of this life stem from sin. But we are without any warrant whatsoever for saying that the particular judgments that happen are always the judgments of God upon those particular people who have suffered because of their particular sins.

[2 : 59] Nor are we warranted in saying that those who have suffered in those disasters are worse than others or that they are worse than ourselves. What Jesus is saying to the people here is, unless you repent, you too shall perish.

No, he says, it's not that those Galileans were worse than others. Unless you repent, you too shall perish. And so it was, he says, with regard to those 18 who died when the tower of Siloam fell upon them.

Unless you repent, you too shall perish. The lesson that Jesus is teaching then is this. Repent. Instead of harshly judging others, repent yourself.

He then goes on to enforce the lesson by telling the parable of the barren fig tree. Now if the lesson that Jesus had been teaching before that was that we must repent, and that is the lesson he was teaching, the lesson being taught in the parable is this.

Repent now. Repent without delay. Repent without delay. In trying to discover then the lessons to learn from this parable, I want to consider it under three heads.

[4 : 25] And the first of them is this. Privilege. Privilege. We read that this man went and he planted a fig tree in his vineyard.

It was common for men who owned vineyards to plant a fig tree in the family vineyard. They would find an unused piece of ground and there they would plant the tree, hoping that in due time it would yield a plentiful supply of fruit for themselves and for their families throughout the fig-bearing season.

Now a vineyard usually occupied a very favoured spot. It was generally placed on a south-facing aspect, in a place where there would be much sun.

The soil of the vineyard was rich soil. The vineyard was always very carefully tended. Its fences were always kept in good repair.

The fact that the tree was planted in the man's family vineyard meant that it was a tree that would receive very special attention. In this tree, the owner of the vineyard and his vine dresser, the man who worked there in the vineyard for him, in this tree, they took a very special interest.

[5 : 54] They bestowed much care and attention upon it. The tree, since it was planted in a family vineyard, was a privileged tree. We are meant to see in this the immediate application to the Jewish nation.

The Jewish people were a people specially favoured by God, favoured in a way that other nations had not been favoured. It was to the Jewish nation that God gave his law, the law of Moses.

It was to the Jewish people that the oracles of God were committed. They received the whole sacrificial system. It was to them that the revelation of God's word was given.

To the Jews, to the Jewish nation, God made himself known in a way he did not make himself known to other people. Favours were bestowed upon Israel that were never bestowed upon Egypt or upon Babylon or upon Greece or upon Rome.

Isn't it reasonable, therefore, that God should look for fruit from the Jewish nation, from Israel? But we must apply the parable to individuals today too?

[7 : 12] Is it not the case that I am speaking to many of you here this morning and you have been privileged far more than the great majority around you have been privileged?

Far more than the great majority of your fellows in the world have been privileged. You've been brought up, haven't you, in a land of gospel liberty? There are many countries in the world today where people cannot gather as we gathered here this morning in church for the worship of God.

Countries where if people take an interest in the gospel and go to hear it preached, they're in danger of being persecuted, even of being thrown into prison. That from your earliest days you've lived in a land of gospel liberty.

We gather here this morning in perfect freedom, none daring to make us afraid. you've lived all your days in a land where the gospel has been fully and freely preached.

You've had all your life free access to the preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In that, you've been greatly privileged. Have you made use of that privilege?

[8 : 22] And then, too, you have the Bible. There are countless millions still who do not have the Bible, but you've had it all your days in your own language. You can't remember a time when you weren't familiar with the Bible and with its message.

But even in our own country, there are thousands growing up around us who know nothing whatsoever about the Bible and who know nothing of its message, but it has not been so with you.

From your earliest days, you were taught to reverence this book. You were taught that this book is the Word of God. You were taught that this is the book which is able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ.

You have been taught that in this book is made known God's marvelous plan of salvation. How greatly privileged you have been.

Is there then fruit in your life as a result? And then, too, you've had the Sabbath day. Countless numbers, the vast majority around us, are people to whom the Sabbath day means nothing.

[9 : 32] From childhood, from infancy, they've been taught to regard the first day of the week as a day to be devoted wholly to their own pleasure. But it's been different with you.

You were taught from early life that this day, the first day of the week, is a day wholly to God, a day different from other days. And in that, you've been greatly privileged.

The weekly return of the Sabbath day has spoken to you week by week about God. It has reminded you that you're accountable to him, that you have an immortal soul, and that ahead of you lies a great eternity.

Oh, how privileged you have been. Have you made use of that great privilege? Is there fruit to be seen in your life today as a result? And then, too, there's the church.

You've been in touch with the church all your days. But all around us, there are people who have no contact whatsoever with the Christian church. They're totally unchurched.

[10 : 37] It's been different as far as you're concerned. In your infancy, your parents brought you to church, and you were given there the sign of belonging to the church.

You were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Throughout childhood, you were brought to the services of the church. Now, as an adult, you maintain your contact with the church.

You attend its services. You're familiar with its message. How privileged you have been. Have you made proper use of this great privilege?

And what of your home? You were brought up, were you, in a Christian home? You had godly parents. They taught you God's word. They set before you an example in righteous living, in godly living.

They prayed for you. They prayed with you. There was an altar in your home, a family altar, and there, each day, you met with other members of the family. Your father read from the scriptures, and together, you bowed the knee in prayer to God.

[11 : 45] And today, you know that in placing you in such a home, God gave to you an inestimable privilege. Have you made use of it? Is there fruit to be seen in your life today for that?

And then, too, you've been privileged to have the gospel on the cross. You know that when he died there, he died paying sin's penalty, opening up for sinners a way back to God.

You know that when he died there, he was giving his life for ransom for many. And you know, too, that he was raised again the third day. You've been taught those truths.

You were taught them from your earliest days. You know perfectly well that your own good works cannot save you, that you can be saved only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, through relying personally, only, and utterly upon him.

You've heard times without number the good news of full and free forgiveness of an eternal salvation in Christ.

[12 : 53] Truly, you've been privileged far beyond others around you. What use have you made of such privileges? Is there the fruit to be seen in your life that should be seen in the life of one as privileged as you have been?

Privilege. But then, I want to think of the lessons of this parable under a second hand.

First of all, privilege. Secondly, judgment. Judgment. The parable speaks of judgment, too. Once that fig tree had grown to maturity, the owner came looking for fruit upon it, but he found none.

The fig tree had been placed in a most favorable position. It had been tended with the utmost care and it was surely very reasonable that when it reached its maturity, the owner should expect a plentiful crop from it.

But when he came, he found no figs there, only leaves, no fruit. Nobody can say that this vineyard owner was an impatient man.

[14 : 11] He accepted the fact that there was no fruit there and he came back again the next year. Perhaps it will yield a plentiful crop in a year's time. And so it was that for three years after the tree had reached its maturity and should be bearing figs, the owner went looking for fruit and on each occasion he found none.

Do you wonder then? Do you wonder that he should give the instruction, cut it down? Isn't it altogether reasonable that he should give such an instruction, cut it down?

And my unconverted friend, isn't it reasonable, isn't it altogether reasonable this morning that there should be fruit in you?

God made you for himself. God it is who created you. He made you for his own glory. Man's chief end is to glorify God.

He it is who has given you all those privileges of which I've been speaking. Lavishly he has showered upon you, bestowed upon you privilege after privilege after privilege, surely, surely you'll recognise my friend that having come to years of maturity yourself, it's right that he should look for and expect fruit from you.

[15 : 44] What is the fruit that should reasonably be expected in one as privileged as you have been? What of the fruit of repentance, repentance unto life?

you've been taught from your earliest days as I've been taught that you're a sinner. You know that you're a sinner by nature and a sinner by practice. You've been taught that and you have the evidence before your eyes that you have a corrupt sinful nature.

Each one of us has the evidence before his eyes that he is corrupt and sinful. And you know you've been taught that sin brings upon one the wrath of God, the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

You know that you need to repent. You've been taught that you need to repent. You've been taught what repentance is. You've been taught that it involves being sorry for sin, that it involves grief of sin and hatred of sin.

You know that it means that you must come and confess your sins before God and beg for his forgiveness. You know that it involves forsaking sin, turning away from sin, turning into, turning in another direction, making an about turn, facing in another direction and moving in that opposite direction.

[17 : 01] You know what repentance is. But my friend, have you repented? Does God come and find in you this morning the fruit of repentance?

Repentance unto life. And then too, there's the fruit of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Surely it's reasonable to expect that such fruit should be found in you.

As a young man, Martin Luther was tremendously concerned about how he could get into a right relationship with God. He made most strenuous efforts.

He, you see, had not been taught the gospel message. He thought that by all his monkish exercises, by ascetic living, by all his penances, by punishing his body, and by such means as these, he could get right with God.

You see, he hadn't been taught that a sinner is justified solely through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He hadn't been taught then the doctrine of justification by faith.

[18 : 10] He hadn't, he only discovered after years of diligent searching, of study of the scriptures, that the just shall live by faith. But you've been taught that great truth from your earliest days.

You know perfectly well, or ought to know perfectly well, as I ought to know, that a sinner is justified solely through faith in Christ. He must come to Christ and rely only and utterly upon him.

He must receive him as his own personal savior. He is justified by faith alone. And is that fruit, the fruit of faith in Christ found in you this morning?

And then, what of the fruit of good works? The good works that are the evidence that one has repented and believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ. What about the fruit of a holy life?

What about the fruit of the spirit? Does the Holy Spirit of God, my friend, dwell in you? Is he producing his own delightful fruit in you? Is there the love there, love for God and love for your fellows?

[19 : 17] Is there the joy there, the abounding joy of the Christian? Is there peace there, the peace that passes all understanding? Are you daily being made more Christ-like in character?

Is there in you the much fruit that always appears in a man nor the woman who is abiding in Christ? my unconverted friend, isn't it altogether reasonable that we should look for such fruit in you?

for a, a, it's a considerable time now, is it not, since you've reached years of discretion?

And oh, how patient God has been. Year after year has passed. Not three years as in the parable here, but many more. and he still hasn't found in you the fruit of repentance unto life, of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and of holy living.

Don't you agree then that it's reasonable, reasonable that he should give the instruction? Cut it down. Having been privileged as you have been privileged, and not having made use of such privileges, surely it's true, my friends, that you, you of all people, should have no grounds for complaint.

[20 : 47] If the instruction is given, cut it down. Don't leave that barren tree there. Remove it. Destroy it. If for you, and oh, I do want to say this very, very tenderly, if for you the day of grace should now end, and the great eternity begins, would you not have to admit that it is altogether reasonable?

You've had, after all, years of opportunity. Why lumber is it the ground, said the owner of the vineyard?

This tree there is taking up precious space, space where I could plant another tree, a fruitful tree that would flourish there. Cut it down, pull it out, pluck out the roots, plant another tree there, a fruitful tree.

My friend, if others had the opportunity that you have had, how much progress, how much better use might they have made of this? If others had heard the gospel message presented to them, as clearly as you have heard that message presented to you by many different preachers, might they not long ago have repented of sin and might they not be today believers rejoicing in the Lord Jesus Christ and living to his honor and to his glory?

If others had the vigor and the energy that you have, what might they not have done in Christ's service? How many would have heard from their lips the message of redeeming grace?

[22 : 26] If others had occupied the position of influence that you occupied, how they would have used their influence in the interests of Christ and of his gospel? Oh, surely, surely it's not unreasonable if the command is given cut it down.

Why cumbereth it the ground? But this tree, this big tree in the man's vineyard, not only occupied space where another tree could have been planted, it was itself a positive hindrance there.

For you see, it was drawing out from the soil, moist, moisture, and minerals that could have given refreshment and nourishment to the other plants there in that vineyard.

Because of its presence there, other plants were suffering. Let me ask you this, my unconverted friends. Could it be that there are others who are following your example?

Might it not be that there are others even in this church who say, that man is a churchman and he hasn't been converted? I too can follow his example.

[23 : 40] I too can be a churchman without taking this step. It's enough for me that I be like him, that I attend the services from time to time. I won't take the step, the step of repenting of sin and of believing upon Christ and coming to him.

I'll come to church, yes, but not to Christ. Not yet. Oh, my friend, if that is so, if others should be following your example and reasoning like that, would you wonder if the instruction were given?

Cut it down. Why cumbereth it to the ground? Wouldn't such judgment be deserved? But thank God there's a third message to learn from this story, from this parable.

Privilege, judgment, and thirdly, mercy. Mercy. Wouldn't such judgment be deserved? Yes, yes, indeed, but look what happens.

The judgment is delayed yet again. Judgment threatens this barren big dream, but mercy pleads that it be spared a little longer.

[24 : 56] Woodman spare that tree. The vinedresser speaks up. He says, leave the tree a little longer.

Let it alone this year also. I'll dig about it. I'll put manure in. I'll fertilize it. And if it bear fruit, and he can't finish the sentence, he stops the sentence there.

He's emotionally moved, at a lump in his throat, and without completing the sentence, he goes on to say, if not, then you can cut it down. He's attached to this fig tree.

He pleads for a reprieve for the fig tree, for a reprieve of a definite, of definite but limited duration. There are in the parable here, two men.

There is the owner of the vineyard, and there is the vine dresser, the man who attends to the vines there in the vineyard. But you'll remember that I said on more than one occasion in our study of the parables that we must not press every detail and find spiritual significance in every detail of the parable.

[26 : 09] What we must learn from this is of the threatened judgment and of the sparing mercy of the one God who with perfect reasonableness can say of you, cut it down, and that has been the fate of many, but who also says of you, and who has said of you, let him alone this year also.

In mercy God has spared you. It is of his mercy that we are not consumed. he is giving you more time, more time to repent, more time to believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ, more time to begin to live to his glory.

He is long suffering, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Oh, how great is his patience, how amazing his sparing mercy.

There are sinners who have spurned him, and who have provoked him by their unbelief, but he has left them longer in the place where mercy is to be found. He has lengthened for them the day of grace, and he continues to hold out his welcoming arms, and in pleading tones, to invite them to come to himself that they might have life.

Oh, my unconverted friend, if the threat of judgment won't bring you to Christ, won't the pleadings of God's mercy break your hard heart and bring you in penitence today to the foot of the cross.

[27 : 51] Leave that tree a little longer, said the vine dresser. Leave it, said mercy. I'll dig around it. I'll loosen the soil there, and then the sun and the rain will be able to perform their work more perfectly.

And hasn't the Lord dug around you? Hasn't the soil been loosened? Haven't you had trials and troubles and difficulties? God sent them to you in order that they might bring you to your senses, as they have brought many to their senses in the past.

Ought they not to set you thinking, to set you seeking the Saviour? Many a man in his hour of affliction has sought and found the Lord. But it's not only that.

The vine dresser said that he would fertilize the ground around. He would dig in manure. God, my friend, has been multiplying to you, has he not, means of grace?

He has caused you to hear many more gospel sermons, many more gospel appeals. He has brought you into contact with many more Christians.

[29 : 02] He's put a Christian into your family. someone in your family circle has been converted. One of your colleagues at work has been marvelously changed. From all quarters, voices have been sounding calling you to repentance, urging you to repent, to be converted.

And why? Why? It's all because of the mercy of God. In his mercy he has spared you. In his mercy he has been dealing with you, dealing with you through the various experiences of life.

In mercy he has been calling you. We might well ask what more could be done for you than has been done. And yet is it that this morning you are still unsaved.

Oh, seek the Lord. Seek him while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his soul.

Let him return unto the Lord, unto our God, and what will he do? He will have mercy upon him, and he will abundantly pardon. Privilege, judgment, mercy.

[30 : 17] If you are still unconverted, then you are here today, my friend, in the mercy of God. But don't presume upon that mercy.

The day of grace will not last forever. If you remain unfruitful, judgment will certainly come. Those who persist in refusing the salvation that God so freely offers will discover one day when it is too late that the day of mercy has ended, and eternity will be for them a never-ending day of wrath.

I love the free church of Scotland. What I'm going to say now, I say in last, but for a long time it has seemed to me that one of the saddest features of our church life is that in so many of our congregations there are so many people so familiar with the sound of the gospel, but who make no profession of having experienced themselves its transforming power.

My friend, if you're in that category, won't you come to the Christ who lovingly invites you to himself? He'll receive you, he will welcome you, and he will give to you a never-lusting salvation.

Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we thank thee for the gospel of thy grace. We thank thee for the privilege of being permitted to proclaim that gospel, but we are dependent upon thy spirit to apply it, and we pray that he will apply the gospel message now, and that there will be those here familiar with the sound of the gospel perhaps for many years who will come to Christ, and they know in their own experience his glorious, life-changing power.

[32 : 26] Do this, Lord, we pray thee for thy glory's name. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.