

He Came Seeking Fruit

Introduction

The Text

⁶ 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.’”

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” ¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. ¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.” ¹⁵ Then the Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” ¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him. (Luke 13:6–17)

Making the Connection

- A. Before I really dive in here this morning, the first thing that needs to be mentioned, I think, is the inherent connection between the parable Jesus gives in [vv. 6-9](#) and the Synagogue scene that follows in [vv. 10-17](#). Now, I recognize that this connection might not be plain at first read, but I trust you will see it.
- B. The parable, as we saw last week, is about a fruitless fig tree and the tension that ensues between the owner of the vineyard who is calling for the tree’s removal and the vinedresser who is begging the owner for one more year to try to get something going.
 1. Now you’ll recall, perhaps, that we tried to tease out the symbolism here and we found that the fruitless fig tree refers in particular to the nation of Israel.
 2. And we saw how the tension that subsists here between the owner of the vineyard and the vinedresser is, in fact, a vivid depiction of the tension that subsists within God Himself, between His demand for justice and His desire to show mercy.
 - a. Israel—because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding steadfast love—is given one more year, so to speak. He’s going to get in the dirt and labor in love for this fruitless tree.
 - b. But—because God will by no means clear the guilty—if Israel continues to stand stiff-necked in opposition to Him, fruitless, they will find themselves cut off.

- C. Well now, with this in view, we are ready, I think to see the connection between this parable and the scene that follows. It's quite profound really.
1. I wonder if you realize that this is, in fact, the third time that Jesus has found Himself in conflict with the leaders in Israel concerning the Sabbath (what it is and how it is to be properly observed). Let that sink in in light of the context and the parable Jesus just told.
 - a. The owner of the vineyard says "Three years I've come for fruit and found none." The vinedresser pushes back: "Give it another year!" Well, here we have precisely this same sort of thing occurring.
 - i. He tries to help them see the true meaning of the Sabbath once ([Luke 6:1-5](#)). They don't get it.
 - ii. He tries to help them see it once more ([Luke 6:6-11](#)). They reject Him.
 - iii. Here, in our text, He comes at it for a third time ([Luke 13:10-17](#)).
 - iv. And in [Luke 14:1-6](#) we shall come even to a fourth and final conflict over this very same issue.
- D. In other words, He comes looking for fruit year after year. He's patient and persistent in grace. He keeps trying to help them get it, but they're not catching on.
- E. Here, then, in this synagogue scene, what we have is the picture painted by this parable playing out in time and space. The principles that the parable sets forth are here fleshed out in reality. The two sections of our text really work together to give us a better understanding of the whole.

Good Fruit

- A. Now, last week we focused on certain aspects of the parable, and I said we'd return this week to look at this idea of fruit in particular. So that is what I plan to do.
1. And, as I've already prepared you for, for most points I plan to read from the parable towards the synagogue scene. And I think, as we do that, we'll get a good understanding of things.
- B. With regard to this idea of fruit, then, there are three things I want to look at in particular: (1) The Necessity of It; (2) The Essence of It; (3) The Production of It.

(1) The Necessity of It

Everything Turns on This Issue

- A. You realize, don't you, that in our parable everything turns on the this idea. Look again at [vv. 7-9](#): "⁷ '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 . . . '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.'" The issue is fruit. If it produces fruit, it can stay and is blessed. If it doesn't, cut it down.

- B. Now, this is important to note in every age, but I sense it may be particularly important in ours.
1. Ours is a day when many, even pastors, are ready to tell you that, since Christianity is all of grace, there is no room for this talk of fruit or works being “necessary.” “Such would obviously be legalism,” they say. “Are you telling me that we are justified by our works? Paul says that any who would hold to such a notion should be an anathema, and so do I.”
 - a. It sounds right, even God-fearing and Christ-honoring, but it is a gross oversimplification of the matter, and it cannot make sense of texts like the one we have before us today—texts that say true Christians will bear, indeed must bear, good fruit.
- C. Sometimes perusing Facebook has its benefits. In this case, one of my friends posted a wonderful quote from Dallas Willard on this from point from his book *The Cost of Non-Discipleship*. Listen to what he writes: “A fundamental mistake of the conservative side of much of the Western church is that its basic goal is to get people into heaven rather than to get heaven into people. This creates groups of people who may be ready to die but clearly are not ready to live. They rarely can get along with one another, much less with those “outside.” Often their most intimate relations are tangles of reciprocal harm, coldness, resentment and righteous meanness. They have become ‘Christian’ without [becoming] Christlike.”
1. You hear what he is saying here, don’t you? We think so long as we have accepted Jesus into our hearts, or said a prayer, or got baptized when we were five, or whatever, that we shall be ready to die and go to heaven, regardless of how we live here on earth. But that is a tragic mistake.
 - a. For as Willard is insinuating here, and as Jesus is clearly teaching in our parable, if we really want to be ready to die, if we really want to be ready for heaven, we ought to be especially concerned with how we are living here on earth. If there is no fruit now there is no salvation then. That is the biblical teaching.
 - i. You cannot truly become a Christian without also progressively becoming more and more Christlike.

Grace and Law

- A. Now, our problem oftentimes, on this point—and why we get confused—is that we misunderstand how God’s grace stands in relation to His law. We tend to think that God’s grace is opposed to His law—that we must choose one or the other.
1. But this is not the case. God’s grace is not opposed to His law. But it is opposed to legalism. That’s a subtle but very important distinction. And this is where we often get tripped up.
- B. If I could put it another way: God’s grace is actually one way of approaching His law. Legalism is another.
1. Legalism says: “I must fulfill the law in and of myself—that I, by my good deeds, can be justified. I need to do x, y, and z, and I will get God in my debt, and all will go well.”

- a. Certainly, God’s grace is opposed to that. But, again, this does not necessarily entail that His grace is opposed to law. It is not. It is another way of approaching His law.
2. Grace says: “God’s law is good and holy—it is, after all, a transcription of His own character and way—but we have fallen short of the mark and we can’t get back to right. Therefore, in grace, Jesus came and lived the life we should’ve lived, died the death we should’ve died, and He has risen for our justification and given us His Spirit so that we might now start to look more like Him, live more like Him, and hence begin to fulfill the law, or . . . bear good fruit.”
- a. Grace is not opposed to law. It fulfills it. Grace is not opposed to fruit. It produces it! You know you’ve encountered God’s grace when you are producing good fruit. But more on this a little later.

(2) The Essence of It

Most Fruitful or Most Fruitless?

- A. So we’ve seen the necessity of this fruit. Now I want to consider the essence of it. If we so desperately need it, what exactly is it?
- B. I wonder, if I were to ask this up front here, what you would say? What is this good fruit? Going to church? Reading your Bible? Giving a tithe? Serving the poor and the needy?
 - 1. I suppose in some instances this certainly could be part of what’s involved in this idea of good fruit, but none of these things are the essence of it.
- C. I draw our attention to this, in particular, because I am quite certain that if the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were to hear His warnings about fruit and such, they would surely consider themselves to already have it.
 - 1. Who in Israel is more holy, or more righteous, or more fastidious in keeping the law than the Scribe, or the Pharisee, or the “[ruler of the synagogue](#)” (v.14)?! If you were to take a poll among those in Israel asking who they thought was truly bearing this good fruit, surely these sorts of people would have topped the list.
 - a. And yet as we read from our parable towards this scene in the synagogue, we find that it is these sorts of people within Israel that Jesus is particularly confronting and warning. They appear to be some of the most fruitful, but truly they are some of the most fruitless.

Love for God and Neighbor

- A. So what is going on here? What is the essence of this fruit, if it’s not all this religious stuff?

- B. Well, I think if we look carefully we shall see that it is: Love—love for God and neighbor. And this certainly makes sense for Jesus Himself would say elsewhere that: “On these two . . . depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:40).
1. It’s what everything has been about. It’s what God has been looking for all along. And yet these men in the synagogue have missed it.
- C. Look at vv. 10-11: “¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.”
1. Anyone with a pulse would feel compassion for this woman. 18 years, hunched. The image in my mind is the way that the trees in Philly would look after snow and sleet had fallen the night before and the frozen precipitation would weigh down the branches and bend over the trees almost to point of buckling.
 - a. Jesus sees her in this helpless state, and in love for her, with a word and a touch, “immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God” (v. 13b).
- D. And we would think that celebration would erupt in this synagogue. But the results are mixed.
1. The ruler of the synagogue, the one who above all should know the heart of God best, surprisingly, tragically, speaks out in opposition of what He’s just seen: “But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath [Why?!], said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.”
 - a. Jesus had broken no biblical law concerning the Sabbath. But he had broken rabbinic tradition concerning it. It was commanded by God to be a day of rest from work, so they had parsed out all the various things you could and couldn’t do—what constituted work and what didn’t—and, according to the ruler of the synagogue here, helping this woman was a violation—not a glory, but even, perhaps, a sin.
 - i. He is rebuking Jesus for restoring this broken woman.
- E. Do you see how far from the heart of God these men have wandered? In Deut 5:15 God tells Israel why He wants them to keep the Sabbath day: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”
1. If this is the heart of God for the Sabbath, then is it not clear that what Jesus has done here for this woman, far from violating it, has in fact been a perfect expression and celebration of it?
 - a. What better way to capture the spirit of the day, to remember how YHWH intervened in grace on Israel’s behalf to set them free from 400 years of oppression by Pharaoh then for Jesus to intervene in grace on this woman’s behalf and set her free from 18 years of oppression by the devil?!

F. This is why Jesus rightly responds: “You hypocrites!” (v. 15)—actors, pretenders, showing on the outside something that is not true of you on the inside. “You act like you have love for God and love for others, but truly you have only love for yourselves.”

1. In other words: there are a lot of leaves, a lot of religious activity, but there’s no fruit.

Misplaced Letters

A. There’s a text I referenced last week that I think speaks eloquently on the sort of thing that is happening here in this synagogue. In *Isa 5:7*, Isaiah is rebuking Israel and He says this: “[T]he vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!”

B. Now there’s something in the Hebrew behind this verse here that we can’t see in the English, and I think it’s quite enlightening. There’s a play on words that Isaiah is using.

1. In the Hebrew the word translated “justice” and the word translated “bloodshed” are very similar with just a few subtle differences: “and he looked for justice [mishpat], but behold, bloodshed [mispach]”.
2. And it’s the same for “righteousness” and “outcry” (which really just means that instead of righteousness and shalom among God’s people there is oppression and many crying out in distress): “and he looked . . . for righteousness [tzedaqah], but behold, an outcry [tza’akah]!”

C. Now, why do I bring your attention to this? Why do I find this enlightening? What point is Isaiah, and YHWH through him, trying to make with this play on words?

1. A misplaced letter or two and its meaning is at once antithetical, diametrically opposed, polar opposite. On the surface it looks like the good, but with just a subtle shift, a slight distortion, a little reduction, it becomes the worst sort of evil. It’s counterfeit. It looks from the outside like the real, the true, the good, but it’s actually a lie, a fake.

a. It looks healthy and alive, but truly it is sick and, even, dead. This is how empty, man-made, self-righteous religion works. It may be busy doing a lot of things for God and neighbor, but in the end there is love for no one other than self.

i. It looks almost like justice but it leads to bloodshed. It looks almost like righteousness but it leads to an outcry. There are a lot of leaves but no fruit.

D. And if you don’t see the connection between this and your own life, let me ask you: Why do you think you can be busy serving and laboring in the church, leading Bible studies, handing out tracts, setting up chairs, or whatever, and then when another person is tapped for some substantial leadership position, or recognized and appreciated for their service, instead of you, you just start to see the inside?

1. Bitterness festers. Jealousy strangles. You secretly loathe this other person (your competition, as you now see them) and you look for ways to prove you should’ve been the

one in that role, the one being praised. You look to one-up in Bible knowledge or boldness in evangelism. You look to tear down in gossip. What is that? There's a lot of leaves on your branches, but there's no love.

- E. Or I wonder if you've ever found yourself, like I have, getting all heated when talking with others, arguing about some doctrine or biblical truth, even the gospel, how we should understand it, and how stupid this other person is for not seeing it the way we do.
 - 1. I remember I would get so worked up arguing with my dad about his belief in Purgatory that, whenever we started getting into it, my sister would just have to get up and leave the room. I would just get nasty.
 - a. Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't stand up for honest biblical truth. But I am saying that the manner in which we stand for it matters at least as much, maybe even more, to God. We can contradict the spirit of the gospel in the way we go about defending it—with our arrogance and our harsh criticism.
 - i. We can mix up our letters. What we think is justice is causing another to bleed. What we think is righteousness is truly oppression. What we call fruit, God may be calling just a leaf, because there's no love there.

(3) The Production of It

- A. So what do we do with this? We see that good fruit is necessary and now understand that it is not, in its essence, all these religious activities, but our love for God and neighbor. The question that follows, of course, is: So how do we get this fruit? How do we start to produce it?
 - 1. It seems to me that, when faced with this question, we have two basic options. And here we come at last again to this idea of legalism or grace.

Legalism

- A. Legalism says, "I can produce it." It looks at the law and says, "I can fulfill it." It sounds good, perhaps, but the only problem is: It never works. In fact, it always makes us worse.
- B. Let me show you how it plays out. Perhaps you have some sin in your life and you want to see it gone. And in its place you want to see fruit. Not a bad desire, right? But how you choose to go about it makes all the difference.
 - 1. Imagine you opt to make things happen yourself. You read the books. You take the steps. You discipline yourself and by sheer will power you start to change that behavior.
 - a. Wonderful, but, and now here is the big problem, what is it that starts to rise in your heart in those moments of your victory? Pride. "Look at what I did. Look at who I've become. I'm the self-made man. And they said it couldn't be done."
- C. When we approach sanctification or fruit-bearing in our own strength we will never escape the labyrinth of our sinfulness, but only wander deeper in.

1. The image in my mind here is like when Hercules was trying to slay the Hydra. For every head he cut off, two more would grow back in its place. Do you remember that? Did they force you to read these things in college, or was that just me? But fighting sin in your own strength is like that. You may be able to cut off a head here or there, but even more will grow back in their place.
 - a. You may be able to fight back your addiction to pornography or whatever, but in its place will rise pride because you were able to do it, impatience and judgment towards others because why can't they do it like you have, jealousy for those who have done it more effectively than you.

- D. I think that's the sort of thing that's happening in the synagogue here. The religious leaders in Israel took on the goal of fruit-bearing in their own strength. And, hence, they loved being praised for what they've accomplished—for their holiness and their wisdom. Indeed, they thought they were worthy of it.
 1. And then here comes Jesus and, from their perspective, He outperforms them. And the people are looking at Jesus now and marveling at Him. "It's not right. I want that praise." This ruler of the synagogue is losing his fan base. He's losing his identity. Because it was all built on himself, what he could accomplish, how he fared in relation to others.
 - a. Jesus was a threat. That's why he was "indignant". It was not about God or His law. It was about his own ego and love for self.

- E. No, you see, approaching the law in your own strength only adds to your law-breaking. Trying to bear fruit in this way only renders you even more fruitless. That's the tragic irony in all of this.
 1. The only way to slay the Hydra of our sin, so to speak, is to deal with it at the roots, at the heart level. And only Jesus can get there.

Grace

- A. In our text, I think that's what we're supposed to see when we look at what happens with this crooked woman. She's a picture physically of what we all are spiritually. Twisted up in knots. Helpless.
 1. In v. 11, again, we're told that: "She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself" (v. 11b). The Greek could literally be rendered: She "did not have the power" to straighten herself. It was not in her to fix this. It had to come from outside. It had to come from Jesus.

- B. I think Rom 7:4-6 wonderfully fills out all that I'm after on this point: "⁴Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code."

1. Approaching the law in our own strength just makes us worse—we end up bearing “fruit for death” (v. 5).
 2. But Christ enters the scene. He takes on Himself all of our crookedness, all of our sin, and He goes to the cross with it. He’s bent over under the weight of it. Like a fruitless tree, He’s chopped down because of it. But He does all of this in love for you and me. So that when He rises from the dead He can give us His Spirit and He can change us from the inside out.
 - a. The law is not just written on tablets of stone out there somewhere, and we better figure out how to obey. It’s now written by His Spirit in here.
- C. So the place to start in producing fruit is to own up to our own crookedness, our own inability and tumble towards Jesus. Let Him love us. Let Him touch you in the place of your failures, your guilt and your shame.
1. Let Him love you right there. And do you know what will happen? He will start to make a more loving person. He will help you bear good fruit.
 - a. “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).