

# *A Warning Against Fruitlessness*

*(Luke 13:6-9)*

An Expository Sermon

by Avon Malone

*“And he spake this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeing fruit thereon, and found none. And he said unto the vinedresser, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground? And he answering saith unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well; but if not, thou shalt cut it down”* (Luke 13:6-9).

A little boy went to his dad and said, “Daddy, I want a quarter.” Now that dad should have realized he was getting off light, but this dad thought he would ask the question, “Why do you want a quarter?” The little boy said, “Well, for being good.” The daddy said, “Son, when I was a boy we were good for nothing.” Otherwise good people are all too often good for nothing. In the text Jesus sounds a warning against fruitlessness.

This parable of the fig tree is one of three warning illustrations in this section of Scripture. Although other passages tell of a barren fig tree, the precise form of these three warnings of impending judgment are in a sense unique to Luke.

In the immediate context Jesus said,

Think ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they have suffered these things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and killed them, think ye that they were offenders above all the men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish (Luke 13:2-5).

Jesus used these two illustrations to show the necessity of repentance.

In the parable of the fig tree Jesus said a man came to his vineyard seeking fruit on his fig tree. He found none. He said to the vinedresser, “Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground?” But the

vinedresser said, “Lord, let it alone this year also. Give it one more year. Let me dig about it and dung it, and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well; but if not, thou shalt cut it down.” The ominous note that was suggested by the earlier warning illustrations appears here too.

The nation of Israel was sometimes pictured and portrayed under the figure of a fig tree. Jeremiah 24:3 and Hosea 9:10 are cases in point. In this particular context, Jesus may be saying, “Israel must repent and the time of preparation and probation is almost up.” He may even have in mind that in the future in A.D. 70 a great destruction was coming upon them. He may have in mind ultimate and eternal punishment. Or, He may be speaking of mankind in general.

But we will make a very personal application of the parable. It would be altogether wrong for us to consider what Jesus had to say and not apply it to ourselves. In this parable Jesus is saying, “Repent.” He is saying; “You need to begin to bear fruit.”

## **I. THE SEEKING GOD (13:6, 7)**

The text reads, as the owner of the vineyards speaks “Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, . . .” The God of heaven is a searching; seeking God. The eyes of the Lord are in every place. He keeps going through the vineyard. He keeps examining the fig trees. Sadly, in many of our vineyards, He sees only leaves.

When I was a boy growing up, we had an ornamental peach tree in our backyard. It never bore a peach. It was so beautiful that I felt like its beauty was justification for its existence. But beauty alone does not justify our existence. We are to be more than ornamental; we are to do more than simply occupy space.

The seeking, searching God says, “Behold, these three years.” Some say the reference here is to the Lord’s ministry. The number three may not be particularly significant. It may just simply

illustrate that God has kept looking and searching.

What is He looking for? Fruit. The owner said, "Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit. . . ."

What does He want in your life? Fruit. What kind of fruit?

Galatians 5:22 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law." I know one kind of fruit that needs to be evident in our lives—the fruit of the Spirit! There is a winsome war, an overflowing love, a great and high joy that ought to be seen in the lives of Christians. The fruit of the Spirit that changes characters, personalities, and temperments ought to be seen in us. But one can't really have the *fruit* without the *root*, and the Word says He gives the Spirit to them that obey Him (Acts 5:32). Peter said, "Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). We are told to "grieve not the Holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4:30). We are to walk in the Spirit, live in the Spirit, and bear the fruit of the Spirit. When God comes looking for fruit, He is looking for love, joy, peace, longsuffering, and gentleness.

In Philippians 1:9-11 Paul prays,

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; so that ye may approve the things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

James 3:18 reads that "the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for them that make peace." Righteousness, peace, love, joy, longsuffering are certainly a significant part of the fruit for which God looks.

In John 15:5 Jesus said, "I am the vine and ye are the branches." Jesus also said, "Every branch that beareth no fruit, he taketh it away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he cleanseth it, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2). He said, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; and so shall ye be my disciples" (John 15:8).

I don't believe the only kind of fruit the Christian bears is reaching another for Christ,

but I do believe this is part of it. I believe it is spiritually and actually impossible to really have the fruit of the Spirit in one's life and not be bearing fruit in terms of reaching others. If the fruit of the Spirit and the fruits of righteousness are really in evidence in our lives there will be another kind of fruit we will be bearing. Be sure and make that application as we look at this story in Luke 13.

The searching, seeking God walks through the vineyard. He examines the fig tree. He looks at your life. What does He find? The fruit of the Spirit? Love, joy, peace, longsuffering? I hope so. The fruits of righteousness? I hope so. But there is a kind of fruit that needs to be found in all of our lives too. Yet I greatly fear that only foliage and maybe a fleeting fragrance are found.

The text reads, "These three years have I come seeking fruit." How long would it be in your case or mine? Some of us are going to be sobered by this truth? The number in the text is three years. How many years would it be in your case? Five years? For some it might be ten years. He would have to say, "I have been looking at leaves in your life for ten years." You haven't had any fruit. You haven't led anybody to Jesus. You haven't really grown in love, joy, peace, and longsuffering."

## II. THE SEASON OF OPPORTUNITY (13:8)

Notice the the season of opportunity in the story of Luke 13. The owner tells his vinedresser, "I have been looking for fruit from the fig tree for three years." The vinedresser says, "Give us this year also." Hence, there is a season of opportunity.

There is a blessing for which we really ought to be grateful today. When I think about the fruit in my life and the fruit within the kingdom that some of us may have had a personal part in producing, it is so pitifully little. As one teacher said at the end of his life in the dying hour, "There is so much to do and so little done." But isn't it wonderful that we can still bear fruit? If we have just produced some luxurious leaves and fleeting fragrances so far, isn't it wonderful that that doesn't have to be the end of the story? If God allows us to live, we will have this year also. There is a season of opportunity. "Don't cut the tree down yet," the vinedresser says. He says, "Give us this year also. I will dig around it;

I will dung it; I will prune it; I will do everything I can to stimulate growth. Give us one more year."

In Charles Dickens' immortal *Christmas Carol*, after the ghost of Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future appeared to Scrooge, Scrooge woke up. That is what many of us need to do. We need to wake up rejoicing that all of this hasn't yet come upon us, that there is still an opportunity. Have you ever awakened from a bad dream to think, "Isn't it wonderful that that didn't really happen and I have life and today?"

I remember when I was a student in college. I heard Carl Brecheen, who was then a fellow student, make a talk in what we called Monday night meeting. He said, "Imagine that you came before God in judgment. The ill-fated words, that terrible sentence that would never be repealed was spoken to your soul, 'Depart from me you cursed into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' But let us suppose that instead of being that unalterable sentence that somehow there is divine intervention and there is the heavenly voice saying, 'But the sentence is not going to stand. We are sending you back to earth, back to life. You get one more chance.'" Carl Brecheen then made this point, "How would you live with that kind of chance? However you would live if you were given one brief period of probation, that is how you ought to live right now because that is what this life is. This year is a season of opportunity."

Now I want to ask you some questions using the expression, "this year also." Is your Bible going to remain dusty "this year also"? Instead of being a daily Bible reader, are you just going to leave the Word over on the shelf "this year also"? Don't think it is dry on the inside just because it is dusty on the outside.

Are you going to live a life of virtual prayerlessness "this year also"? Are you going to live in a home where there are no family devotions "this year also"?

Are you not going to speak to anybody about Jesus "this year also"? You say, "I teach a Bible class on Sunday." That is not the question. How many souls have you won to Jesus?

How is it going to be "this year also"? Are you going to be careless in your words and speech? Will the jargon of the world, the vocabu-

lary of the street be soiling your lips "this year also"? Will you be careless in dress? Will you by demeanor and dress lead others to think or act in the wrong way "this year also"?

Are you going to just get by in school or on the job "this year also," when the Book says, "Whatever you do, do it heartily as unto the Lord"? When Paul wrote those words in Colossians 3, he was writing to slaves. *Duloi* is the plural word for bondservant or slave. I have a feeling that if God wanted slaves in the first century to do whatever they did as heartily unto the Lord, that He doesn't want students or employees to just half do it now.

How is it going to be "this year also"? Are you going to be a God-robber "this year also"? Malachi 3:8 says, "Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings." We live under a different system today, and it is a system that ought to move us to greater liberality.

Don't keep hurrying down the pathway of procrastination. Don't keep running down the road of rebellion. Don't keep going down the expressway of exemption from God's will and personal responsibilities. Turn from lingering to laboring. Turn from doubt to decision. Turn from complacency to compassion. Turn from lethargy, lukewarmness, and inactivity to action and service. Turn from fruitlessness to fruitbearing, from selfishness to selflessness. Resolve, that this year will be a year in which fruit will be born. This year—a season of opportunity, probation, and preparation—we are going to begin to serve with the diligence that we should.

### III. A SOBERING ALTERNATIVE (13:9)

In Luke 13:9 the vinedresser, after making an appeal for more time, pictures the alternative: "Now give us this year also, and I will dig around it, I will dung it, I will do everything I can to stimulate growth. And then if it bear not fruit, it shall be cut down." I know that ultimately, even in eternity, that principle is going to find an application. I know from John 15:1-8 that if I am not a fruitbearing branch that I am going to be cut down. Jesus said, "Herein is my Father glorified, that we bear much fruit; and so shall ye be my disciple" (John 15:8). I know that a person might be inactive and apparently get by. However, I have also noticed another truth. The late

Gus Nichols lived into his eighties and was vigorous and strong. Into his eighties he was a fruitbearing branch. I believe the Lord has a way of pruning and protecting, of blessing and keeping the fruitbearing branch. But I place myself in jeopardy if I choose not to be a fruitbearing branch.

There is an obviously fanciful story of a consultation of the devil and his angels. Satan and all his demons conferred as to how best to thwart the plan of God. Satan said, "Here is the problem. Jesus has died for all men and that means that salvation potentially is available. It is available to all. We have to somehow thwart the divine plan. What should be our plan of action? What is the best way to do it?" One demon speaks up and says, "Let me go to earth and tell them there is no heaven. Let me tell them that when Jesus said, 'I go to prepare a place for you,' that it is not so. Let me go to earth and tell them there is no heaven." The Evil One said, "Well, that has some possibilities. Are there any other proposals?" Another demon speaks up and says, "Let me go tell them there is no hell. Jesus said, 'And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life' (Matthew 25:46). But let me tell them that when He said 'eternal punishment' He didn't mean it. Let me tell them that when He talked about that realm in which the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched, He was wrong. Let me tell them that when the book talks about a second death and a lake that burns with fire and brimstone that it is incorrect. Let me go say there is no hell." The Evil One said, "Well, that has some possibilities. Are there any other proposals?" One more demon begins to speak up. He says, "One of my colleagues has suggested, 'Let us go to earth and tell them there is no heaven.' Another of my colleagues has recommended, 'Let us go to earth and tell them there is no hell.' But I have another recommendation. Let me go to earth with this message: 'There is no hurry.' The Evil One said, "That is it. That is the plan we will adopt." The devil and his angels, Lucifer and his legion, Satan and his cohorts have adopted a method that has worked in the lives of countless hundreds through the years. There is no hurry.

But in Luke 13 there is some hurry. After three years of examining that tree, the owner of the vineyard is only going to give it one more year: "This year also."

## CONCLUSION

I don't know when the heart that is beating so rhythmically will stop forever. I don't know when the shades are going to be drawn in my room or yours. I don't know when loved ones are going to speak in muted tones. But I know the time is short. I know that your life is "a vapor that appeareth for a little while and then vanisheth away" (James 4:14).

Tomorrow he promised his conscience,  
Tomorrow I mean to be good.  
Tomorrow I'll do things as I ought to,  
Tomorrow I will do as I should.  
Tomorrow I will conquer the habit  
That holds me from heaven away.  
But ever his conscience repeated,  
One word and one only today.  
Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow,  
Thus day after day it went on.  
Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.  
Till youth like a vision was gone.  
Till age and its passion had written the  
message of fate on his brow  
And forth from the shadows came death  
with the pitiless syllable "now."

Do you know what Satan is trying to say to you today? He is saying, "There is no hurry." He says, "Oh, you know you ought to be bearing fruit. You know you ought to be winning souls. You know you ought to be giving as you have been prospered. You know you ought to be reading the Bible every day. You know you ought to be praying fervently with your family. You know you ought to be keeping your life unspotted from the world, but there is no hurry." But the Book still says, "Today if you hear His voice, harden not your heart" (Hebrews 4:7). It also says, "Today is the day of salvation; now is the accepted time" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

The devil has succeeded in causing you to believe the idea that there is no hurry. You believe there is a heaven and a hell, but you also believe there is no hurry. We don't know when He is returning. We don't know when our lives will end. We don't know when the brittle thread that holds us here is going to snap. Choose to bear fruit today.