

Sermon for March 3, 2013 – Lent 3

Luke 13:6-9

Theme: God Looks For Fruit

He has a right to expect this fruit.

He warns seriously concerning this fruit.

He does all he can to encourage this fruit.

⁶ Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' ⁸ "Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

"It's my life so I can do with it what I want!" This is the mantra of many people, and we too are often tempted to adopt it. But is it true? Does your life belong to you alone? Society says that you are your own person, that you can accomplish whatever you want if you put your mind to it. The world says: "As long as you don't hurt other people, do whatever you want, because you are the only person you have to answer to."

"It's my life so I can do with it what I want!" What does God have to say about this? Concerning the statement: "It's my life," the Lord says to the Christian: ¹⁹ *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;* ²⁰ *you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)*

Concerning the statement: "I can do with my life whatever I want," the LORD says: *Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see (Ecclesiastes 11:9a).* So far it seems that God is giving youth a license to follow their passions - to do whatever they want. But I didn't finish the verse! It continues: *Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment (Ecclesiastes 11:9b).* In other words, "Yes, you can do what you want, but realize that God will judge what you do."

We are not our own. We belong to God. We have been created and saved to serve him alone. It's vitally important that we remember this, because we often live as if we belong to ourselves. We live as if all our money, possessions, life, etc. . . . are our own to do with as we please.

Our sermon text for today calls us back from such thinking. It reminds us that we are like fig trees that God has planted for His own purpose. And when he looks at us, **God looks for fruit.** 1) *He has a right to expect fruit.* 2) *He warns seriously concerning this fruit.* 3) *He does all he can to encourage this fruit.* May the LORD bless our meditation on his Word.

Part One: *He has a right to expect this fruit.*

Our text begins: *Then he told this parable.* For whom is the following parable meant? Is it meant for unbelievers – a warning to get them to repent? Not really. This parable is meant for people who consider themselves God's people. It is to Christians that God speaks this warning, and not just Christians of other

denominations that play fast and loose with the truth. He is speaking this parable to us, so that every single one of us considers our ways. Do we live for ourselves or for our LORD?

"A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard." God the Father is the man who planted the tree and the vineyard represents his Church - the grand sum of all believers on earth and in heaven. What is the fig tree? An individual Christian. Like all the other plants in the vineyard, he was planted by God when the LORD created faith in His heart by means of the Gospel. He has been baptized with water and the Holy Spirit. He is a member of the Holy Christian Church. This fig tree – this Christian – has been planted for a purpose, and that purpose is to bring forth fruit.

[The man] *went to look for fruit on [the fig tree]*. It is obvious that any orchard owner would look for fruit on his trees. So it is with God – who has every right to expect “fruit” from us. Why? St. Paul says: ¹⁰ *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10)*. What is the fruit God looks for? St. Paul summarizes it in this way: *the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth (Ephesians 5:9)*. In other words God looks for evidence that we rejoice in his gift of righteousness and salvation. The fruits of faith are being Christ-like in our attitudes and actions: living a life of love to God and our fellow man in response to God's love to us, as the Scriptures say: *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. ³ But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving (Ephesians 5:1-4)*.

God has every right to expect fruits of faith from us. Why? Because He created and saved us for this purpose. Just as the DNA (the genetic code) of a fig tree causes it to produce figs, so also the spiritual DNA of a Christian results in Him producing spiritual fruit. We don't produce fruit in order to save ourselves from judgment. Christ Jesus has already accomplished that! Rather, we produce fruit because we are God's holy people who have been washed clean and reborn through the water of baptism.

Part Two: He warns seriously concerning this fruit

Back to the parable: *A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any.* The tree with no fruit signifies the person who exhibits no fruits of faith. What does such a person look like? Since he has no fruits of faith, we might imagine a mean and rotten person - someone who uses God's Word as a license to sin. We might imagine an obvious and overt sinner.

But the truth of the matter is that this might not be the case. Remember the fig tree Jesus cursed during holy week? That tree looked healthy; it looked like it should have fruit. Only closer observation proved otherwise. (Mark 11:13). The same is true regarding the fruitless Christian: Only God can really tell which Christian is truly fruitless because only God can inspect the heart.

Let me give you a Biblical example: Cain and Abel both offered sacrifices to the LORD. From all outward appearances, we would not be able to tell the difference between these two men and their devotion to the LORD. But God rejected Cain's offering and only accepted Abel's. Why? The Bible tells us that Abel's offering was a fruit of faith. Cain's was not. If Cain didn't believe, why did he offer a sacrifice to God? Maybe it was out of a sense of obligation, maybe it was to earn God's favor, or maybe it was simply thoughtless. The truth is we don't know why he offered his offering to the LORD, but what we do know is that it was not a fruit of faith. We know this because God tells us so much.

What does a fruitless fig tree look like? To be quite honest, he can look like anything – like any Christian we know. The fruitless tree could be the most outwardly generous and pious Christian (like certain Pharisees in Jesus day), or he could be the Christian using God’s grace as a license to sin. The fruitless fig tree could look like anyone of us, and could be anyone of us. Only God knows the heart. Only that person and God know the truth.

And so the warning our sermon text offers is not for the person next to us, or five pews over. It’s meant for you – because God wants each of us to seriously consider our ways.

Our text continues: *So [the vineyard owner] said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'*

Notice God’s patience in looking for fruit, but his patience does come to an end. The ‘believer’ in question is showing himself to be an unbeliever. It is as if he altered his DNA. He is no longer that which God declared him to be. There is no fruit on this tree. He must be spiritually dead.

What use to an orchard is a tree that gives no fruit? None. It just uses up the soil and takes nutrition away from the other trees. Yes, just as any gardener knows that you don’t want weeds growing with your plants because they actually hinder the fruitfulness of what you planted, so also the fruitless Christian, who has lost his faith, may hurt and hinder other Christians from being fruitful. And this is why God threatens to cut such a tree down and remove it from his Garden – to remove the unfruitful (and thus unfaithful) Christian from the Church.

I want to pause here a moment and ask a question: Does this parable bother you or at least make you uncomfortable? I hope so. Why? Because Jesus wants us to think about our relationship to God. We belong to Him. God has every right to expect fruit from us. I must admit that when look at my life I see how I have not always lived to God’s glory. It makes me ask God for forgiveness. And the peace of God’s forgiveness encourages me to live for my LORD. I hope this parable does the same thing for you as well. Why? Because we have a marvelous, merciful Savior who loves us and works in all things for our salvation – as we will now see in the rest of the parable.

Part Three: He does all he can to encourage the fruit.

"Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

The man who takes care of the tree is Jesus. Listen to Him plead to his Father on behalf of the fruitless – begging for the Lord’s patience. “Just a little more time,” Jesus cries. He will do all he can to revive the faith in the Christian who has lost it. And what tools does Jesus use to accomplish this? He uses the pruning shears of his law to cut away the selfishness and callousness of our hearts. He tears at our sinful pride. Then he fertilizes us with his love and waters us with the Gospel. He shows us how He kept the law perfectly for us and thereby won our righteousness. He shows us how He paid for all of our sins through his sacrificial death on the cross. He reminds us of His sacrifice for us every time we take the Lord’s Supper - giving us the very body and blood he used to win our salvation. He does this so that we can remember his love. And as he gives us these things, he says: “Believe in me and be forgiven. I love you and have paid the price for your salvation. I purchased you so that you could be a child of my Father; so that I could be your brother. My Father and I love you.”

The warmth of Jesus love awakens faith in our hearts. His forgiveness nourishes us in every way so that we might produce fruits of faith – showing ourselves to be God’s chosen and holy people. In response to His love for us, how can we not want to live for Christ? How can we not want to thank him by producing the fruits of love, joy, righteousness and truth?

And if you are so callous and selfish so as not to respond to Jesus’ love with an attitude of joy and thankfulness? Then know this: God’s patience will come to an end, and you will be cut down and thrown into the fire – as Jesus himself says.

Dear Christian, your life is not your own. It belongs to Jesus. Consider His love for you. Consider the price he paid for you. Love and thank Him by living for Him. This is how fruits of faith are produced – fruits that come from the hearts. This is how you can show yourself to be the very child God declared you to be. Amen.