

# [ the constant gardener ]

:: luke 13.6-9 ::

So there I was. 16 years old, working for the summer at a local auto shop doing some office paperwork and small jobs like getting cars on the lifts and changing oil. Nothing major.

One day a customer brought in a large motor-home to have some work done on it.

In the midst of my regular busy work, my boss came in and let me know I needed to bring the RV into bay number 3 and to make sure the rolling door was all the way up before I drove it in, as this vehicle was considerably larger than those we typically worked on.

I may have *heard* what he said, but I certainly wasn't *listening*. His instructions went, as we say, in one ear and out the other.

A few minutes later, I found myself in the driver seat of a large vehicle, trying to guess how much damage I had done not only to the customer's RV, but to the rolling door that I had neglected to pull all the way up.

It was not a good day.

The key to my misfortune was my failure to **listen** to what I was told.

Today we're going to be looking at a parable found in Luke chapter 13.

Parables are wonderfully instructive portions of Scripture. They were a tool that Jesus used frequently when teaching the people that came out to meet Him.

In fact, in Matthew 13 we read an interesting and familiar verse:

**Matthew 13.34 - All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them *without a parable. (emphasis added)***

We find the reason why Jesus used this method of teaching so frequently by going back to the first recorded incident where He taught this way.

**Matthew 13.10-11 -Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."**

You see, after Jesus would share a parable, He would make an odd and somewhat cryptic statement. He would say:

*"He who has ears to hear, let them hear."*

Now, I think sometimes we miss the depth and significance of this phrase. Indeed, it is an essential part of our faith, a profound key to understanding God and to learn more about His revelation of Himself in the Scriptures.

Because we hear the word 'hear' and it isn't all that precious to us.

It's like the quintessential parenting moment that we've all witnessed where a parent says, "are you listening to me?" To which the child may say, "Yeah I heard you."

"Then what did I just say?"

...and then silence.

To us, *hearing* is not necessarily *listening*. We do a lot of hearing, but **listening** is what's important. Sound waves hitting the ear drums, *THAT'S* hearing to us. But what we need to understand is that when Jesus says "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," He's inviting us to understand more of who He is. He's inviting people to understand truth and to conform their lives to the word of God.

I like how the Amplified Bible translates that phrase. It says:

*If any man has ears to hear, let him be listening and let him perceive and comprehend by hearing. Let him consider and understand.*

That is the invitation of the parable. To hear the word of God and then to focus on it, to consider it, understand it, apply it.

Parables are meant to get us thinking about what God desires to teach us. And, whether studying a parable or any other portion of Scripture, if we find ourselves mentally numb to the Bible, if we don't find ourselves thinking about what we've read or what we've heard, if we never find ourselves asking questions about a text or wondering about it, if we never find ourselves *digesting* the word of God, but only *hearing* (in the American, 21st century sense), then something is wrong. Because the Holy Scriptures have been delivered and preserved for us that we might understand and apply the desires of God to our lives and become the people He has made us to be. That we might live the kind of lives that He's won for us on the cross and offered to us in His word.

And if we don't understand that, then we've have perverted what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. If we don't understand the value of His revelation, then we will not experience the love and the calling and the victory that Jesus has for us.

The word of God is profitable. For life. For Godliness. It is the foundation that we build upon. It is the drama of loving redemption that God has prepared and delivered to us so that we can understand who our Creator is and His great love for us.

So we find ourselves in Luke, chapter 13, looking at the Parable of the Fig Tree.

{ passage }

{ prayer }

Let's find the setting of this passage.

Jesus is in the middle of His ministry on the earth. He's speaking a lot to His disciples in this section, there are crowds of people, there's always the angry Pharisee or two hanging around to chew Jesus out, and at this point, with all these people around, Jesus tells this parable, which is recorded for us to learn from today.

In this section of Scripture, Jesus has been talking about repentance and being spiritually ready, watching the signs of the times and living life without anxiety or worry. As always, we find that His words and teachings are incredibly spiritual AND incredibly practical, meeting people where they are and calling them into repentance and a relationship with God and the life that He has for them. And in this setting He shares this little parable.

Now, when approaching a parable, we need to figure out who we are in it. Which element or character represents us, OR, which element or character do we want to **not** imitate?

We've read these verses once through already. So we know that there are 3 characters. The **man**, who owns the vineyard, the **vinedresser**, who is working the vineyard and the **fig tree**.

Sometimes when we're given a parable we're then given a clear explanation of exactly what the characters or elements represent.

Matthew 13, the Parable of the Sower explained. Jesus told His disciples, the soil is your heart, the seed is the Gospel, the sower is the minister of the Gospel. Very plain and clear.

But here in our passage we do not have a given definition for this cast of characters, so let's figure out who they are.

First, we have the **man**. We're not the man. The man is the owner of the vineyard, who, elsewhere in Scripture is identified as God. Matthew 20, Matthew 21, Matthew 25, Luke 12, each time the man who owns the vineyard is the Lord.

So we're not the man. Might we be the vinedresser?

This is where things get a little interesting. Because this parable can rightly be understood as an analogy of God's dealings with the nation of Israel. In that regard, Israel is the fig tree, God the Father is the owner of the vineyard and Jesus is the vinedresser. And in that understanding we find a beautiful example of God's longsuffering and Jesus' great love for the people of Israel.

But can we also view this parable as a message to us, as individual believers and members of the Church? And, can we see ourselves as the vinedresser?

I think so, and here's why.

Though it is important to always remind ourselves that the Church HAS NOT replaced Israel, God is NOT through with His chosen nation. The unconditional, eternal promises He made to them have not been taken away and given to us.

But, in this era of grace, the Church Age is what we call it, we find that people outside of the nation of Israel can find salvation through faith in Christ. And to us God has much to say in His word and much work to accomplish through His Spirit.

Now, in Matthew 20 Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. In that parable, the vinedressers are believers.

In Matthew 21 the owner of the vineyard hires two of his sons to work as vinedressers. We can see ourselves devotionally there.

Then we think of the parable of the talents, where the master gives a certain amount of money to each of the servants and expects them to invest them and do work on behalf of the master.

I believe we can see ourselves as the vinedresser in this parable, though it is *also* a picture of God's dealings with His special people; the historic, literal children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But then we have the 3rd character, the fig tree.

Might we be this tree?

In Psalm 1, the Believer is depicted as a tree planted by rivers of water, which yields fruit in its season.

In Psalm 52, David said that the Believer is like a green olive tree in the house of God.

In Psalm 92, we learn that the righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

Our relationship with Jesus Christ is absolutely compared to a tree many times in the Bible. This parable focuses on fruitfulness, and immediately we can think of places in the Old and New Testament where God talks to us about our lives bearing fruit as we cultivate our relationship with Him.

And so we see a couple of areas where we might fit in these verses in Luke 13. Now we must apply what we find and measure ourselves according to the word of God, which is profitable and powerful to us.

**Luke 13.6 - 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."**

We've said a lot of words already today, but the point that we need to take away from this passage is that God desires fruit in your life. He wants us to be people who are fruitful. In fact, He **expects** it from us.

How do we know that?

**Romans 7.4 - [Paul, speaking to Christians says] ...you have also 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.** *emphasis added***

John 15.16a - You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.

John 15.8 - By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples.

Your life is about fruitfulness, and, as we see in Luke 13, God is **seeking** fruit in the lives of His people.

So what are we talking about when we say 'fruit'? It's a good question, so let's get it defined.

We, of course, find our answer *in* the Bible, where we read:

Galatians 5.22-23 - The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

That is our primary list. That is the starting place for measuring our lives and doing a little fruit inspection.

We know that God is looking for fruit in our lives, so pick one thing from that list and ask yourself, 'do I find this in my heart?'

Patience. Am I patient? Patient when I actually have to wait for something or someone?

Self-control. Do I control myself? Do I control my tongue or my thoughts or my temper?

Peace. Am I at peace, no matter what my circumstances may be?

Listen, this list really hits home. We're not perfect, but that isn't the point. The point is that these characteristics are the *Fruit of the SPIRIT*. The Holy Spirit of God which, if you are a Christian here this morning, indwells your heart and seeks to influence your life.

And as we continue to submit ourselves to God's word, we find that there are a lot of fruits that are included either under that primary list or are given to us elsewhere.

Jesus says that His disciples are to serve. Do I have the fruit of service in my life? Am I serving in the Church? Am I serving at home? Am I serving at all?

Jesus talks to us a lot about stewardship in the Bible. How am I using that which God has given me? My time. My talents. My resources. Am I producing the fruit of good stewardship, using those things to glorify God and minister to others, or am I missing that fruit?

The Scriptures speak to us about selflessness. Do I bear the fruit of selflessness? Am I mindful of the needs and the sufferings of others, or am I always thinking about what *I* want?

The Bible talks to us about the fruit of our speech.

Hebrews 13.15 - Through Him then [*speaking of Jesus*] let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips that acknowledge His name.

Now, if we are thinking about these things and treating them like a checklist, then we are moving away from relationship with Jesus and toward religion of the Pharisees. And that isn't what we want. That isn't what we're talking about. That's not what fruit is.

Fruit is the natural activity of a fruit tree. Fruit is what a healthy tree produces. And what God has said is that our relationship with Him is like being a tree planted by streams of water, which will bring forth its fruit in season. That is why God comes looking for fruit in our lives, because He has made us new creations, and when we are in relationship with Jesus Christ, when we're living in love with Him, when we're submitted to His Lordship and following His Spirit, then the fruit we've listed is going to be the natural byproduct of that relationship.

And so the man came seeking fruit and found none.

The word 'none' there can be translated as 'the absolute negative.' There was nothing there. No fruit. No buds. Nothing.

And what we need to understand is that we, unlike the trees in your backyard, we have a say in our own fruitfulness. We are actively a part of when and how fruit is produced in our lives. And sometimes we allow ourselves to be fruitless. Sometimes we've drawn back from Jesus or we've chosen to neglect parts of our walk with Him in favor of self-serving or carnality or sin. And when we interrupt that relationship with God, with His word, in our prayer lives, then the fruit that God desires for us is not produced.

**Luke 13.7 - And [the man] 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?"**

We find some amazing truths in this verse.

First, do not pass these words by without seeing the longsuffering of God. Do not miss the mercy and the love of God. Because we serve a God who perseveres. He is the God of second chances. The God who *continually* shapes us and molds us. He is the God who forgives and empowers and helps. Do not miss that. The man had come year after year looking for fruit and finding none.

Second thing we need to see here, is that there is a point where fruitlessness becomes pervasive. Now, you may be thinking, "wait, isn't God the God of second chances and unconditional love?" Yes He is. But, what we find here and elsewhere in the Scriptures is that through continual fruitlessness we become rigid and hard and useless for the plan of the Gospel. Remember, in Corinthians, we'll get there eventually on Sunday mornings, but Paul says, "look, some of you are getting taken home to heaven early because of your sin and your carnality."

We remember Elijah, who allowed selfishness and bitterness to wither up the fruit in his life, and eventually he was pointing his finger at God and saying "You're not doing enough!" And, finally, God said, "ok, it's time for you to retire. It's time for someone else to carry on the work. You're done."

And here in our text, there came a point where the master simply had enough of this tree's fruitlessness. Why? Because it was using up the ground.

The master is looking at this tree and sees that it is taking up space. It's taking up resources. It's taking up time. And there is no fruit. And a fig tree that bears no fruit is useless to a fruit farmer.

The third insight we gain from this verse: the vinedresser had a responsibility. The master said to the vinedresser, "Ok, it's time to go. Take care of this tree. Remove it. We don't have time for fruitlessness because we're in the harvesting business."

Luke 13.8-9 - And [the vinedresser] answered him, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

What a wonderful response. Do we see the love of God here? The demonstration of His longsuffering and grace. The demonstration of His willingness to work through our imperfection and to forgive and to show mercy. This is the God we serve.

But here we must apply God's word to ourselves and make some choices about our lives. Because, from the way we're looking at things this morning, we are, in a sense, both the fig tree and the vinedresser. The fig tree is your life. It is your relationship with Jesus Christ. And that life in Christ is to be like a tree planted by streams of water, which brings forth fruit in its season.

Not only that, but as disciples, as members of God's family, we are called to work in this world, to work in the garden that God has placed us and to tend to this tree.

And throughout our lives God comes to us, as His servants, and says, "I'd like you to do something for Me. I'm here to pick some fruit. I'm here to enjoy the produce of My love and grace in your life." And, while the production of fruit is natural for a Christian, we can shut down that production. We can stop it by our attitudes or by our neglect or by our sin or by our selfishness. We stop that production by choosing to focus our thoughts and our strength and our resources on ourselves and fail to allow those things to be used by the Spirit to produce all the fruit that He wants for us.

At the end of our lives we will meet the Lord and we'll stand before Him. Those who do not choose to follow after Jesus Christ will be judged. They will stand before Him and He will say, "I never knew you. Your name is not found in the Lamb's Book of Life." If that is you, then I am bound to tell you that you will enter into a Christless eternity in Hell. The good news is that you can be saved this morning.

The Bible says:

Acts 2.21 - ...everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Romans 10.9 - that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

If you are a Believer, then at the end of your life you will stand at the Reward Seat of Christ, the Bema. And at that time Christ will open the books on our lives and say, "let's see what we did together. I want to reward you for the work that we did, for the fruit that you bore, for the things I accomplished in your life."

And so the question is: ***What will we do with the time we've been given?***

In this parable, the vinedresser spoke with the master and said, "give me a year, I'm going to cultivate this tree. I'm going to fertilize this tree."

Gardeners sometimes talk about fertilizing their crops and groves by saying they are going to 'amend' the soil.

To amend is to add or improve. To remove or correct faults. To change for the better.

Today we have an opportunity to amend the soul around us. We have an opportunity to dig around the base of our tree and clean out that old dirt, clean out that hard stuff and fill it with something rich and new and valuable from the Lord. We can choose to remove attitudes of selfishness or anger. We can choose to remove hatred and bitterness. We can choose to let go of the grudges we have against other people and stop gossiping or lying or deceiving. We can choose to dig and clear away lust for power and lust for pleasure and lust for wealth and amend our lives with the richness of God. With His water and His power.

This parable is left open-ended because it is a picture of your life. And fruitfulness is up to you. It's up to me. We decide the kind of lives we're going to live before the Lord. We decide the kind of work we're going to do in His vineyard. Whether we will be faithful or if we will be faithless.

The Bible is very clear on this point. I mean, in Bible we see God telling us, "Hey, YOU are the vinedressers. YOU are the fishers of men. YOU are the invited guests. YOU are the fig tree. YOU are the servants with the talents. YOU are to tend the sheep." Not as obligation, but as opportunity!

And again and again we are brought to the place of decision. What will we do with the garden God has given us? That was the original question back in the book of Genesis. And it is the question that remains today. What will we do with the garden God has given us to tend? We must decide.

In the mean time, God has given us the power and the enabling. He's given us the tools and the guidance. He's given us gifts and resources and ability and vision and protection.

Do you know what God has done for you? He's offered you a life of incredible spiritual abundance. He's offered you a life of satisfaction and purpose. He's offered to take your burdens and give you peace. He's offered you everything you need to be a fruitful, strong tree. He's given His word. He's given His Spirit. He's given His Son to win us victory and deliver us from those things which seek to hinder and harm us. All this God has given to you! And on top of all that, God has invited us to partner with Him in cultivating fruit in our lives. Fruit that glorifies Him and fruit that blesses others. Fruit that we can enjoy and fruit that can help those in need.

That is the invitation of the parable. A master has planted a tree in his vineyard. And he's come looking for fruit. And we get to partner with Him in that process. We get to enjoy a life amended by the power of God, not focused on self, but on Him and His plan and His unconditional love.

And the end is up to us. What fruit is growing in your life? You know the answer. You know what to do. You simply need to allow God to control your life and allow His word to train you and change you. You need to allow Him to remove selfishness and replace it with His Spirit.

It isn't about obligation, it's opportunity. We know what to do. Now we just need to do it.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.