

**+ Luke 13:1-9 + Journey to the Cross: A Fruitless Tree + 3rd Sunday in Lent + 7 March 2010 +**

When God created fruit trees, he gave them one purpose. Whether it's an apple tree, an orange tree, a pear tree, or a cherry tree, their reason for existence is to bear fruit. You expect a fruit tree to bear fruit, especially if it's been planted properly—in good soil with plenty of sunshine and water, perhaps paired up with a matching tree for cross-pollination. Usually when a fruit tree is well-tended, when the right season arrives, you'll find fruit.

How disappointing it can be, though, if after months of work and tending the tree, the season arrives and you find no fruit. Now imagine if that happens year after year for several years. Each year you do all you can to care for the tree hoping for fruit when the time arrives, but still find nothing. Eventually your patience will run out. Frustration will set in and you'll stop wasting money, effort, time, and soil on that fruitless fruit tree.

This morning we make our next stop as we follow Jesus on his journey to the cross. We go to a vineyard where we find a tree with no fruit, but we're not here to get a lesson on fruit farming. No, here in this vineyard beneath **A FRUITLESS TREE**, our Savior gives us a warning for the journey ahead—repent and bear fruit or perish for your fruitlessness. It's a tough message to hear, but God-willing, one that will bear abundant fruit.

How long did he have to wait? The man owned a vineyard. He did well enough to have a gardener tend the vineyard, where he had also planted a fig tree. The gardener had cared for the tree until it was fully grown. The season had finally arrived for the main crop of fruit, but when the owner went out, he found empty leaves. "Maybe next year...", he thought, but the same thing happened the following year. The owner was disappointed, but patient, so he waited for another year. The time for fruit arrived once again. The owner made his way out **"to look for fruit...but did not find any."**

Frustration set in. This fruitless tree was wasting his time and money and soil. After three years of expecting fruit, this fig tree was worthless, because it was fruitless. The owner had had enough. It was time to move on, uproot the tree, and plant something else in its spot. In frustration, the owner told the gardener, **"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?"** After all, the owner had every right to demand the tree be cut down. Without fruit, that tree would in time have to be destroyed.

Now we might hear Jesus' story of that fruitless tree and think little of it. A fruitless fruit tree doesn't seem so remarkable to people like us who spend little, if any, time with fruit trees, but what's Jesus' point in all this? His repeated statement in the earlier verses of our text sheds light on our question. **"...Unless you repent, you too will all perish."**

**"...Unless you repent..."** "Repent" is a word we might toss around, but may not fully understand. "Repent" has the idea of changing one's mind about sin, of being turned around from sin to life. You can see why Jesus considers this important, but why does he warn his hearers so urgently? Why is it necessary to repent and bear fruits of repentance?

Well, that leads to another term that's important for us to know—"time of grace". You see, our God is a patient God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. Peter tells us, **"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."** (2 Peter 3:9)

Our God is long-suffering as he gives each and every one of us a "time of grace"—a time to hear his Word, a time for his Holy Spirit to work in our hearts and lead us to repent of our sins and unbelief so we turn from our wicked ways and receive forgiveness through his saving Gospel. It is a time to bear abundant fruits of that repentance according to God's will like a fruit tree in season, but again why the urgent warning?

Even though our patient God wants **"everyone to come to repentance"**, every time of grace always comes to an end. For Jesus' hearers, a time was coming when God would cut short their time of grace, when they would no longer have a chance to repent of their foolish sinfulness and bear fruits of repentance. Of course, only God knew when that would happen.

Now God does not do this as punishment for a specific sin, but at his appointed time whenever it might be. After all, death comes because it is the wages of a life of sin no matter how short or long. Jesus' hearers didn't understand that when some brought news **"about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."** The Roman governor was known for his brutality and some Galileans had been killed when Pilate sent his Roman soldiers marching into the temple.

The people thought that God had cut those lives short as punishment for something wicked they had done. Jesus' response not only corrects the confusion, but also urgently calls his hearers to repent and turn from their wicked ways. ***“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”***

Even today it's not unusual for people to think God is punishing someone for a specific sin when their lives end in a swift and sudden way. We might even think that if that doesn't happen, then one must've lived a good life. Jesus' examples simply show us that it's not about a specific sin or lack of sin, but about God's timing to end one's time of grace.

The fact is, unless Christ comes again, every one of us will cash in the wages of our lives of sin and all will die, yet who of us knows when that time will be? Who of us knows when our time of grace will end? Those killed amidst the sacrifices or those crushed by the fallen tower or in the earthquakes of Haiti and Chile surely didn't know their time of grace was ending. That's why Jesus' call to repent is so urgent, why the need for repentance is so immediate, and why a life of faith-filled fruit is so important. Who knows when the owner will have the tree cut down?

So then when you look at your life, what do you see? Do you see a life filled with fruits of faith in Christ or do you see selfish, empty fruitlessness? Do you see your life as an opportunity to serve and praise your gracious God for what he has done for you or has it been a life of serving self and praising how well you've done? So easily we take for granted the patience of our God and think we can put off repentance for tomorrow, but how often recently have we been reminded that tomorrow may never come? The time for repentance is right now because the end is coming soon!

In a lesson like this, we can easily lose sight of God's mercy and forgiveness in Christ. We see the stark reminders of times cut short. We hear the urgent call to repent and the owner ready the ax to bring down the fruitless tree, but at the very end of Jesus' story, we hear a surprising defense of the fruitless tree. The gardener who had labored to tend the tree spoke up on its behalf. ***“Sir, ... leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”*** The gardener wanted one more year to do everything he could to help that tree bear fruit. The tree might still fail and be destroyed, but the gardener wanted to give it one more shot. If it revived to fruit as expected, the owner would credit the faithful labor of his gardener for making it possible.

The same is true for fruitless trees like you and me. You see, Jesus is our Gardener and he wants us to bear fruit forever. In mercy and love, Jesus still works to bring his people to repentance. Through his Holy Spirit, the message of his life-changing Word still goes out to those who receive or reject it. In fact, if you and I are to bear fruits of repentance, Jesus alone is responsible for them and he alone gets credit for them. By nature, we're fruitless, so Jesus had to do everything he could to nurture and save us from doom. Remember that the Savior who calls the crowds and us to repentance was on his way to save those crowds and us. He would labor to the bitter end to bring us life, suffering the loss of everything he had. In fact, he would even give up his own life for our sake, but in doing so, he would turn us away from destruction and move us to bear abundant fruits of faith. All this he did out of undying mercy and love that never once gave up on us.

Jesus, our Gardener God, still continues to tend us. Each day he gives you opportunity to go back to your Baptism and repent for those times when you've been fruitless with the care God has given you. There at your Baptism you can drink deeply of the refreshing waters of Christ's forgiveness. The Lord also provides the rich soil of his Word for you to partake deeply of its amazing nutrients as you find forgiveness and life and purpose and hope and motivation to keep growing. Then even more amazingly in his Supper Jesus gives you the life-giving fertilizer of his body and blood with bread and wine. All this he does out of unfathomable mercy and love that never gives up on you.

So marvel at the mercy and patience of your Gardener God and bear abundant fruit. There are all different kinds. Consider your stations in life and what God commands in his Word. Consider what you once were and now have become through Christ's long-suffering labors. All are opportunities to bear fruits of repentance. See every moment of your life as a time of grace, an opportunity to serve your faithful Lord. Then when your time of grace comes to an end, you can have complete confidence knowing you have life eternal because of Jesus' faithful labors for you and you can rejoice in the fruits with which he blessed you. May Jesus, your Gardener God, enable you to ever bear abundant fruits of repentance! Amen.