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The Words, Works, and Person of Christ

The Gospel of Luke

The Barren Fig Tree (Part 1)

November 27, 2022

Sermon Text: Luke 13:6-9

Scripture Reading: John 15:1-17

Luk 13:6-9 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.’”

This Scripture, a parable told by Christ, is the text which John Bunyan chose to write an article long ago in 1682. But, as the editor and printer of the article wrote: *Who being dead, yet speaks, Heb 11:4*. The extended title of this sermon (and we will call it a sermon), is this:

The Barren Fig Tree;

Or,

The Doom and Downfall of the
Fruitless Professor:

Showing, that the Day of Grace
May be Past with Him Long
Before His Life is Ended

We could rightly entitle it, *The Man in the Iron Cage*, which man we have recently met in our reading through *The Pilgrim's Progress*. As we proceed, you will understand why this is so.

What I intend to do is to allow Bunyan to open up this parable for us, and we will be praying as we do so that the Holy Spirit would give genuine, fruitful Christians great encouragement while at the same time striking trembling fear in those who the Lord calls – *Fruitless or Barren Fig Trees*.

Bunyan introduces the sermon with a few paragraphs addressed to the “Courteous Reader,” and that is us!

I have written to you now about the Barren Fig-tree, or how it will fare with the fruitless professor that stands in the vineyard of God. Of what character you are I cannot certainly tell; but the parable tells you that the **cumber-ground** [*something that encumbers the ground, producing nothing, and interfering with the productivity of the rest of the trees*] must be cut down. A cumber-ground professor

[*ie, someone who professes to be a Christian*] is not only a provocation to God, a stumbling-block to the world, and a blemish to religion, but a snare to his own soul also.

“Though his excellency mount up to the heavens, and his head reach unto the clouds, *yet* he shall perish for ever, like his own dung; they which have seen him shall say, *Where is he?*” (Job 20:6,7).

Now ‘they count it pleasure to riot in the daytime.’ But what will they do when the axe is fetched out? (2 Peter 2:13,14).

The tree whose fruit withers is reckoned a tree without fruit, a tree twice dead, one that must be ‘plucked up by the roots’ (Jude 12).

O thou cumber-ground, God expects fruit, God will come seeking fruit shortly. My exhortation, therefore, is to professors that they look to it, that they take heed. The barren fig-tree in the vineyard, and the bramble in the wood, are both prepared for the fire.

Profession is not a cover to hide from the eye of God; nor will it satisfy the revengeful threatening of his justice; he will command to cut it down shortly. The church, and a profession,

are the best of places for the upright, but the worst in the world for the cumber-ground. He must be cast, as profane, out of the mount of God: cast, I say, over the wall of the vineyard, there to wither; thence to be gathered and burned.

'It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness' (2 Peter 2:21).

The Context and Setting

This 13th chapter of Luke began this way:

Luk 13:1-5 There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. (2) And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?

(3) No, I tell you; but **unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.**

(4) Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed

them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? (5) **No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.**"

Pilate was an evil ruler, and a cruel one. We know nothing about this incident of Pilate slaughtering Galileans except for what information we have right here. The reason for Pilate's actions are unknown.

Why did these Jews here bring up this matter to Jesus? Their motive is revealed by Jesus' response to them – they apparently believed that those killed by Pilate, and in the second instance – those upon whom the tower fell, were punished by God. That they were worse sinners than these who were questioning Jesus. They were not looking to themselves, especially in light of all the warnings Jesus had just given them in chapter 12 about being certain they are ready for the final judgment day.

It is with this backdrop and setting that Jesus presents them with this

parable of the barren, fruitless fig tree.

The Vineyard of the Lord

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.

Israel is often compared, in Scripture, to a vineyard. For example, we have just read from John 15 –

Joh 15:1-6 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. (2) Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (3) Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. (4) Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (5) 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. (6) If anyone does

not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

And the background of this is:

Isa 5:1-7 Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. (2) He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

(3) And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. (4) What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

(5) And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

(6) I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

(7) For the 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!

And so we have it here in this parable once more:

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.

“The Lord Jesus presents them with this parable, in which he emphatically shows them that their dry of being the temple of the Lord, and of their being the children of Abraham, and their being the church of God, would not stand them in any stead” [ie, would be of no advantage to them in the Day of Judgement]. (Bunyan)

Who are the primary players in this parable?

- The Man who owns the vineyard is God
- The vineyard is the covenant people of God – Israel under the Old Covenant, the Church under the New
- The Vinedresser is the Lord Jesus
- The barren fig tree is a counterfeit professor, one who claims to be one of the Lord’s people
- The Barren fig tree’s *fruitlessness* is his lack of any fruit which a true child of God will inevitably produce.

A Fruitless Tree in the Vineyard – the Nature of this Fruit

“Observe then that it is no new thing if you find in God’s church barren fig trees, fruitless professors...Fruit is not so easily brought forth as is a disguise to put on. To be fruitful, to bring forth fruit to God, this is something not every tree that stands in the vineyard of God does.” [Bunyan]

The new birth cannot be pretended without eventually being discovered. Of course, the Lord knows and sees through to the heart, but we must look for fruit in ourselves as evidence of being born again. So, just what is this fruit the Lord Himself looks for?

We know that many people are in reality, in God's sight, barren fig trees, devoid of the fruit He insists upon. The Lord has told us so many times. And yet they can bear "much fruit" – or so it seems:

Mat 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (22) On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' (23) And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

They prophesied, they cast out demons, they did many mighty works – they apparently it would seem bore much fruit! And yet the Lord will, on that great Day, reject them and their fruit as counterfeit. Why? What is this fruit that the Lord looks for? Let me show you:

Joh 15:7-17 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (8) By this my Father is glorified, **that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.**

(9) As the Father has **loved** me, so have I **loved** you. Abide in my **love**. (10) If you keep my commandments, you will **abide in my love**, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and **abide in his love**. (11) These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (12) **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**

(13) **Greater love** has no one than this, that someone lay down his life

for his friends. (14) You are my friends if you do what I command you.

(15) No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. (16) 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, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (17) These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Think carefully now on this. What fruit can be faked? What is the typical plastic fruit that counterfeits hang on themselves to appear genuine? They can be masters at imitation as they creep in among us.

- Apparently they can, by Satan's devices, even imitate spiritual gifts – *'we did many mighty works in your name'*

- Like the Pharisees, they can put on an outward show of great saintliness.
- They can put on the fruit of great knowledge of Scripture and theology
- They are quite capable of being leading persons in our churches – just as Korah was a privileged office-bearer in Israel

But what is this genuine fruit which the Lord of the vineyard demands? What is this fruit that cannot be manufactured by any human being, but only by the Spirit of the Lord in us? The answer is very plain, isn't it? *It is LOVE. Love for God. Love for one another. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

Joh 13:34-35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (35) By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This supernatural love, this love which the Son has for the Father and which the Father has for the Son, is at the core of all other real fruit. This is what the barren fig tree does not bear.

Notice the very first fruit in this listing:

Gal 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

The owner of the vineyard sees it immediately-

Luk 13:6-7 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?'

It is a Creation of the Lord

1Co 13:1-13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

(2) And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

(3) If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

(4) Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant (5) or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; (6) it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

(7) Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

(8) Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. (9) For we know in part and we

prophesy in part, (10) but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. (11) When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

(12) For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (13) So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

But these Jews in Jesus' day, except for His true remnant, were barren of this fruit. Here was Christ among them, and they hated Him. They hated one another.

Hos 10:1-2 Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. (2) Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. The LORD will break down their altars and destroy their pillars.

'God's church may be encumbered with fruitless fig trees, with barren professors.' [Bunyan]

No matter their disguise, the barren fig tree, the fruitless professor will meet this end:

“Out of Christ final destruction is sure to every man of woman born; no rank, possession, or character, shall suffice to save a single soul who has not believed in the Lord Jesus. Behold this wide-spread judgment and tremble at it. All are safe in Jesus. Are you in Him? [Spurgeon, quoted recently by Becket Cook]

This barrenness of fruit, this vacuum of love, is a widespread epidemic in the visible church, and we must not be surprised at it. This fruitlessness will inevitably be exposed. Real love, the fruit of the Spirit kind of love, is kind and forgiving, patient, longsuffering. But the fruitless professor will, sooner or later, be exposed because, listen to Paul –

2Co 2:15-16 For we are the aroma

of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, (16) to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

See it? The barren fig tree pretends, often quite convincingly, but the fact is that the genuine trees, the ones bearing real fruit, *are a stench to him*. And as a result this is unavoidable and inevitable:

1Jn 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

We Must take Heed

Bunyan's words here remind us of Pilgrim's Progress:

“These climbed up some other way. There are many ways to get into the [visible] church of God, even professing His name, and yet without entering by the Door.”

With a true heart's desire to warn his people of this dangerous road to hell, this barrenness of fruit which reveals an unconverted heart, Bunyan addresses the fruitless professor repeatedly:

“Barren fig tree, do you hear? God expects fruit, God calls for fruit, yes, and God will shortly come seeking fruit. Barren fig tree, either bear fruit, or go out of the vineyard...A church and a claim to know Christ are not means by which the workers of iniquity may hide themselves and their sins from God....Many make religion their cloak, and Christ their stalking-horse [ie, a horse to walk behind while stalking up on prey], and by that means cover themselves and hide their own wickedness from men; but God sees their hearts. Barren fig tree, do you hear?”

Luk 13:7-9 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.”