

# Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

*You Must be Born Again!*

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## *The Words, Works, and Person of Christ*

### **The Gospel of Luke**

The Barren Fig Tree (Part 7)

*February 12, 2023*

**Sermon Text:** Luke 13:6-9

**Scripture Reading:** Psalm 49

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 morning I want to focus our attention upon verses 7-9 in which we not only see the sobering truth of God’s axe, but the incredible patience of His graciousness.

- For three years He came seeking fruit, even though He found none
- The intercession of the vinedresser (Christ)
- The continued provision of every advantage (the cultivation and fertilization of the ground).

I have spent these seven times in this parable because, as Bunyan warns us, if anyone is a barren fig

tree in the Lord's church, if they are deceived about being in a just standing before the Lord, or if they are simply hypocrites, producing no good fruit because their root is bad – because they are not born again – then the destiny to which they are headed is fearful and terrible.

And even more sobering is the fact that the Lord's axe can fall in its finality *even while the barren tree which refuses repentance is still alive in this present world*. Bunyan pointed out to us that Scripture identifies many examples of such people:

- That first generation of Israelites
- Esau
- No doubt the majority of the Pharisees
- Cain
- Judas

Bunyan emphasized this in the title of his treatise on this parable:

*...Showing that the day of grace may be past with him (the fruitless*

*professor) long before his life is ended.*”

This is a fearful truth given to us all that we might carefully examine ourselves and not end up as the fig tree in this parable. I say that this fig tree did not repent because – listen to Matthew Henry explain:

“This parable primarily refers to the nation and people of the Jews. God chose them for his own, made them a people near to him, gave them advantages for knowing and serving him above any other people, and expected answerable returns of duty and obedience from them, which, turning to his praise and honour, he would have accounted *fruit*;

But they disappointed his expectations: they did not do their duty; they were a reproach instead of being a credit to their profession. Upon this, he justly determined to abandon them, and cut them off, to deprive them of their privileges, to unchurch and unpeople them; but, upon Christ's intercession, as of old upon that of Moses, he graciously

gave them further time and further mercy; tried them, as it were, another year, by sending his apostles among them, to call them to repentance, and in Christ's name to offer them pardon, upon repentance.

Some of them were wrought upon to *repent*, and bring forth fruit, and with them all was well; but the body of the nation continued impenitent and unfruitful, and ruin without remedy came upon them; about forty years after they were cut down, and cast into the fire, as John Baptist had told them (Mat\_3:10), which saying of his this parable enlarges upon.” [Referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of myriads of the people by Rome in 70AD].

However, as we have been applying the parable to ourselves – especially to anyone who professes to be a Christian, Matthew Henry goes on-

“Yet it has, without doubt, a further reference, and is designed for the

awakening of all that enjoy the means of grace, and the privileges of the visible church, to see to it that the temper of their minds and the tenor of their lives be answerable to their professions and opportunities, for that is the *fruit* required.

As Paul told the Corinthians, referring to the sad experience of the idolatrous Israelites in the wilderness –

1Co 10:11 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

As we continue then to consider the danger of an imminent falling of the Lord’s axe upon such a one, let us never think that the Lord’s intent is to lead a fruitless, barren hypocrite to despair. Once again I will let Matthew Henry explain –

What it is he prays for, and that is a reprieve: *Lord, let it alone this year also*. He doth not pray, “Lord, let it never be cut down,” but, “Lord, not

now. Lord, do not remove the dresser, do not withhold the dews, do not pluck up the tree.”

Note, [1.] It is desirable to have a barren tree reprieved [ie, given more time to repent]. Some have not yet *grace to repent*, yet it is a mercy to them to have *space to repent*, as it was to the old world to have 120 years allowed them to make their peace with God.

[2.] We owe it to Christ, the great Intercessor, that *barren* trees are not cut down immediately: had it not been for his interposition, the whole world had been cut down, upon the sin of Adam; but he said, *Lord, let it alone*; and it is he that upholds all things.

[3.] We are encouraged to pray to God for the merciful reprieve of barren fig-trees: “Lord, *let them alone*; continue them yet awhile in their probation; bear with them a little longer, and wait to be gracious.” Thus must we stand in the gap, to turn away wrath.

[4.] Reprieves of mercy are but for a time; *Let it alone this year also*, a

short time, but a sufficient time to make trial. When God has borne long, we may hope he will bear yet a little longer, but we cannot expect he should bear always.

[5.] *Reprieves* may be obtained by the prayers of others for us, but not *pardons*; there must be our own faith, and repentance, and prayers, else no pardon.

And now especially note this:

“Where he leaves the matter: “Let us try it, and try what we can do with it one year more, *and, if it bear fruit, well*, [Luk 13:9](#). It is possible, nay, there is hope, that yet it may be fruitful.”

In this hope the owner will have patience with it, and the vinedresser will take pains with it, and, if it should have the desired success, both will be pleased that it was not cut down.

The word *well* [ie, *very good*] is not in the original, but the expression is abrupt: *If it bear fruit!* - supply it how you please, so as to express how wonderfully well-pleased both the owner and dresser will be.

If it bear fruit, there will be cause of rejoicing; we have what we would have. But it cannot be better expressed than as we do: *well*.

**Note, Unfruitful professors of religion, if after long unfruitfulness they will repent, and amend, and bring forth fruit, shall find *all is well*. God will be *pleased*, for he will be *praised*; ministers' hands will be strengthened, and such penitents will be their joy now and their crown shortly. Nay, there will be joy in heaven for it; the ground will be no longer cumbered, but bettered, the vineyard beautified, and the good trees in it made better. As for the tree itself, it is *well* for it; it shall not only not be cut down, but it shall *receive blessing from God* ([Heb 6:7](#)); it shall be *purged*, and *shall bring forth more fruit*, for the Father is its husbandman ([Joh 15:2](#)); and it shall at last be transplanted from the vineyard on earth to the paradise above.**

Do you see it? Never give up calling upon the Lord to be merciful to you in Christ, until you

know that in His kindness He has caused you to be born again. No matter how black your sins have been, turn from them and, well, believe this:

Rom 10:8-9 But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); (9) because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Rom 10:13 For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

“But that is all for the other guy, not for me.” That is a lie. EVERYONE! The promise is to EVERYONE...who calls on the name of the Lord. Turn from your sin, confess your hypocrisy and barrenness, admit you have no right to be in the vineyard of the Lord, stop trying to make yourself good by supposed good works, *and call on the name of the Lord to show you mercy even though you know you don't deserve it.*

## The Lord's mercy

Once again, take careful note of the patient kindness of the Lord toward us as shown in this parable –

- For three years He came seeking fruit, even though He found none
- The intercession of the vinedresser (Christ)
- The continued provision of every advantage (the cultivation and fertilization of the ground).

Some if not many of us, myself included, were at one time barren fig trees. We professed to be Christians, but we were not born again. The Spirit of Christ was not in us and as a result our root, our heart, was still fleshly, stony, and fruitless. The only fruit we produced was bad fruit. God's love – not the love which the world claims, but the love for God Himself and the love He produces in us for His people and for His Word, were absent.

But the Lord was kind to us. Patient. He sent us His Word, He provided us with faithful ministers

and the fellowship of genuine Christians, His Spirit convicted us of our sin and of the fact that we were headed for hell, and He brought us to repentance and faith.

He did not strike us down with His axe and cast us into the fire. We had a *reprieve* simply due to His grace and there were probably one or more of His true people praying for us.

Rom 2:4 Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Do not despair should he convict you of being a barren fig tree in His orchard where you have no right to be. Rather, honestly confess it all to Him and, as the Puritans of old used to say, *apply to Christ for saving mercy*. You have nothing to offer Him to compel Him to save you. Nothing. But that is the very point of the matter, Grace is undeserved. His mercy to us is undeserved. *Stop trying to present yourself as worthy to Him*. You aren't. None of us are. If you have in your mind that others are

superior to you in God's sight, then that is a very wrong assumption.

Which brings us to this next point:

### The Obstacle of the Cumber-Ground

When we began this series, we came across this old word used by Bunyan and the KJV –

Luk 13:7 Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why **cumbereth it the ground?**

The barren fig tree in the Lord's vineyard, the counterfeit Christian in the Lord's church, is a *cumber-ground*. It *encumbers* the soil where the Lord's church is planted. It sucks nutrients away from the true fig trees and it serves as an obstacle to their fruit-bearing.

Now, I want to address this possible obstacle to any barren fig tree or actually to all of us.

Counterfeit Christians in the Lord's church are a hindrance to those who are truly seeking Christ, and also to those who are already

born again. How is this so?

- They project themselves as being superior to everyone else. It requires a tremendous amount of sinful pride to be dead in one's sins and yet parade themselves as the Pharisees did. Clean on the outside, corrupt on the inside.
- This air of superiority causes others to despair. "How can I ever be as holy as they are?"
- They serve as a discouragement and hindrance to Christ's true people. They oppose the truth of God's Word. They seek to exalt themselves and they work to expel Christ's sheep.
- They quench the Spirit of Christ so that He is not so powerfully at work among us.
- They cause the little ones to stumble. Not just children, but little ones in the faith.

Now, I want to encourage all of us, but in particular I want to encourage anyone listening who has been caused to stumble, whose

travel on the Narrow Way has perhaps been hindered by these *cumber-grounds* which we all have come across far too often. NOTE: There is a lengthy and EXCELLENT comment on the unholycharade.com blog which tells the story of how one such cumber-ground almost led a lady to suicide.

Back to the encouragement: *If you have been hindered by a cumber-ground in this or any other church or setting, by someone who claims to be a Christian but who sets themselves up in arrogant Diotrephes type status, then be sure of this – none of us are superior to others here. None of us are superior to YOU.*

Look at it:

1Jn 2:12-14 I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. (13) I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. (14) I

have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.

Do you see how John addresses all categories equally, whether they are new believers or old ones? Little children, young men, fathers. One way cumber-grounds suck the life from the church and quench the Spirit, hindering people from coming to Christ or growing in Him is *they divert the focus from Christ onto themselves*. They often exalt themselves into office and position in the church. They become false shepherds and they make the little ones in the faith think that the Lord looks down on them. But it is all a lie.

*Cumber-grounds must repent or go, lest they continue hindering the life of Christ among us.*

### **A Final Word to the Cumber-Ground**

Having pointed everyone to the mercy and grace of God in Christ,



we end with this sobering warning to all, which warning will prove to be life to us if we heed it:

“Unfruitful Christians [he means, *professing* Christians for no true believer is unfruitful] must be *awakened* by the terrors of the law, which *break up the fallow ground*, [meaning the hard, stony, unrepentant heart of the sinner] and then encouraged by the promises of the gospel, which are warming and fattening, as manure to the tree. Both methods must be tried; the one [the Law] prepares for the other [the gospel], and all little enough.

But he adds, *If not, then after that thou shalt cut it down*. Observe here, [1.] **That, though God bear long, he will not bear always with unfruitful professors; his patience will have an end**, and, if it be abused, will give way to that wrath which will have no end. Barren trees will certainly be *cut down* at last, and *cast into the fire*.

[2.] The longer God has *waited*, and the more cost he has been at upon them, the greater will their destruction be: to be cut down *after*

*that*, after all these expectations from it, these debates concerning it, this concern for it, will be sad indeed, and will aggravate the condemnation.

[3.] Cutting down, though it is work that shall be done, is work that God does not take pleasure in: for observe here, the owner said to the dresser, “Do thou *cut it down*, for it cumbereth the ground.” “Nay,” said the vinedresser, “if it must be done at last, *thou shalt cut it down*; let not my hand be upon it.”

[4.] Those that now intercede for barren trees, and take pains with them, if the barren ones persist in their unfruitfulness, will be even content to see them cut down, and will not have one word more to say for them. Their best friends will acquiesce in, nay, they will approve and applaud, the righteous judgment of God, in the day of the manifestation of it, Rev\_15:3, Rev\_15:4. [Matthew Henry]

If you read John Calvin’s sermons (not so much his commentaries, though those are excellent as well), you will soon realize that he closes

each sermon with a prayer, and those prayers are wonderful. Here is one, and we close with it now:

“Now let us bow before the majesty of our gracious God in acknowledgement of our faults, praying that He will be pleased to touch us to the quick in such a way that we will learn to grieve and groan before His majesty and beseech Him to forgive the many offences we are guilty of, and seek for healing in order to rise above our vices and grievous sins, ingratitude, and rebellion that are in us.

But let Him govern us by His Holy Spirit, and as we grow in strength to resist all temptations and wicked desires, let us live in this world in such a way that, acknowledging we are nourished by His free goodness, we will be able to aspire to heaven, applying to that effort all of our thoughts so that we will truly be freemen and citizens of it.

And let us be strangers here below until we are gathered into the inheritance which was acquired for us at the great cost of our Lord Jesus Christ’s blood. May He grant

that grace not only to us, but to all people and nations of the earth. Amen.” [Sermons on Genesis, p. 857, Banner of Truth Trust].