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The Words, Works, and Person of Christ

The Gospel of Luke

The Barren Fig Tree (Part 8)

February 19, 2023

Sermon Text: Luke 13:6-9

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 3

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.’”

Last time in this series on the parable of the Barren Fig Tree, we saw that the Lord also emphasized His mercy and patience in dealing with this fruitless tree in His vineyard. And so it is today. His longsuffering toward those who push into His vineyard but who never bear fruit because they are not truly born again, is great. Year after year He came looking for fruit, but found none. The Vinedresser, who is Christ, interceded for that tree – just one more year – and so it was given reprieve.

But...

A reprieve is not forever. It is not the pardon of justification. God's patience is great, but it is not forever. At some point, for all who reject Him, His decree is carried out...*cut it down.*

I am compelled to dwell on these things because the time is growing short. We are all decades closer to the conclusion of our earthly pilgrimage than we were when we began together. And all through these past 40 years, I have seen it over and over again. So many, even the majority, of people who claimed to be Christians – but who evidenced no fruit of the Spirit, who were devoid of the love of God – one by one now passing off into eternity without Christ. With increasing frequency I read a notice or receive news that one of these who served as church members, who were even often very active in the church, have passed out of this life. I could tell you story after story after story.

I do not want any of you to be like them. Barren fig trees of which John the Baptist warned:

Mat 3:10-12 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (11) "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (12) His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Unquenchable. Even that horrible fire in Ohio that is polluting those poor people's homes and lives – will eventually be extinguished. But the fire John warns of will never be extinguished. Never – because that fire is God Himself:

Heb 12:29 for our God is a consuming fire.

In our sin, apart from Christ, we can deceive ourselves. We can deceive others. But we cannot deceive God. He knows who is

wheat and who is chaff. And the day will come for every bit of chaff to hear, “cast it into the fire.”

Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.

Cut it Down

Let’s consider the ways in which the Lord effects this cutting down of the fruitless one who has pressed himself or herself into His church.

One of Bunyan’s primary points in his treatise on this parable is that the cutting down can be effected by the Lord *even while the fruitless one is still alive in this world*. Just how does He accomplish this? Esau was cut down, yet he still lived in the world. All the inhabitants of the earth were cut down, handed over to judgment, even while Noah was building the ark. The Lord decreed that He would destroy the Sodomites except for Lot and his own – the cutting down was decreed well before the actual fire fell.

Now, how does the Lord effect this

manner of cutting down? Consider:

1. By removing the barren one from His vineyard, taking him out from among Christ’s true people.

You see it. He takes the counterfeit who refuses to repent, who is devoid of fruit, away from His church. And how does He do this? What are some typical ways in which this removal from the saints is effected?

A. By strong delusions as Bunyan observes. Having stubbornly and wickedly refused to hear and believe the truth, having desired the lies of the devil, the Lord finally hands such a one over so that they reject the gospel of Christ and embrace some, as they were termed in years past, “damnable doctrine.”

Isaiah 66:3b Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. 4 I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon

them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose *that* in which I delighted not.

And again:

2Th 2:9-11 The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, (10) and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (11) Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false,

Understand? They are dead, even while they live. The axe has fallen upon them and all that is left for them is that fire. Anyone who refuses to love Christ's truth and so be saved is on the path to this fall of that axe, from which there is no return.

A. By open profaneness.

“There are those who has taken up a profession of that worthy name,

the Lord Jesus Christ; but this profession is just a cloak used to secretly hide this kind's practice of wickedness.” (Bunyan)

A man or a woman may walk on a path of wickedness, keeping his real person hidden by a façade of outward godliness, but if he pursues this evil way long enough, the Lord will hand him over to his sin.

Psa 125:5 But those who turn aside to their crooked ways the LORD will lead away with evildoers! Peace be upon Israel!

Many such barren fig trees press themselves into the church, putting themselves off as the most holy saints, and their deceptive disguise is so effective that sometimes the church is at a loss to see it or to know how to deal with it. *But the Lord sees. The Lord knows. And so He says, “I will deal with that man Myself.”*

Eze 14:7-8 For any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who

separates himself from me, taking his idols into his heart and putting the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to a prophet to consult me through him, I the LORD will answer him myself. (8) And I will set my face against that man; I will make him a sign and a byword and cut him off from the midst of my people, and you shall know that I am the LORD.

Are you encouraged by this? If you are a real child of God, if you truly know Christ, then in our weakness and dimness of sight, to know that Christ the Good Shepherd watches out for us and for His church is a wonderful thing to know.

Rev 2:18-22 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. (19) “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. (20) But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who

calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. (21) I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. (22) Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works,

These are fearsome words for the hypocrite – but for the Lord’s own people, our King promises He will cut down the barren fig tree, that fruitless vine which encumbers the ground in His church, the apple of His eye.

And one such way in which He exposes and removes the counterfeit is to hand such a one over to the power of his own sin. So that he cannot hide it anymore, and he must depart from the company of the saints. “I will give him over to his own vile affections.”

This is why we are given the responsibility and authority of exercising church discipline. Here

is Bunyan once more:

“God does sometimes cut down the barren fig tree by the church, by the church’s execution of the laws and censures which Christ for that purpose has left with His church (see Matthew 18; 1 Cor 5; 1 Timothy 1:20).

2. Sometimes ‘cut it down’ means that God casts the Barren tree out of the world

Consider:

- Nadab and Abihu
- Korah
- Saul
- Ananias and Sapphira
- Absalom
- Judas

Est 7:9-10 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” (10) So they hanged Haman on the gallows

that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.

Cut it down. The Barren Tree, the false professor in the vineyard of the Lord is “*a mock and reproach to true religion, to the ways of God, to the people of God, to the Word of God.*”

Rom 2:17-24 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God (18) and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; (19) and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, (20) an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— (21) you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? (22) You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? (23) You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. (24) For, as it is written, “The

name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

The counterfeit, false professor and hypocrite who has pushed himself into the Lord’s church, keeps fruitful trees out of the place where they might prosper. This is to say, where Barren Trees populate a visible church, little ones are hindered from coming to Christ and bearing real fruit for His glory.

“Cumber ground, how many hopeful, inclinable, forward people have you by your fruitless and unprofitable life, kept out of the vineyard of God? Because of you people have stumbled at Christ’s truth, you have been a means of hardening others and of quenching the beginnings of the Spirit in their hearts.” Bunyan

Mat 18:6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

“The cumber ground is a sucker; he draws away the heart and nourishment from the other trees. Were the cumber ground cut down, the others would be more fruitful; he draws away that fatness of the ground to himself, that would make the others more hearty and fruitful. The cumber ground is a very drone in the hive, that eats up the honey that should feed the laboring bee; he is a thief in the candle that wastes the tallow but gives no light; he is the unsavory salt that is fit for nothing but the dunghill. Hear this well, Barren Tree!”
(Bunyan)

Let me repeat what I stated in the beginning here – *In 40 years of ministry, the large majority of church members I have personally known have been Barren fig trees. And as the years have passed, one by one, the axe has fallen and they have passed into a Christless eternity – in spite of the glowing assurances of their saintliness given in their obituaries. Do not be one of them! Christ is giving you that one more day, that one more year perhaps, to repent. As*

vinedresser He is cultivating the ground you are planted in, He is fertilizing that soil by giving you His Word, by calling to you to repent, so that you have a reprieve. But unless a sinner repents, confesses his barrenness and turns to Christ alone as his righteousness, the reprieve is not a pardon. The axe will still fall. *Cut it down.*

Amazing Grace

As we considered last week, this parable also emphasizes the patience of the Lord with sinners. Even with willful sinners who dare come to His table without wedding garments pretending to be one of His own.

“Lord, let it alone this year also.”

Why should the Lord Jesus, the only mediator between God and man, even bother to step in to ask for further reprieve for such a one? Why stop the axe from falling at all?

“Barren fig tree, it is well for you that there is a Jesus at God’s right

hand, a Jesus of largeness of heart as to have compassion on you, else justice would long since have swung its axe and cast you into the fire.” (Bunyan)

Here is Moses as a type of Christ the mediator:

Exo 32:9-11 And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. (10) Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” (11) But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”

“Lord, let it alone this year also.”

The Barren Tree is Earth-Bound

The vinedresser tells the owner of the vineyard that he will *dig around it*. I don’t know much about growing domestic plants, but I do

know that there is such a thing as a plant in a pot becoming “root bound.” Here is a definition I looked up –

“When a plant is root bound, it’s root system has out-grown the pot in which it is planted, causing the root system to become entangled. When a plant becomes root bound, it loses the ability to expand its root system and will often become stunted in size.”

The fruitless counterfeit in the Lord’s church is *root bound*. *That is to say, he or she is earth bound*. And therefore the Lord works in His patience grace to *dig around it*. How is the Barren tree earth bound? Bunyan explains:

“The love of this world and the deceitfulness of riches lie too close to the roots of the heart of this false professor. The love of riches, the love of honors, the love of pleasures, are the thorns that choke the Word.

1Jn 2:15-16 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone

loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (16) For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.

Mat 13:22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Barren fig tree, the things of this world lie too close to your heart and affections. The earth, this world, has with its things bound up your roots; you are an earth-bound soul, wrapped up in thick clay.

1Ti 6:9-10 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. (10) For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

How then can the false professor

with such an earth-bound root wrapped up in earthly things bring forth fruit to God?”

And so, in His patient mercy, Christ the vinedresser digs around those roots to free them.

“I will loose his roots, I will dig up this earth, I will lay his roots bare; my hand shall be upon him by sickness, by disappointments, by counter-providences. I will dig about him until he stands shaking and tottering; until he is ready to fall; then, if ever, he will seek to take a faster hold. Thus the Lord in mercy often times deals with the Barren professor; he digs about him, he smites one blow at his heart, another blow at his lusts, a third at his pleasures, a fourth at his comforts, another at his self-conceit. By this he works his diggings to take the bad earth from his roots.” (Bunyan)

It is then a hopeful sign when we see such painful providences come to the Barren one.

I will Fertilize around him

How does Christ the vinedresser bring nourishment to the soil in which the Barren tree is set? What is the nutrient He graciously brings?

- Firstly and primarily this nutrient is the Word of God.

Set in the Lord’s vineyard, the counterfeit – like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day – heard Christ’s Word. Patiently, year after year, the Lord sends the preaching of His Word, He sends the Bible right into our hands, and calls us to hear and read.

- He provides these nutrients by the ministry of the Holy Spirit

Joh 16:8 And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

- He provides these nutrients by surrounding the Barren one with fruitful trees.

Heb 6:7-8 For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for

whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. (8) But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

The Final Warning

“But if not, cut it down.”

Christ is long-suffering with sinners. He was long-suffering with each of us in the time we were Barren trees – *“If a barren tree, a barren professor, shall now at last bring forth fruit to God by pleading with Him for mercy in Christ, by confessing his unfruitful mimicry of godliness and be saved, it will go well with him. His former barrenness and tempting of God, his abuse of God’s patience, his mis-spending year after year, shall now all be forgiven him.”*

And yet, God’s Word makes it evident to us that there are many Barren trees who will not repent. Who persevere in contemptuous rejection of all the efforts of Christ to bring him to fruitfulness.

“There is a generation of professors in the world that are incurable, that will not, that cannot repent, nor be profited by any means of grace. A generation of persons who will retain this false form of godliness, but who will never bring forth the fruit of God’s Spirit. Such kind wear out God’s patience, waste away time given, harden themselves to the Lord’s threatenings and Christ’s intercessions, and after all this remain unfruitful.

Is anyone listening today such a one? If so, how sobering these words:

“When Christ gives you over, there is no intercessor, no mediator, no more sacrifice for sin, all is gone but judgment, all is gone but the axe, all is gone but the certainty of a fearful looking for judgment, fiery indignation, which shall devour all adversaries (Heb 10:26-27)

Heb 3:7-8 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, (8) do not harden your

hearts as in the rebellion, on the
day of testing in the wilderness,