

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 11)

March 12th, 2023

Sermon Text: Luke 13:6-9

Scripture Reading: Amos 6

Amo 6:1 “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel comes!

If you read the writings of faithful Christians from days of old, like John Bunyan, you will find that they frequently repeat the first part of this verse – *woe to those who are*

at ease in Zion. They do so to describe and warn Barren Fig Trees – professing but fruitless “Christians” who are at ease in their perilous condition.

This past week Verla and I watched a You Tube presentation by Becket Cook, interviewing Pastor Calvin Robinson, an Anglican minister who has withdrawn from the Church of England and is now part of the Anglican church which also is no longer part of the Church of England.

(<https://youtu.be/o13A6UU6IPY>)

Robinson has spoken out against the Church of England (led by the archbishop of Canterbury) for embracing and blessing same-sex “marriages,” and he has been mercilessly attacked by professing Christians for taking that stand.

[Note: just one point in that interview we disagree with – Robinson believes that marriage is permanent, no divorce permitted, no remarriage. He mentions this in passing].

Recall the Apostle Paul’s warning to the church at Ephesus:

Act 20:28-31 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (29) I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; (30) **and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.** (31) Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

From among your own selves. Isn’t that interesting? Think carefully about it. Paul was leaving, never to see them again. His last words to

them are not a warning against persecution and enemies from *outside* the church, but from *within*. That is where, for example, the persecution and hatred directed at Pastor Robinson is coming from – *within* the vineyard.

Barren fig trees, as we have seen, are not harmless. They are *cumber-grounds*. They not only use up nutrients meant for the Lord’s true flock, but they actively oppose the feeding of Christ’s sheep. They reject God’s Word and replace it with their own vile imaginations. *From among your own selves.* That is where we are to watch in particular.

John Bunyan’s treatise on the Lord’s parable in Luke 13:6-9 is entitled: *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, The Signs also by Which Such Miserable Mortals May be Known.*

It is the last part of Bunyan’s title that we intend to look at this morning – *the signs by which the*

cut-down fruitless fig tree might be known.

Now, our purpose in this is not go on some kind of a search mission to root out Barren Fig Trees, having certainty that the Lord has finally and ultimately handed them over to judgment. *Rather, our purpose is to promote a Godly fear* in exhorting each of us to honestly examine ourselves and, in particular, to challenge the fruitless professing Christian with sober warnings and a repeated call for such a one to run to Christ *now*, lest the day come when it is too late. When the Lord of the Vineyard declares that His grace has ended, that the axe is to fall, and the Barren Tree becomes Esau, for whom repentance is no longer possible.

What, then are some signs, the symptoms, the danger signals, that a person is the man in the iron cage? Perhaps these warnings will awaken careless Christians and bring them to repentance. First, then, a symptom of the Barren Tree:

When a Person Steals into the Vineyard by Other Hands than God's and there Remains Lifeless, Graceless, Careless, and Without Any Good Conscience to God at all. [Bunyan]

There is only ONE WAY into the vineyard of the Lord, into His Church:

Luk 13:24 “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

Joh 10:7-9 So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. (8) All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. (9) I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

Joh 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

As we have been reading Pilgrim's Progress together on Sunday mornings, have you noticed one recurring theme?

Pilgrim's Progress Series Book 1) (pp. 15-16). Brown Chair Books. Kindle Edition.

And again:

Evangelist handed him a scroll with these words on it: "Flee from the wrath to come!"⁵ The man read it and asked, "But where should I flee to?" There was a wide field before them with a gate. "Do you see that wicket gate?" Evangelist asked. The man looked far into the distance and said, "No, I do not." Evangelist asked, "How about the light? Do you see the light?" The man looked closer and said excitedly, "Yes, I think I do!" "Good! Keep that light in your eye, and go straight to it," said Evangelist. "When you arrive at the gate, knock, and you will be told what you are to do." Then I saw in my dream that Christian—for that was the man's name—set off running to the gate.

Formalism and Hypocrisy replied, "We were born in the land of Vain-glory and are going to Mount Zion to receive praise and honor."

Christian had seen them climbing over the wall and said, "I'm curious. Why did you not enter at the Wicket Gate located at the beginning of the Way? Don't you know that it's written, 'If someone does not enter in the door, but climbs over some other way, that person is the same as a thief and a robber'?"

"That may be true," they said. "However, our countrymen have all agreed that this entrance, or Wicket Gate as you call it, is unnecessary and just too far away. We prefer to take this shortcut right here by climbing over the wall. It's easier and requires less effort."

Bunyan, John; Vermilye, Alan. The Pilgrim's Progress: A Readable Modern-Day Version of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress (Revised and easy-to-read) (The

Christian paused for a moment and then said, “But will the Lord of the Celestial City where we’re heading not consider this a violation against His revealed will? Is it not trespassing?”

Formalism and Hypocrisy glanced at each other and smiled. “There’s no need to trouble yourself with this. You see, our manner of climbing over this wall has been a long-established tradition. In fact, many witnesses would testify that it’s been accepted as an established route for over a thousand years!”

Bunyan, John; Vermilye, Alan.
The Pilgrim's Progress

There are many Barren Fig Trees in the Lord’s visible church who have entered by climbing over the wall. They have not come through the Gate. That is to say, *there are many reasons for people to claim to be a Christian, for being a church member, for coming to the gathering of the church on the Lord’s Day...but only one reason is acceptable to God.*

“I am here in the vineyard of the Lord because Christ laid hold of me, changed my heart and mind, made me a new creation, granted me faith and repentance and washed me from my sins.” Or perhaps He is at work in me, convicting me and showing me my need to be born again.

Have you entered by the One Way, by faith in Christ, by hearing the gospel with faith, by being born again from above? Or have you entered by pushing your own way in:

- I am in the Lord’s vineyard because I grew up in church. Church and the Christian religion were part of my parents tradition, so here I am.
- I came into the Lord’s vineyard because it is part of the image I want to project in my community
- I climbed over the wall into the Way because I don’t want to go to hell and I want God to be pleased with me.

To such people, you see, it is no difficult thing to gain God's approval. It is no struggle at all to arrive at the Celestial City. The way is not difficult. You just push yourself in. You take the shortcut – there's no real difficulty about it. You get baptized, you recite the creeds, and you're in.

But....

Joh 1:12-13 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, (13) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Joh 3:5-7 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Why are you here? Why do you claim to be a Christian? Why are you at ease in Zion?

"There are some men that steal into a profession, nobody knows how, even as the Barren Fig Tree was brought into the vineyard by other hands than God's, and there remains lifeless, graceless, careless, and without any good conscience to God at all."
[Bunyan]

Still another means of examining ourselves for the life in Christ than only comes from GOD making us His children by the new birth in Christ, is to look to this point:

What is God's Word to me? What is this? –

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.’”

The fruitless professor, week after week, year after year, hardened in unbelief, hears these words from the very mouth of the Lord, and yet says to himself:

“...’but these are words, not blows,’ therefore off goes this consideration from his heart. So that when God comes next year, He finds this one still as he was, fruitless, barren, a cumber-ground.”

The circumstances of his life continue on – though it is only because of the mercy of the Lord that he is not thrown into the fire. The Lord’s warnings have no effect on him – *“Tush,” he says, “Here is no threatening. God is merciful, He will defer His anger, I am not afraid.”* (See Isaiah 30:18) Such ungodly people in this way turn the

mercy of the Lord into license to keep right on sinning.

Now, what response do we see from such a person, from a thief who has crept into the Lord’s vineyard by climbing over the wall, *when the Lord begins to shake him. That is, when the Lord resolves to step up the intensity of His threatenings and thundering voice?*

An example Bunyan gives is, in order to remind the counterfeit of the axe ready to cut him down forever, the Lord perhaps puts him down upon a sick bed? What is the response of the false, fruitless, professor who has persisted in that hypocritical condition year after year, hardening himself against the Lord’s warnings? Well it goes something like this: [NOTE: This is in contrast to the real Christian’s response when trials and sufferings come to them] -

Now, while death is thus tormenting the body, hell is doing with the mind and conscience, striking them with its pains, casting

sparks of fire in there, wounding with sorrows, and fears of everlasting damnation, the spirit of this poor creature.

And now he begins to think to himself, and to cry to God for mercy; Lord, spare me! Lord, spare me! No, says God, you have been a provocation to me these three years.

How many times have you disappointed me? How many seasons have you spent in vain? How many sermons and other mercies did I, of my patience, afford you? But to no purpose at all. Take him, death!

O! good Lord, says the sinner, spare me but this once; raise me but this once. Indeed I have been a barren professor, and have stood to no purpose at all in thy vineyard; but spare! O spare this one time, I beseech you, and I will be better!

Away, no you will not; I have tried you these three years already; if I should recover you again, you would be as bad as you were before.

And all this talk is while death stands by. The sinner cries again, Good Lord, try me this once; let me get up again this once, and see if I do not mend my ways.

But will you promise me to mend? Yes, indeed, Lord, and vow it too; I will never be so bad again; I will be better. Well, says God, death, let this professor alone for this time; I will try him a while longer; he hath promised, he hath vowed, that he will amend his ways. It may be he will mind to keep his promises. Vows are solemn things; it may be he may fear to break his vows. Arise from off they bed.

And now God lays down his axe. At this the poor creature is very thankful, praises God, and fawns upon him, shows as if he did it heartily, and calls to others to thank him too.

He therefore rises, as one would think, to be a new creature indeed. But...

...by that he has put on his clothes, is come down from his bed, and

ventured into the yard or shop, and there sees how all things are gone to sixes and sevens [ie, “everything is in disarray in his business], he begins to have second thoughts, and says to his folks, What have you all been doing? How are all things out of order? One may see, if a man be but a little a to side, that you have neither wisdom nor prudence to order things.

And now, instead of seeking to spend the rest of his time to God, he doubles his diligence after this world.

And thus, quite forgetting the sorrows of death, the pains of hell, the promises and vows which he made to God to be better; because judgment was not now speedily executed, therefore the heart of this poor creature is fully set in him to do evil, to resume just where he left off before.”

Surely such is a terrible sign that this man’s day of grace is over, even while he still lives in this world.

You have seen it and I hope that no one listening today is the person so described – but test and examine yourselves to see if you have entered by Christ, the only door to the sheepfold or if you have pressed into the Lord’s flock by your own doings. By climbing over the wall. Where is your fruit? Where is the evidence that the Spirit of Christ is in us?

Now, is the Lord’s mercy yet ended with this Barren Fig Tree Bunyan just described? Is there yet another chance for him or is his day of grace ended? Listen once more:

These things proving ineffectual, God takes hold of his axe again, sends death to a wife, to a child, to his cattle, 'Your young men have I slain, - and taken away your horses' (Amos 4:9,10). I will blast him, cross him, disappoint him, and cast him down, and will set myself against him in all that he puts his hand to.

At this the poor barren professor cries out again, Lord, I have sinned; spare me once more, I beg

you. O take not away the desire of my eyes; spare my children, bless me in my labors, and I will mend and be better.

No, saith God, you lied to me last time, I will trust you in this no longer; and withal he tumbles the wife, the child, the estate into a grave. And then returns to his place, till this professor more truthfully acknowledges his offence (Hosea 5:14,15).

At this the poor creature is afflicted and distressed, rends his clothes, and begins to call the breaking of his promise and vows to mind; he mourns and prays, and like Ahab, awhile walks softly at the remembrance of the justness of the hand of God upon him.

And now he renews his promises: Lord, try me this one time more; take off your hand and see.

Well, God spares him again, sets down his axe again. 'Many times he did deliver them, but they provoked him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity' (Psa 106:43).

Now they seem to be thankful again, and are as if they were resolved to be godly indeed. Now they read Scripture, they pray, they go to church meetings, and seem to be serious a pretty while, but at last....

...they forget.

Their lusts prick them, suitable temptations present themselves; they turn to their own crooked ways again. 'When he slew them, then they sought him, and they returned and inquired early after God'; 'nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongue' (Psa 78:34-36).

Yet again, the Lord will not leave this professor, but will take up his axe again, and will put him under a more heart-searching ministry, a ministry that shall search him, and turn him over and over; a ministry that shall meet with him, as Elijah met with Ahab, in all his acts of wickedness, and now the axe is laid to the roots of the trees.

Besides, this ministry does not only search the heart, but presents the sinner with the golden rays of the glorious gospel; now is Christ Jesus set forth evidently, now is grace displayed sweetly; now, now are the promises broken like boxes of ointment, to the perfuming of the whole room!

But, alas! there is yet no fruit on this fig-tree. While his heart is searching, he wrangles; while the glorious grace of the gospel is unveiling, this professor wags and is wanton, gathers up some scraps thereof; 'Tastes the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come'; 'drinks in the rain that coms often upon him' (Heb 6:3-8; Jude 4).

But still he does not bring forth fruit acceptable for the Lord whose gospel it is; 'Takes no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart' (2 Kings 10:31).

But instead he considers that the glory of the gospel consists in talk and show, and that our obedience to Christ is a matter of speculation; that *good works lie in good words*;

and if they can finely talk, they think they bravely please God. They think the kingdom of God consists only in word, not in power; and thus proves ineffectual this fourth means also.

Well, now the axe begins to be heaved higher, for now indeed God is ready to smite the sinner; yet before he will strike the stroke, he will try one way more at the last, and if that miss, down goes the fig-tree!

Now this last way is to tug and strive with this professor by his Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord is now come to him; but not forever to strive with man (Gen 6:3).

Yet for awhile he will strive with him, he will awaken, he will convince, he will call to remembrance former sins, former judgments, the breach of former vows and promises, the misspending of former days; he will also present persuasive arguments, encouraging promises, dreadful judgments, the shortness of time to repent in; and that there is hope if he come.

Further, he will show him the certainty of death, and of the judgment to come; yes, he will pull and strive with this sinner; but, behold, the mischief now lies here, *here is tugging and striving on both sides.*

The Spirit convicts, the man turns a deaf ear to God; the Spirit says, Receive my instruction and live, but the man pulls away his shoulder;

The Spirit shows him where he is going, but the man closes his eyes against it;

the Spirit offers violence, the man strives and resists; they have 'done despite unto the Spirit of grace' (Heb 10:29).

The Spirit speaks a second time, and urges the necessity of a new nature, but the sinner answers, No, I have loved strangers, and after them I will go (Amos 4:6-12).

At this God's fury comes up into his face: now he comes out of his holy place, and is terrible; now he

swears in his wrath they shall never enter into his rest (Heb 3:11). I exercised towards you my patience, yet you have not turned to me, says the Lord. I struck you in your person, in your relations, in your estate, yet you have not returned unto me, saith the Lord. 'In your filthiness is lewdness, because I have purged thee, and you were not purged; you shall not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I cause my fury to rest upon you' (Eze 24:13). 'Cut it down, why doth it cumber the ground?'

Is this not the pattern which is so common? You even see it increasingly in our nation. How many times has the Lord, in His mercy, brought threatenings and disasters against America – but is the nation listening? How many people humble themselves now and confess that the evil increasing all around us is due to our sin. He gives us evil leaders. He strengthens our enemies against us. He brings wars and lets loose more and more lawlessness in our cities. Who is listening? Who sees that

the remedy is confession of our sin, a humble turning in faith to Christ?

But the chief point here, the essential question the Lord is putting to us is, *are WE listening?* Has the Lord sent His merciful threatenings against us? Has He sent His Word to us day after day? Has He sent His Spirit to convict us of our sin and of our need for Christ? Is he showing any of us that we have pushed into His vineyard over the wall without coming in by the only Gate which leads to life?

Finally, and we end this series on the Barren Fig Tree with this:

“The second sign that such a false professor is almost, if not quite, past grace is, *when God has given him over.* When the Lord withdraws, leaves him alone, and permits him to do anything – removing His restraints.”

Hos 4:17 Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone.

Rom 1:28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God

gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

So many who were once, it seemed, traveling in the right way, now lapping up the very vomit they once despised. “It is astonishing to see how those that once seemed to be ‘sons of the morning,’ and were making preparations for eternal life, now at last, because of the rottenness of their hearts, by the last judgment of God, to be past feeling, to give themselves over to work all uncleanness with greediness (Eph 4:18-19).” (Bunyan). The Day has come to them, though they yet live in this world. Such ones have only “the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear. Just as they go to the Lord’s assembly, so they come out from it unchanged, soon forgetting all.” (Bunyan)

May these terrible warnings from our holy and merciful God lead us to soberly examine ourselves that we not be deceived as to our true condition before Christ.