

“What’s Missing in Your Life?”

Luke 13:1-9

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This morning our attention is drawn to a parable Jesus told that contains some of the best advice we’ll ever receive. Personally, I have found it to be very helpful in my own spiritual development.

This parable, as much as any Jesus told, has helped me to examine my life and to make changes, both big and small. I hope it will do the same for you.

The parable describes a landowner who had a three year old fig tree in his vineyard. As he was walking through his vineyard, the landowner noticed this particular tree had no figs on it. As a result, he told the gardener to cut it down so it would no longer waste the soil and nutrients required to keep it alive.

For some reason, the gardener pleaded with the owner to leave it in the vineyard one more year in spite of the fact the fig tree should have produced fruit in the third year. Evidently, he saw something in this tree the owner of the vineyard did not, and he believed with a little more attention from him, the tree would bear fruit.

The gardener must have sounded convincing, especially when he told the owner if the tree was not bearing fruit a year later, he would cut it down. The owner agreed to let the tree live for another year.

What was the outcome? Did this barren tree begin bearing fruit? Was it spared or was it cut down the next year because it never became productive?

We don't know. In the words of that great storyteller, Paul Harvey, there is no 'rest of the story'.

Quite frankly, I think this is a big part of what makes this parable more effective. Each of us must write the ending to this story based upon our lives and the changes we make to bear more fruit. It appears this was Jesus' intent when he left the outcome open ended.

When did Jesus tell this parable and why? To whom was it directed?

This parable is a part of the travel narratives recorded in the third gospel. In Luke 9:51, Luke told his readers Jesus was beginning a new phase to his public ministry. Up to this point, Jesus had spent his time teaching, preaching and ministering to people around the Sea of Galilee and the surrounding villages. Now, he would turn his attention from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The remainder of Luke's book describes the conversations that took place along this journey to Jerusalem and the events that occurred during and after Palm Sunday, including Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. This parable is a part of those conversations.

It seems the closer Jesus got to Jerusalem, the more resistance he faced from the religious authorities. I am not surprised.

Jesus laid the blame for many of the world's problems at their feet. He held them responsible for the problems he saw, and he called on them to confess their hypocrisy and repent.

He exposed their addiction to power, prestige, attention, money and their lavish lifestyles. He criticized them for using their power and influence for personal gain. He condemned them for making life harder for those who were struggling to survive instead of helping them to rise above their dire circumstances. He called them out for being deceptive and untrustworthy, selfish and greedy, rude and arrogant, insensitive and cruel.

So, when some of the religious leaders approached Jesus to talk to him on this particular day about what horrible sinners and hypocrites these Galileans must have been for Pilate to

have slaughtered them while they were worshiping, Jesus turned the tables on them. If the Pharisees wanted to talk about hypocrites, Jesus was ready to have this discussion.

The hypocrites, according to Jesus though, were not these innocent Galileans who were butchered at the altar, but the religious leaders who repeatedly killed the prophets God sent their way urging them to repent. Each time a prophet criticized the scribes and Pharisees for misplacing their values and priorities and ignoring the principles of the covenant they made with God through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he was treated like a criminal.

Now Jesus was enduring this same treatment as his call to repent was rejected, leaving him no choice but to tell this parable. There is little doubt Jesus saw many of the religious leaders of his day as barren fig trees planted in a select vineyard where everything they needed to make the world better for all people was available to them. As far as he could tell, there was no fruit on their branches, which was inexcusable.

What was missing in the lives of the scribes and Pharisees? If you read the entire travel narratives, the last half of Luke's gospel where Jesus had several tense conversations with the scribes and Pharisees, you will discover what was missing in the lives of the religious authorities. It is not a short list...

...Integrity; Honesty; Truthfulness; Love; Compassion; Mercy; Grace; Kindness; Gentleness; Humility; Unselfishness; Generosity; Sacrifice; Responsibility; Faithfulness; Forgiveness; Patience; Self-control; Tolerance; Peacemaking...

...The pursuit of justice; A sensitivity and response to others' needs; A healthy use of power; An effort to tear down walls of suspicion and hate that separated people by building bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope...

It appears, for the most part, life was all about them, not the people who needed them. It was about accumulating wealth, feeding their egos, holding on to power and living in ease.

In some ways, I guess you could say there was much fruit on their trees. It was just all for them and about them, which caused God to lose hope in them.

What's missing in your life? What fruit are you not bearing?

I wonder how those around you would answer these questions. What deficiencies would they identify?

In recent years, this parable has helped me to ponder these questions and to make needed changes. It has inspired me, encouraged me, given me hope and assured me, by God's grace, my life can be more fruitful than it has been.

What about you? What fruit would the people around you like to see more of in your life?

Integrity. Honesty. Truthfulness. Love. Compassion. Mercy. Grace. Kindness. Gentleness. Humility. Unselfishness. Generosity. Sacrifice. Responsibility. Loyalty. Faithfulness. Forgiveness. Patience. Self-control. Tolerance. Peacemaking.

Why are these traits missing in your life, especially if you are a follower of Jesus? Have you settled for less than your best?

What difference would it make if you replaced your less desirable values and behavior with the fruits of the Spirit Jesus taught and modeled? How would your life and the lives of those around you change if you followed in Jesus' footsteps? I believe you know.

Who can help you make these changes so you can be a better person and role model?

This parable holds the answer to this strategic question.

In order to make changes and bear more fruit, my friend, Tom Ehrich, says all of us need both the landowner and the gardener in our lives. We need someone who holds us accountable, and we need a patient advocate who nurtures and nourishes us when we need more time to grow. I agree.

One without the other will not achieve the desired results. A stern taskmaster without an encourager will beat us down. A loving nurturer without someone who holds us accountable will merely coddle us. We need both mentors in order to turn a barren tree into a fruit-bearing one.

We need someone who will be brutally honest with us as he or she explains the severity of our situation, and we need someone who will roll up his or her sleeves to help us find our way out of the mess we are in.

We need someone who will tell us what lies ahead if we do not change our ways, and we need someone who will help us move in a new direction.

We need someone who will help us see the damage we are doing to others and ourselves, and we need someone who will bind these wounds and help heal our broken spirit.

We need someone who will remind us of our promises and chart our progress, and we need someone who will walk each step with us offering words of encouragement and support.

Sometimes this is different people; at other times it is the same person, as Jesus was. Regardless of who it is, it is up to each of us to listen carefully with an open heart and mind and to take responsibility for our decisions and actions.

Will you do this? Will you lay down your defenses and set aside your pride? Will you humbly listen to those who see the potential in you that others may not see, including you? Will you respond to their attempts to help you be more productive? I pray you will.

I also pray for those who are reaching out to help you bear more fruit. This is not an easy task because it requires knowing when to be the landowner and when to be the gardener.

Most people perform one of these tasks easily, but the other one demands they get out of their comfort zone and do something very difficult for them. This is why they must rely upon God for wisdom, strength and courage. Tough love is just that, tough.

Perhaps this is where you are now and how you feel. I pray this parable Jesus left us helps you to understand what you need to do and who can help you do the difficult.

Thank you, Jesus, for sharing this insightful parable. May we take it to heart as you use it to help us change our hearts and lives.