

Bad Things, Good People, Bearing Fruit

¹ At that time some people who were present there told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. ² He said to them in reply, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? ³ By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! ⁴ Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them —do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!” ⁶ And he told them this parable: “There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, ⁷ he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. (So) cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ ⁸ He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; ⁹ it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.’” (Luke 13:1-9)



The Vine Dresser and the Fig Tree | James Tissot, 1886-1894 | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US

Admonitions

Coming as it does on this Sunday in Lent, out of sequence with the narrative flow of Luke’s gospel, we would do well to consider the verses that precede our gospel pericope.

Luke 12 begins with a warning about following the teaching and example of the Pharisees, having denounced them at the end of Luke 11. All this is Jesus’ way of preparing the disciples for the time after the Crucifixion and Resurrection when the Pharisees will be one of the sources of persecution of the nascent Christian community. The message is not to fear them, but if you want to fear someone, then fear the One who can consign you to Gehenna for eternity - and yet they also need to know that the One cares for them without limit. And so, do not worry about judgment from the Pharisees and scribes, but follow Jesus, and at the time of judgment, the “*the Son of Man will acknowledge [you] before the angels of God.*” (Lk 12:8)

Luke 12 continues, addressing the earthly concerns of things that will matter little in the life to come. When a man wants Jesus to arbitrate an inheritance issue it serves as an entree for Jesus’ parable about the

“foolish rich man” who, in greed, accumulates great, overflowing wealth. To that one God says, “ ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’ Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.” (Luke 12:20-21)

The message is to not worry, but seek the kingdom and trust in the loving care of the Father in heaven. Jesus directs their attention to the care God gives to the ravens and the flowers of the field, and people are far more treasured. Thus, seek the kingdom as vigilant and faithful servants, working even when the master has done away “*Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.*” (Luke 12:48)

Luke 12 ends with a reminder that Jesus will be for them a cause of division within their households and communities, but they are to continue to seek the kingdom and stay alert to be able to read the “signs of the times” of the in-breaking of the kingdom.

The chapter before our Sunday gospel has raised issues of persecution, God’s providential care, not to worry about earthly concerns but to bear fruit in what matters to God, and staying alert to the signs of the times. With that, our gospel begins: we hear about a report given to Jesus about Pilate’s brutal slaughter of Galileans, after which Jesus mentions the accidental death of eighteen inhabitants of Jerusalem upon whom the tower of Siloam fell.

Why do bad things happen... The people bring Jesus an account of Pilate’s horrific actions among the Galileans. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus describes Pontius Pilate in two key passages in his work *Antiquities of the Jews* (written around 93–94 AD). His depiction presents Pilate as a harsh and insensitive ruler, often clashing with Jewish customs and provoking unrest.

Josephus recounts how Pilate offended Jewish religious sensitivities by bringing Roman military standards bearing the emperor’s image into Jerusalem. This was seen as idolatrous by the Jewish people, who protested intensely. Eventually, Pilate was forced to remove the standards to avoid a larger uprising. Later, when Pilate sought to fund a new aqueduct in Jerusalem using money from the Temple treasury the Jewish populace protested. Pilate responded by sending disguised soldiers into the crowd, who violently suppressed the demonstrators, leading to many deaths.

¹ *At that time some people who were present there told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.*

The story of Pilate’s brutality among the Galileans and its defilement of Jewish worship is a story worthy of denunciation, but instead it is almost as if Jesus is scolding the messengers who brought the bad news. To their accounting Jesus adds his own newsworthy event: the accidental death of the 18 people in Jerusalem. One set of deaths is caused by human choices; the other was accidental. One set of deaths is among people far from Jerusalem; the other happens to people within the holy city’s walls.

Given Jesus’ origins from Galilee, one wonders if this encounter is especially poignant in addressing a post-crucifixion sentiment among the Jerusalemites: *he was from Galilee, of course he got what he deserved. God saves the righteous. God did not save him....*

In the moment, Jesus addresses what likely lies on the hearts and minds of the people gathered: was all this because of their sinfulness that such tragedies befell them? Jesus challenges the popular wisdom associating disaster with punishment for sin (Job 4:7–9; John 9:2). The common understanding of sin at the time of Jesus was a cause and effect system: sin caused suffering and suffering must be the result of some sin. This popular wisdom has its roots in a particular understanding of some verses of Scripture (cf. Exod. 20:5; Job 8:4, 20; 22:5; Prov. 10:24–25) – as well as:

“Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.” (Job 4:7-8)

“His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind” (John 9:2)

Jesus asked the people if they *“think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans?”* (v.2) and directly tells them that the answer is “no.” Perhaps the listeners do not think much of Galileans, so Jesus asks about the untimely deaths in Jerusalem. Jesus’ answer remains the same: “no!” (v.5).

The point is clear. Tragedies occur, whether intentionally by oppressive governors such as Pilate or accidentally by imperfections in the kind of world we live in. In neither case must one conclude that tragedies are necessarily an indication of divine judgment against sinners. Rather, in view of the uncertainty of life and the unpredictability of the future one must be warned to examine one’s own life and repent.

It can be understood that Jesus is asking his listeners to consider a new paradigm of righteousness before God. Their popular wisdom is simply wrong and it needs to be replaced with one that understands God’s desire is that all be saved. What is essential is repentance – and this is a major theme that occupies a good portion Luke 12, immediately preceding our text: the divine call for decision and reform. Such time is not endless. The parable of the barren fig tree presents a story about the continuing patience of God with those who have not yet given evidence of their repentance (*cf.* Luke 3:8).

Repentance

In our passage, the verb “to repent” (*metanoeo*) is in the present tense (subjunctive), which implies continuous action = “be repentant” or “continue to repent” or “keep on repenting.” In other words, this does not speak to a once-for-all-time event that saves one from “perishing,” but rather a lifestyle of penitence.

Repenting/Repentance (*metanoeo/metanoia*) is a theme throughout Luke/Acts. While the words appear in Matthew (7 times) and Mark (3 times) – in Luke it appears 14 times. For Luke, the primary content of our proclamation is repentance and forgiveness. Part of Jesus’ concluding words in this gospel are: *“Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that **repentance**, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”* [24:46b-47].

As Stoffregen notes, frequently, in the gospel, Jesus talks about the importance of repenting:

- 5:32 – I have not come to call the righteous to **repentance** but sinners.
- 15:7 – I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who **repents** than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of **repentance**.
- 15:10 – In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who **repents**.
- 17:3-4 – Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he **repents**, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, ‘I am **sorry**,’ you should forgive him.”

Jesus’ harshest words of judgment are towards the unrepentant:

- 10:13 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have **repented**, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.”
- 11:32 “At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they **repented**, and there is something greater than Jonah here.”

Stoffregen notes: “It seems that the crux of Jesus’ message (which continues in Acts) is a call to repentance. It is not primarily a call to worship or praise God. Such actions without repentance are meaningless. What brings the greatest joy in heaven is the repentance of sinners. As I noted earlier, the present tense of the verbs in our text indicate living repentantly, rather than seeing repentance as an occasional act.”

Parable

⁶ And he told them this parable: “There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, ⁷ he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. (So) cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ ⁸ He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; ⁹ it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.’”

As with all parables, there is a lot of room for understanding. Is this an agrarian parable where a fig tree is just a fig tree? Or is Jesus’ parable using a familiar OT symbol for Judah or Israel (cf. Jer. 8:13; 24:1–10; Hos. 9:10; Mic. 7:1). The fact that the fig tree is situated in a vineyard may suggest that Jesus wanted his listeners to think of Isa. 5:1–7, in which the prophet compares the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the people of Judah with a vineyard that yields only wild grapes. If this is correct, then the vineyard stands for Israel, and the fig tree represents Israel’s barren leadership. In any case, we continue.

“*For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none*” (v.7). If one takes literally the practice of Leviticus 19:23, then the first three years of a fig tree’s fruit were allowed to go unharvested in order that the fruit be declared clean. In such a scenario, six years have already passed since the fig trees were planted. One could consider this tree hopelessly barren. And even barrenness has a price – fig trees take a disproportionate amount of nutrients and minerals from the soil – thus depriving other trees and vines from a needed source of growth. By any measure of agriculture, this tree should be removed and discarded.

The importance of fruit-bearing has been emphasized repeatedly in Luke’s Gospel. In the Sermon on the Plain Jesus notes the importance of bearing good fruit (6:43–45), but this element is especially well developed in his parable/ teaching on sowing (8:4–15). There, “authentic hearing” of the word of God is demonstrated in “bearing fruit.” This accent on fruit-bearing goes hand-in-hand with the emphasis on repentance in vv 3 and 5; both signify expected responses from Jesus’ audience to the manifestation of God’s purpose in his mission.

Despite the lack of fruitfulness, the gardener proposes to take another year and dedicate special care and attention in the hope that it will, at last, bear fruit. Perhaps this is an echo of Jesus’ proclamation in the Nazareth synagogue of “*a year acceptable to the Lord*” (Luke 4:19) To that point, Joe Green [515] notes: “Not incidentally, the parable also holds for the possibility of fruit-bearing in spite of a history of sterility—or, in human terms, the possibility of change leading to faith expressed in obedience to God’s purpose. If it announces a warning of judgment, then, it also dramatizes hope.”

In vv.6-9, Jesus’ telling of the parable of the fig tree is a different rendering than the cursing of the fig tree in Matthew 21:18 *ff* and Mark 11:20 *ff*. In both those accounts the fig tree has no time – judgment has come. That was the message of John the Baptist: “*Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore*

every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:9). But Jesus’ message is different. He continues to warn the people of the judgment, but there is an element of mercy in Jesus’ parable: allow more time, another year before the axe is lifted. John the Baptist expected the Messiah to bring judgment upon Israel (7:18 ff), instead, Jesus was healing disease, casting out evil spirits, and giving sight to the blind (7:21-23). God’s judgment has been delayed through the gracious works of the Messiah.

The parable has many potential interpretations. In Jesus’ days it is perhaps that the vineyard owner represents God the Father, the gardener is Jesus, the vineyard is the nation of Israel, and the particular fig-tree is the “leadership” of religious Israel. In such an analysis, the justice of judgment is rightly proposed by the owner, yet the gracious of God’s mercy is seen in the request of the gardener for time. To this point, Father Gerry Pierse, C.Ss.R., recounts the following story:

Emperor Napoleon had a rule in his army that anyone who went absent without leave, on being captured would be shot the next morning at breakfast time. There was a boy of seventeen who had seen many of his companions die. Scared, he ran away, but he was caught and was sentenced to be executed next morning at breakfast time. It so happened that this boy was the son of Napoleon’s cook. The mother went to plead for mercy. Eventually, Napoleon orders her out of his sight saying, “Woman, your son does not deserve mercy.” To this she replied, “Yes, of course, you are right. He does not deserve mercy. If he deserved it, it would no longer be mercy.”

Jesus uses an agricultural parable to make this point. The nature of a fig tree is to bear fruit and in Israel the average person would know that means, on average, 10 months a year. This barren tree is corrupted at the very level of nature and deserves nothing, yet mercy is extended to it in hopes of fruitfulness. It has a year to repent and become fruitful.

The prelude to this parable was Jesus telling the disciples that in the present age good fortune and disaster are no indication of a person’s spiritual state. Jesus makes a similar point elsewhere: “*But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.*” (Mt 5:44-5). Yet, in the judgment to come, those who have been evil will certainly experience disaster. And so today is the time for repentance and to produce evidence of a life dedicated to the kingdom: “*A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For people do not pick figs from thornbushes, nor do they gather grapes from brambles*” (Luke 6:43–44). The time may even be extended for us as for the fig tree. But ultimately the judgment will come.

Repentance and Its Fruit

The need for repentance has been indicated throughout the section 12:1-13:9. We are given hints at what is expected of us -- the fruit we are to bear.

- Fear not of the one who can harm us in life, but righteous fear of the One who can cast into hell (12:5).
- Consider ourselves valuable because we are the ones in Creation that God sees as “very good” (v. 7)
- Acknowledge Christ as Savior before others (v. 8)
- Be on guard against greed (v. 15)
- Be rich towards God (v. 21)
- Don’t worry about your life (v. 22)

- Strive for the kingdom (v. 31)
- Sell possessions and give alms (v. 33)
- Be ready for the Son of Man's return (vv. 35-40)
- Be doing what the master wants (v. 47)
- Interpret the present time (v. 56)

Jirair Tashjian notes: "Repentance here can be understood as God's gracious offer of extended opportunities for us to respond to the demands of the kingdom of God and allow that to reshape our lives. If John the Baptist was a hell, fire, and brimstone type of preacher with an urgent message of an imminent judgment, Jesus tempered that austere message with a message about a compassionate God who lets an unfruitful fig tree stand another year. The God of judgment is also the God of grace. Jesus hurls scathing rebukes at religious hypocrisy and at the same time reaches out in compassion and touches hopeless people that had been marginalized for a variety of reasons. He pronounces woes on the rich, the well-fed, the laughing, and offers hope and blessing to those who are poor, hungry and weeping (Luke 6:20-26). Judgment is coming, but the door of mercy is still open. The possibility of change is still available. Will the fig tree become fruitful in another year? God waits and longs for that to happen."

Faithful or Fruitful?

Based on Luke 12:1-13:9, the "fruit" might be summarized as referring to our relationship with God, our relationship with self (especially concerning money), and our relationship with others. And clearly in our passage there is a very strong accent on "repentance." But what is it that we expect regarding our Christian "fruitfulness." In his book *Purpose Driven Church*, Pastor Rick Warren has a section dealing with "Myth #7: All God Expects of Us Is Faithfulness." His answer to the meaning of fruitfulness is provocative and challenging:

"Myth #7: All God Expects of Us Is Faithfulness"

"This statement is only half true. God expects both faithfulness *and* fruitfulness. Fruitfulness is a major theme of the New Testament. ...

"What is fruitfulness? The Word *fruit*, or a variation of it, is used fifty-five times in the New Testament and refers to a variety of results. Each one of the following is considered by God to be fruit: repentance (Matt. 3:8; Luke 13:5-9), practicing the truth (Matt. 7:16-21; Col. 1:10), answered prayer (John 15:7-8), an offering of money given by believers (Rom. 15:28), Christ-like character, and winning unbelievers to Christ (Rom. 1:13). Paul said he wanted to preach in Rome "in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles" (Rom. 1:13 NASB). The fruit of a believer is another believer.

"Considering the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the church, I believe that the definition of fruitfulness for a local church must include growth by the conversion of unbelievers. Paul referred to the first converts in Achaia as the "first fruit of Achaia" (1 Cor. 16:15 NASB).

"The Bible clearly identifies the numerical growth of the church as fruit. Many of the kingdom parables of Jesus emphasize the unavoidable truth that God expects his church to grow. In addition, Paul connected fruit bearing with church growth. Colossians 1:6 says, "All over the world this gospel is *bearing fruit and growing*, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it ..." Is your church bearing fruit and growing? Are you seeing the fruit of new converts being added to your congregation?

“God wants your church to be *both* faithful and fruitful. One without the other is only half the equation. Numerical results are no justification for being unfaithful to the message, but neither can we use faithfulness as an excuse for being ineffective! Churches that have few or no conversions often attempt to justify their ineffectiveness with the statement, “God has not called us to be successful. He has just called us to be faithful.” I strongly disagree because the Bible clearly teaches that God expects both.

“The sticking point is how you define the terms *successful* and *faithful*. I define being successful as fulfilling the Great Commission. Jesus has given the church a job to do. We will either succeed or fail at it. Using this definition, every church should want to be successful! What is the alternative? The opposite of success is not faithfulness, but *failure*. Any church that is not obeying the Great Commission is failing its purpose, no matter what else it does.

“What is *faithfulness*? Usually we define it in terms of beliefs. We think that by holding orthodox beliefs we are fulfilling Christ’s command to be faithful. We call ourselves “defenders of the faith.” But Jesus meant far more than adherence to beliefs when he used the term. He defined faithfulness in terms of behavior -- a willingness to take risks (that require faith) in order to be fruitful.

The clearest example of this is the parable of the talents in Mathew 25:14-30. ... [pp. 62-64].”

While it is clear Pastor Warren has placed a heavy accent on evangelization *ad extra*, his point is well taken in context, and in a broader sense. In whatever sense of “fruitfulness” that is part of your repentance, is there a willingness to take risks for the greater glory of God?

However it is defined, it is clear that Jesus is doing all he can to give us time to repent and bear fruit to avoid the coming destruction.

A Final Thought

The parable of the fig tree is an invitation to us to consider the gift of this next year as a gift of God’s mercy; a year of God’s favor (Lk 4:19). Would you make it a year of forgiveness, restoration, and second chances?

What would you do if you only have one year remaining? Would you make up for the wrongs done? What you failed to do? Would you focus on things that bring meaning, joy, and closure? Perhaps you’d spend time strengthening relationships: spend quality time with loved ones; express gratitude, love, and forgiveness to those who matter; or reconnect with old friends or estranged family members.

Maybe it is a moment to turn inward and deepen your spiritual life: spend more time in prayer, scripture, and worship.; seek peace and understanding of our teachings on eternity; or share your faith and encourage others in their journey.

Would you give generously? Donating to causes that matter to you. Mentoring or helping someone in need. Maybe you would perform random acts of kindness.

It’s a year of mercy. It’s your year. What would you do?

Sources:

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol. 3 of the *Sacra Pagina* series, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegville, MN: 1991)

Jerome Kodell, “Luke” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989). 936 – 980.

Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)

Brian Stoffregen, “Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes” at www.crossmarks.com

Jirair Tashjian, “3rd Sunday of Lent, Year C” at www.crivoice.org

Scripture quotes from New American Bible by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC.
© 1991, 1986, 1970