

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE

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### Luke 13:6-9

The importance of bearing spiritual fruit is repeatedly emphasized in the Bible. Especially significant is the link between the failure to produce good fruit and divine judgment. Jesus makes this connection by telling the parable of the barren fig tree, a story describing a man seeking fruit. This is what we read in Luke 13:6-9.

*Luke 13:6. He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.*

*7 "Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?'*

*8 "But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it.*

*9 'And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' "*

### A fig tree in a vineyard

Let's take a closer look at this parable. We read in v. 6, *A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.* The first question that comes to our mind is this: What is this fig tree doing in a vineyard? A vineyard is where you grow grapes, not figs. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate or at least more natural to say, 'A man had a fig tree planted in his orchard.'

Well, to think like this is to misunderstand the agricultural methods of that time. Different plants have different demands on the soil. It was a common practice to plant a variety of fruit trees in vineyards and even in vegetable gardens. For that reason, the presence of fig trees in a vineyard was not unusual.

The other thing to observe is that fig trees and vines are often mentioned together in the OT, which seems to indicate that these two types of plants were often grown together. We read for example in Joel 1:7, *He has laid waste My vine, and ruined My fig tree...* The same association is found two other times in the book of Joel (Joel 1:12, 2:22) where the vine and the fig tree have a spiritual meaning. Their symbolism applies to Israel as a nation. We will come back to that subject later.

### A barren tree

Then Jesus goes on to describe the man's disappointment. 'I have been coming for three years looking for fruits on this tree and I did not find anything. I must say that my patience with this tree is gone. Just cut it down.'

We know that when you plant a new fig tree, you will not get fruit from it right away. You have to wait at least three years before the tree is mature enough to bear fruit. This means that when a person comes to look for fruit, it is already in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of that tree. In this parable, the man had come to the tree after the initial three years were passed. Year after year, for three consecutive years, he came to look for fruit but found none. We may assume therefore that the tree was at least six years old by this stage.

‘Cut it down,’ the owner said. But the vinedresser intervened with a plea for patience. He wanted to give the tree one more year. *Let it alone, sir, for this year too* (v. 8). Six plus one is seven. The tree will be seven years old at that time. You know that in the Bible, seven is a number of perfection. I wonder if it has a meaning here. Perhaps it expresses God’s perfect patience. He has waited for a full seven years. In other words, his patience has been expressed to the fullest possible extent. He waits and waits until there is no more hope left.

Notice that the owner of the vineyard doesn’t need a lot of persuading. When the vinedresser said, ‘Give it one more year,’ he didn’t say, ‘No, it’s finished. That’s enough.’ Rather, he said, ‘Fine. I will give it one more year. But after that, if it is still fruitless, cut it down.’

Beyond that point, it cannot go anymore. Beyond that, it would be irresponsible to let the fig tree grow in the vineyard. Why? Because it is depleting the soil. V. 7: *Cut it down; **why should it use up the ground?***

Remember that a fig tree, like any plant, takes a lot of moisture and nutrients from the soil to sustain its growth. Every year the tree remains barren is a loss to the owner. The other vines and fruit trees suffer. And he could have used the same parcel of ground to plant a productive tree. In the owner’s judgment, the vineyard is better off without the fig tree if it doesn’t bear fruit.

## **Pleading for mercy**

Then we come to the question of the identity of the two characters. Who is the owner of the vineyard? Who is the vinedresser? From the parables of Jesus, we know at once that the owner of the vineyard is God Himself. In the parable of the wicked wine-growers for example (Matthew 21:33-41), it is quite clear that God is pictured by the owner of the vineyard.

Who then is the vinedresser? The picture is also quite plain. Who intercedes and pleads for mercy? Who is the mediator between God and man? None other than Christ Himself of course. He is the high priest who is pleading for a little more mercy toward us. And the Father is very willing to grant it ... up to a limit.

The picture of Jesus as Intercessor is explicitly mentioned in Luke 22:31 where Jesus says to Peter, ‘Peter, Peter, Satan desires to have you but I have prayed for you.’ ‘I have interceded for you.’ Jesus has prayed for Peter that his faith may not fail, that he would be kept by the power of God. It is such a joy to know that the Lord intercedes for us, to know that we have a merciful and gracious high priest who pleads on our behalf.

Now, the vinedresser pictures the Lord Jesus not only as an intercessor but also as a servant. When you study the word ‘vinedresser’ in the OT, you notice that it is used with reference to a servant class. In Isaiah 61:5, Jeremiah 52:16 and 2Kings 25:12, it is linked with the plowman, the person who plows the field, and these passages tell us that they come from the poorest group of the society. *But the captain of the guard left some of **the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen*** (2Kings 25:12). During the captivity, the poor were left behind as vinedressers and plowmen in order to prevent the land from becoming completely desolate. A vinedresser is by implication someone who is from the low class. And that is precisely what Jesus came to be. He came from the majesty on high to

the lowest position on earth. As Philippians 2:7 tells us, He *emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant*... Jesus is not only an intercessor, He is also a servant.

## Unfruitful Israel

What about the fig tree? What does it represent? The fig tree is a picture of Israel. In Jeremiah 24, we read about the prophet's vision of two baskets of figs. Every person in Israel was symbolized by those figs. This means that the whole nation is one or several fig trees from which come the figs, the individual Israelites. Elsewhere in the OT, when God was displeased with His people because of their unfaithfulness, He would make it known by referring to the lack of fruit on a fig tree. We have an example of this in Jeremiah 8:13. *"I will surely consume them," says the Lord. "No grapes shall be on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade; and the things I have given them shall pass away from them."* Here again, Israel as a nation is symbolized by a fig tree.

The picture of Israel as an unfruitful fig tree is also found in the NT. The Lord Jesus uses it in His acted parable of cursing the fig tree (Matthew 21:18-22). Looking at a fig tree full of leaves but which had no edible buds, Jesus said, 'You will never bear fruit again!' And immediately the tree withered. This was meant to be a warning to the Jews. Israel is like this unfruitful fig tree. She is spiritually barren. By cursing the tree, Jesus is showing that Israel will come under the condemnation of God. So the barren fig tree portrays Israel as not having born any spiritual produce for some time.

The other thing to notice in our parable is that the fig tree is not just given another year. God doesn't just give another chance. He does something positive. During that extra year, the vinedresser will loosen the soil around the tree so that moisture can get to the roots more easily and he will put fertilizer into the ground. That is to say, God is doing something very special for Israel. He is giving her an extra measure of grace. And this extra attention and love had been showered on the nation in the presence of their Messiah. Before He sent to them His prophets. Now the Son Himself has come to tend to this fig tree, to speak to Israel.

## The time is short

There is one more question about this fig tree. Why is it used as an example? You see, sometimes Israel is pictured as an olive tree, sometimes as a vine. But here, it is a fig tree. Why? One remarkable characteristic of the fig tree is its fruitfulness. There is no tree that can beat a fig tree for fruitfulness. It can bear fruit in spring, in summer, in autumn and even in winter. For ten months of the year, a good fig tree can bear fruit, producing up to three crops of figs.

In this parable, the Lord Jesus chooses the fig tree as a picture of Israel to highlight the fact that what should have been most fruitful turns out to be not fruitful at all. Israel failed to be a fruitful nation. When God planted Israel, He expected fruit. The chosen nation was highly privileged in that it had received a choice spot in God's vineyard. But with the privilege came responsibility – the responsibility to bear fruit. And Israel failed to match privilege with duty. Soon God will execute His judgment – one more year.

The image is similar to John the Baptist's warning to Israel that the ax lies at the root of the tree in Luke 3:9. *And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* The ax is already at the root of the tree that does not bear fruit. That is a very explicit figure of the nearness of the approaching judgment. Chopping a tree with an ax requires a certain technique. Typically you line up the ax against a specific point on the tree. Then when you are ready, you raise the ax and you bring it back to that point. So when it says that the ax is laid at the root, it means that the woodman has already lined up his mark against the tree, and with the next swing, he will strike the tree right at that point. John's message is clear. The time left for Israel to turn back to God and be fruitful is very short.

The fig tree in the parable was supposed to bear fruit. It had been planted for that specific purpose. But it did not bear fruit. Although the tree is given another chance to produce fruit within one more year, the prospect of seeing it happening is not so good. It is very unlikely that a fruit tree which has failed to bring forth fruit for six consecutive years is going to produce anything at all. To be realistic, it is virtually impossible.

This is where the supernatural element of the parable comes out. You see, this fig tree will never bear fruit unless a miracle happens. There has to be a complete and profound transformation in the fruit tree. It can be described as a miracle of regeneration in the tree and this vinedresser is actually looking for such a miracle to happen.

So the parable holds for the possibility of fruit-bearing in spite of a history of sterility, i.e., it holds for the possibility of change in the human heart in spite of its sinfulness. Such a miracle, God can perform. His whole power and grace is made available beyond measure for those who repent.

### **Bearing fruits worthy of repentance**

Now here, the notion of repentance goes hand in hand with that of fruit-bearing. It is important to observe that vv. 6-9 of Luke 13 are closely linked with vv. 1-5. Like the three parables of the lost sheep, coin and sons in Luke 15, Luke 13:1-9 combines two questions related to repentance with a parable which illustrates in more detail the theme of repentance. They are coordinated in such a way that the need for repentance corresponds to the lack of fruit in the parable.

What are these two questions? Jesus taught the parable of the barren fig tree in the context of people coming to Him with a report about two recent disasters in Jerusalem. One was the massacre of some Galileans by Pilate in the temple. Question #1: Did these people suffer because they were worse sinners than other Galileans? The answer Jesus gave was negative. ‘Repent,’ He said to His listeners, ‘or you too will perish (v. 3).’ The other incident was the collapse of a tower in Siloam which left eighteen people dead. Question #2: Were those eighteen persons who perished worse sinners than others who lived in Jerusalem? Again the answer was ‘no’. Once more, Jesus said, ‘Repent, or you too will perish (v. 5).’

The parable of the barren fig tree then follows and its meaning in this context becomes evident. It is a warning to Jesus’ audience of the judgment that will come on them if they fail to respond to His call to repent.

How do you know that a person is truly repenting and seeking forgiveness for sins? You will know it by the effect that their repentance has on his life. He will bear fruit that shows a changed heart and a turning away from sin.

This was the way John the Baptist preached repentance in Luke 3. Just before declaring that the ax is laid at the root in v. 9, he says to the Israelites in v. 8, *Therefore **bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance**, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.* For John, as for Jesus, there is an appropriate product of repentance. Real repentance manifests itself in behavior, or ‘fruit’ consistent with repentance. Fruitfulness then is expressed in the qualitative change of one’s life. If there is no fruit, John’s warning is that the tree will be cut down.

The other passage that emphasizes fruit bearing and warns of judgment is John 15 about Jesus as the true vine. In v. 8, we read, *By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.* The fruit is something that the Lord is looking for. God planted this vine in order that it might bring forth much fruit. And by this, i.e. by the fact that you bring forth much fruit, ‘so

prove to be a disciple of Christ.’ In other words, the proof of discipleship is fruit-bearing. It is similar to John’s message about ‘bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance.’

John’s warning was to Israel as a nation. And in this parable, Jesus’ warning is also to Israel, the fig tree symbolizing Israel as we mentioned earlier. But I don’t think it is limited to Israel. The preceding discussion of the people who died in Jerusalem and the warning that ‘unless you repent, you will perish too’ favors a much broader application. It applies to all the sinners. It applies also to the new Israel, to all those in the church who profess to know Christ.

How do we sum up the main lesson of this story? We can say that the image pictured by this parable is one of judgment graciously held back for a time. In the context of the two reports concerning those who died, Jesus is telling his audience – and to us – that God’s patience will end in judgment if the sinner does not repent. In His mercy, God has allotted a period of grace for each human being, ‘not wanting anyone to perish.’ He does not merely go the second mile. He will go a third mile and if need be a fourth in order to save a sinner. But there is a limit to God’s patience. The clock will tick only so long before the current opportunity to respond is lost. When the allotted time for man’s repentance has expired, then judgment is unavoidable.