

# The Barren Fig Tree

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Date: 27 January 2019

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, now we'll have you to God's blessing and let us turn back to the portion of Scripture which we read in the Gospel according to Luke and chapter 13. And I want us really to look at verses 6 to 9 today, but we can take our text from verse 6.

And he, that is Jesus, told this parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

Well, God, friends, he calls us to examine ourselves on a regular basis, to assess where we're at spiritually. This is something that we do anyway at a material level.

We evaluate our lives. We think about what we could do better. We think about how we could be happier. We think about how we could be more productive, how we could be more satisfied.

We think about how we could be more successful in life, how we could be more fruitful. And these things, in a sense, are all good and well. But the parable of the barren fig tree really calls us, each and every one of us, to examine ourselves before God.

[ 1 : 17 ] With regard to what God has called us to do. It calls us to examine ourselves with a view to seeing if we're fulfilling our purpose before him. If we're bearing fruit as he would have us bear fruit.

That's what it calls us to do. The context of the parable, as you see, is that of suffering and tragedy. You see that in verses 1 to 5. Herod, he had mingled the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices. We read of another people who were on a building project on the Tower of Siloam. It fell on them and killed 18 of them. And the people are asking Jesus, well, why did these things happen? Were these things, were they God's judgment on an evil people? Well, they may have been and they may not have been. But one thing is for sure. And that's what we have, the refrain in verses 3 and verses 5.

But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And so what Jesus is doing here is this. He's emphasizing the necessity of repentance for all people.

[ 2 : 23 ] The need for me and the need for you to bring forth fruit which is worthy of repentance. But in this parable which follows, a parable that we're going to consider today, Jesus comes to speak not so much of the necessity of repentance, although that's still there, but rather the urgency of repentance, the urgency of it.

As we'll see that the parable is a lesson in the patience of God, his patience towards sinful man. But it's also a warning. It's a warning of the solemnity of being found barren under the gospel and under the privileges of that gospel.

I do feel in many ways that this is directly relevant to us as an island, just as it was directly relevant to the Jews in their own day. Because we're a privileged people here, are we not?

We're privileged when it comes to the things of the gospel. God in his grace, he's not withheld from us the things which belong to our peace. Christ is offered to you, I'm sure, week by week, day by day as you read your Bibles.

Repentance and faith, these things are urged upon you. And so in many ways, friends, we've received much. But from those who receive much, much will be expected in return.

[ 3 : 43 ] Fruit will be expected. Now, there's much for us to learn from this parable, and I just want to break it down into two sections today. Because in verses 6 to 7, we have a problem presented to us, the problem of this barren tree.

And then in verses 8 to 9, we have a solution to that problem, a solution as to what should be done with that barren tree. And so I want us, first of all, to consider the problem presented to us in this parable.

We're introduced here to the owner of our vineyard. He's a man who's in the farming business. He's probably quite a powerful man. He's a businessman.

He's a facts and figures man. He's a kind of guy who's careful to make sure that all of his business is profitable and that nothing that he's doing is running at a loss. He's a kind of man who's always looking for new ventures, new ways of cultivating the ground.

He doesn't stand still. He's never flat on his feet. He's always looking to the next thing. He knows what's going on and he knows what he wants to see on his farm. And he's had this fig tree planted in his vineyard.

[ 4 : 55 ] This, of course, wasn't uncommon. A vineyard, as you know, is where grapes were grown. And that would always, well, generally, if it was a good vineyard, it would be placed or be planted on fertile ground.

But often because the ground was so fertile, other trees would be planted in the same yard, in the same area as well. And so this man, this businessman, this farmer, he decides to experiment in the fig business.

He wants to see if he can broaden his portfolio. And so he plants this tree. And he gives the tree some time to bear fruit. And he keeps his eye on the tree. In the meantime, he's checking up on it every now and then.

Now, many of you perhaps know more about botany than I do, but fig trees don't tend to bear fruit particularly quickly. They're not, for example, like tomato plants.

But after a few years in good, fertile land, a fig tree will be expected to bear fruit, to bear figs. Fig trees, if you've seen photos of them, we don't have them here.

[ 6 : 01 ] They need a warmer climate. But if you see photos of them, their leaves are quite heavy. And if you want to see the figs themselves, you have to sort of pull away some of the foliage.

You have to get up close to it. And you have to lift some of the leaves and see if there's anything growing under them. And that's what this farmer does. The owner of the garden, he walks into his garden this day.

He seems to bypass the gardener. And he walks straight up to the tree. And he has a good, close look. But what does he see? What does he see? That's the question. Well, he sees a beautiful tree, I'm sure.

He probably sees lovely green leaves. But what's significant here isn't what he sees, but what he doesn't see. Because what he doesn't see is what he wants to see.

He wants to see figs. He wants to see fruit. He wants to see his tree producing. You see, that's why the tree is there. That's why he planted it. Not that it might look nice.

[ 6 : 57 ] Not that it might brighten up his garden. But that it might produce. And that he might eat its fruit. Or perhaps that he might sell its fruit. That's the whole point of the tree in the vineyard.

And so if the tree isn't doing that, if the tree isn't doing that, then cut it down. If the tree isn't doing that, then get rid of it. Burn it. Do something with it. But get it out of my garden.

And it's not as if he hasn't given it a chance. He's been checking up on it, we're told, for three years. Three years. And so he says to his gardener, he says to him, cut it down.

Get rid of it. Now, Jesus, of course, doesn't tell parables so that we might have nice little stories in our Bible that we can read and perhaps talk about.

He told them primarily that we might learn the lessons from them. That we might apply these parables to ourselves. And some of the parables are perhaps more difficult to figure out.

[ 7 : 55 ] You have to work a bit harder at them to understand what Jesus is getting at. But not this parable. The message here, I'm sure you understand, is really quite clear.

That God commands you to bear fruit. He commands you, especially with all of your gospel privileges, to bear fruit.

To live the life that he's called you to live. You've got to remember that God expects certain things from you. There are certain things that God wants to see. He wants to see faith and he wants to see repentance.

He wants to see obedience. He wants to see steadfastness. He wants to see faithfulness. He wants to see trust. He wants to see devotion to himself. He wants to see self-denial. These are things that God wants to see.

These are things that God expects to see. This is what he requires from everyone. He requires it not just from the believer, he requires it from the unbeliever, because this is the purpose for which we were made.

[ 8 : 53 ] For many of you, from your youngest days, you would have repeated these words. What is the chief end of man? Well, man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

This is our great duty and it's our great responsibility. But are we doing it? You see, that's the question. Are we doing it? Are we striving towards it? Are we bearing fruit as a church?

Are we bearing fruit individually? That's the question. Because you've been planted in the vineyard of God. That's what the Bible sometimes calls God's church, his visible church.

He calls it his vineyard. And spiritually speaking, you here today, you're in a fertile spot, aren't you? You're in a place where the gospel is preached.

You're in a place where there should be growth. The sound of the gospel is in your ears. But is the fruit of the gospel in your heart? And is the fruit of the gospel in your life?

[ 9 : 52 ] That's a question. You know, there are few places in the world where it's easier to be a Christian than here. I'm not saying it's easy to be a Christian.

But there are few places in the world where it's easier to be a Christian. Because here, friends, the way of salvation isn't hidden from you. Christ has proclaimed to you as the way, the truth, and the life.

The Bible is explained to you. And so like the barren tree in the vineyard, your problem isn't your situation. The ground is good. But the question is, are you growing in the ground?

Are you growing in the vineyard? Are you bearing fruit? Are you fulfilling the function for which you were made? Some of you perhaps, I don't know, but some of you might look at yourselves today after many years in God's garden.

And yet, sadly, there's no real fruit there, is there? There's no real change. There's no real Christian obedience. There's no real effort to seek the Lord.

[ 10 : 53 ] There's no fervent prayer. There's no true faith. There's no thorough repentance. And there was perhaps a time, again, I don't know, but perhaps there was, when you looked so promising.

When you even realized it yourself. There was a time, perhaps, when you thought about your soul. When you considered eternity. There was a time when you began to come to terms with the gospel. With its demands and with its requirements. With its urgency and with its emergency. You remember days when you listened in church. Nights when you read your Bible earnestly. And when you prayed to God on your knees fervently. Days when you wanted Christ for your soul. When you wanted nothing else in this world more than to become a Christian. And yet, where are you today?

Today, your convictions perhaps are stifled. Your affections for the things of God, they've been suffocated. And now, if you're honest with yourself, the gospel is really tasteless to you.

[ 11 : 53 ] And you're spiritually barren. There's no fruit there. What happened? What happened, friend? What changed? There's no point either in trying to comfort yourself or to satisfy yourself with the fact that you're here in church today.

It's great that you are. And continue to come. But remember this, that the barren fig tree in all likelihood would have had plenty green leaves. The problem wasn't a lack of leaves.

The problem was a lack of fruit. It looked beautiful, I'm sure, from a distance. But there's no fruit there. And so, friends, you can have the leaves of Christianity without the fruit of Christianity.

You can have the appearance of Christianity without the essence of Christianity. You can have a Christian profession of sorts without a heart and without a life which agree with it.

You can have a form of godliness without the power of godliness. You can even have a Christless Christianity. You can even fool people into thinking that you are saved.

[ 12 : 53 ] That you're a good man. You can even, sadly, fool yourself to an extent. But there's one person that you can't fool, that you can never fool. And that's God.

And it's fruit that God is looking for, not leaves. It's faith that he's looking for. And it's repentance that he's looking for. Not a show, not an appearance. It's interesting, though, that the tree isn't just cut down because it's unfruitful.

No, we're told that because it's unfruitful, that it's using up the ground, that it's cumbering the ground. You see, this fig tree was worse than useless.

Because not only was it not producing fruit, but it was also wasting space. Its roots were probably drawing the moisture from the ground. And that would affect the other trees.

Indeed, that might have starved some of the other trees. And so the businessman, the farmer, his answer is to get rid of it. To plant something else in its place. Something that will be more healthy for the garden as a whole.

[13:59] Something that will make this ground productive again. And so he gives up on this barren fig tree. He calls for it to be cut down. There's two lessons here, aren't there?

Firstly, there's a lesson concerning your influence on other people. Because just as an unfruitful tree hinders other trees around about it, so an unfruitful soul is going to hinder other souls. I don't know if you've thought about this. Perhaps you have. Perhaps you haven't. But have you thought about your influence, the influence of your life, the influence of your unbelief perhaps upon other people, upon sons and daughters, upon husbands and wives, upon friends and upon relatives, perhaps on the person sitting beside you in your pew, perhaps on your child in the Sabbath school.

Have you thought about your influence, your unchristian influence upon them? Some of you don't believe, don't profess. Well, let's leave it at don't believe.

In order to, in your own mind anyway, to keep family happy. Because you know that they don't want you to be going to a prayer meeting on a Wednesday night. They don't want you to be giving up on the things of this world.

[15:14] And you do it in a sense almost to protect them. You hold back. And yet actually you're doing them the most harm. Because what your loved ones need, what they need, is a proper Christian influence in their lives.

That's what they need. Not you to try and satisfy them. Not you to try and hold back from the things of God in order to keep them happy. You see, what happens is that they see your carelessness and your unfruitfulness.

And they see your green leaves. And they just copy you. And they justify themselves on that basis. How many sinners have gone to hell because of that? Because they've looked to men.

Men who were always sitting here in church. Men who were always where they ought to have been, but there was no real heart in their Christianity. And so they justified themselves on that basis. Well, I'm like my father was.

I'm like this person was or that person was. And yet what really happens is people see how wasteful you are with the gospel. And they become wasteful themselves. They see how cavalier you are with it all.

[16:22] And because they respect you, because they love you, they become cavalier with it themselves. And what happens is this, and it's very solemn, you become party in the murder of their souls.

And your blood, sorry, their blood will be on your hands. And you give answer at the judgment, not only for what you've done to yourself, but for what you've done to others.

Indeed, for the corrupting and damning influence that you had on them, even them which you loved the most. How fearful, how solemn. But we also learn another thing from this.

And it's that if we continue to be unfruitful ourselves individually, as a church, indeed as a nation, that God won't only remove us from our place, but that he will replace us.

In other words, he'll take our privileges away from us, and he'll give them to another people. He'll give them to a people who'll make use of the gospel, a people who will believe the gospel, and a people who will bear the fruit that the gospel deserves.

[17:27] You see, Jesus himself says that if Tyre and Sidon had heard the things that Chorazin and Bethsaida had heard, then they would have borne fruit. They would have repented.

And you know, perhaps if another people heard the gospel that you've spurned, perhaps they would bear fruit in your place. Perhaps God would draw more glory from them than he's drawn from you. Perhaps they will repent in a way in which you haven't repented, and devote themselves to the faith in a way in which you haven't, if you're being honest, devoted yourself to the faith.

Perhaps you're here today, and really you've never declared his glory. You've never witnessed to his love. You've never really contributed to his cause in any real meaningful way.

You've never really advanced his kingdom on earth. And so what's to stop God removing his candle and lighting it somewhere else? The owner of the vineyard is getting no fruit from you.

[18:29] And so in many ways you're useless to him. And so why shouldn't he cut you down and give your privileges to somebody else? That's a question for you to answer. You see, many hungry

people could be fed with the excess that the glutton wastes.

And so many poor souls could feed on the means of grace that perhaps we have despised, that perhaps we have not had an appetite for. You see, God can raise glory to himself that he hasn't had from us by giving other people, other places, other nations our privileges.

And don't think that it won't happen. Or we tend to such complacency, don't we? Perhaps especially here on this island, with all the blessings that we've had, we become so complacent.

But don't think that it won't happen. Don't think that the candle won't be removed. It has happened before, and it will happen again. Because places that have been blessed with, with privilege upon privilege, with blessing upon blessing, with even revival upon revival, they've become a wilderness, spiritually speaking.

You know, when the Jews rejected Jesus, they cumbered up the ground. That's what they did. And the Gentiles were planted there. And the Gentiles bore fruit in the place where in many ways it should have been the Jews bearing fruit.

[ 19 : 56 ] I could give you instances from Scotland, many, countless. From Cate Ness to Cromarty. From Perthshire to Argyle. You don't have to go past Alexander MacLeod's hook in her own island.

A place which saw revival. There was no finer moral spectacle, hardly ever seen in this century, than there was in hook. And yet now it's largely hostile to the gospel.

Is that not solemn? Almost 200 years ago from now, the place was ablaze in the glory of God, in reviving power. And where is it now? You see the tree cumbered up the ground, and it was cut down.

In many ways, not completely. There's a remnant, of course, but in many ways it was. God forbid that one day that might be set of point. That they cumbered up the ground.

They didn't bear fruit. And so God cut them down. He took the candle away. He took the witness out of the place. Who saw them? And yet friends, as you know, it's not that far away.

[ 21 : 04 ] Secondly, I want us to notice that the vinedresser or the gardener, here he proposes a solution to the problem. It appears that the gardener is visibly almost disturbed by the owner's proposal.

He's repelled by the thought of cutting this tree down. He doesn't want to do it. The tree, it seems, was the object of his interest, and now he's called to cut it down. This tree that he'd perhaps spent time on.

And so he says to the owner, in verses 8 and 9, he says, Sir, let it alone this year also until I dig round about it and put on my manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.

Give it a year, he says. Just give it some time. Let me work on it. Perhaps it was my fault and not the fault of the tree. Perhaps I didn't look after it well enough.

Just give me a year so I can loosen the soil, so that the rain and so that the sun can enrich it. And let me spread manure to fertilize it so that it has another chance.

[ 22 : 09 ] Give it another year. Now, the owner doesn't give an answer here, not record it anyway. Anyway, the parable ends actually quite abruptly, as you'll notice. But we can assume that the owner of the vineyard, that he agreed to this proposal, that he agreed to give the tree another year.

And he did so on the basis of the pleading of the gardener. And it's really a picture, is it not, in the power of prayer in pleading mercy for an undeserving people. The owner was going to cut it down. This is what he was going to do. But based on the vine dresser, based on the gardener's intercession, it was spared a year. Just like Moses very often interceded for the children of Israel in the wilderness when she rebelled and provoked God to wrath and God relented because of that intercession.

And so many believers, I'm sure, in your life and in your church, both past and present, have prayed for you and they've prayed for your life and they've prayed for this church. The greatest, of course, of such intercessors is Jesus Christ himself.

He who makes continual intercession for his people. He who continues to pray for his church. And as a result of these things, the privileges, which in many ways should have been removed from us, we still have them here today, don't we?

[ 23 : 35 ] because God heeds such intercession. God hears such prayers and God gives more time. You see, friends, God is patient.

It's an amazing characteristic in anyone, but it's especially amazing with God because he's not only patient, he's not patient with those who are like him, who are sinless, who are faultless, but he's patient with sinners.

He's impatient with unfruitful men and women like me and you. And when he looks at us in his patience and wrath, he remembers mercy because he is long-suffering and he is slow to wrath. And so you are here today, are you not? And you are here in a day of God's patience. And perhaps you've got a great history of spiritual privilege behind you.

Perhaps you do. I know many of you do. You've heard the gospel countless times and perhaps you've neglected it countless times. And yet you're still here and more privileges are set before you and more gospel opportunities are sent your way.

[ 24 : 43 ] You have sermons and you have services. You have Bibles and you have books. You have prayers and you have fellowships. You have it all really. You're given to live in a day of grace with mercy's ground under your feet and the gospel of Christ crucified in your ears.

You have all of these things. And so in verse 9 we read, and if it bears fruit, well and good. This is a possible outcome that the tree will bear fruit.

You perhaps haven't borne fruit thus far. But you know a tree that is barren one year may be fruitful the next year. Indeed, just about every soul in here today that has in God's grace become fruitful, every soul has a barren past.

There was a day when they didn't believe. There was a day when they didn't repent. There was a day when they didn't trust in Christ. There was a day when they didn't bear fruit.

But the Lord intervened. The Spirit regenerated. And in God's grace they responded and they did bear fruit. Oh, that that would be your own experience today.

[ 25 : 51 ] That you would bear fruit. That you could speak of a barren past rather than a barren present or than a barren future. Because you're here today are you not?

You're here. And you're still in the vineyard of God. You still have time. You still have opportunity. Let it alone a year the gardener says. Give him another year.

Give her another year. It's metaphorical language. Of course the year refers to a period of time. We don't know how long it is or how short it is. It could be a minute or it could be a month.

It could be an hour or it could be a year. It could be a day or it could be a decade. We're not told.

We're not told. It's undefined. All that we know is that we are each in a day of God's patience now.

That we are there today. That we are there at this moment. But God's patience won't last forever.

The probation time will not last forever.

[ 26 : 51 ] His spirit, as you know, will not always strive with man. At the end of verse 9 he says, but if not, if it doesn't bear fruit, then you can cut it down.

You can cut it down. He's the gardener realistic, isn't he? He realizes that for the farmer this is a business and things have to work in this way. Now, God is slow to anger.

Certainly, he is. We've spoken about that characteristic. But the fact that God is slow to anger, it shows us, it tells us, in the very language, it tells us that he does get angry.

You can drive very slowly to storn away. But after a while you're going to get there, aren't you? And God does get angry with sinners after time. And he won't wait forever.

God won't wait on you forever. The day will come when he will despair of seeing any fruit in you. And then he'll cut you down. And so the question is just this.

[ 27 : 53 ] When will that day come? When will God's patience run out? When will God cut you down? I think the last time I was here with you, around a year ago from now, we looked at the preaching of John the Baptist.

And we're told in, I think it was maybe Matthew we looked from, it's also in Luke. John the Baptist said that now the axe is laid unto the root of the trees.

Every tree therefore which brings forth, which brings not forth good fruit, is shewn down, is cut down, and it's cast into the fire. What he's saying is this.

As you sit there under the gospel, as you hear Christ proclaimed and offered to you, the axe of God's justice, it is laid upon your root, it's resting there, it hasn't lifted up, it hasn't put any force on yet, but it's resting there, and it's waiting for the order to strike.

But the question is, the important question, the all important question is just this, when will it strike? When will this happen? When will you be cut down?

[ 28 : 59 ] Well, you know friends, just as the gospel call doesn't go out on our watch, so God's axe, it's not going to strike on your time. You might think that it will.

It'll strike when you're ready, but it's not going to strike on your time. It'll strike in God's time. And while the tree stands, there is hope for the tree. But when the tree is cut down, there's no longer any hope.

Because as the tree falls, so it shall lie. But where will your tree fall? And when will it fall?

The Lord tells us that he will come as a thief in the night. Jesus warns us that that day may come when we're not looking for it. That it may come at an hour when we're not aware of it.

His justice will strike. And these things aren't contradictory. God's patience and God's justice, they work together. They go hand in hand. Indeed, as we said, it's God's patience which leaves you here today where you are.

[ 30 : 01 ] But one day, the acts of his justice will strike. We want to say, you want to say, I'm sure, that this is a matter for tomorrow rather than for today. It's a matter for next year rather than for this year.

But no friend, all you have is a metaphorical year. However long that may be, however short that may be, that's all that you have. And then, the barren tree will be cast into the bonfire and the unbelieving sinner will be cast into hell.

Where will you be cast? Where will you be found? Where will your tree lie? Now, as you know, of course, this parable speaks powerfully to the Christian as well, does it not?

It speaks to you there. Indeed, every evangelistic message should speak to you. It should hammer home the truths which you know to be true. It should challenge you.

It should call you to examine yourself, to ensure that you're on the right road, to ensure that you're building on the right foundation, to ensure that you're living the Christian life, to ensure that you're distinct from the world.

[ 31 : 09 ] You see, God is looking to every one of us, not just the unbeliever, he's looking to the believer too. And he's looking down to see if we are bearing fruit for him. It's by our fruit that we're known.

There's no point in saying that you're a Christian if you don't have the fruit of the Christian. Every good tree brings forth good fruit. That's a fact. And every corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit or no fruit at all.

What kind of fruit is there in your life? Is it Christian fruit? Do you look like a Christian? Do you act like a Christian? Do you speak like a Christian?

Do you think like a Christian? Do you repent like a Christian? Do you believe like a Christian? Do you bear fruit like a Christian? The fruit of the Spirit, remember, is love and joy, peace and long-suffering, gentleness and goodness and faith and meekness and temperance.

Are these things found in you? Even in a measure? Even in a measure? This parable then, friends, it's all about the use, as I conclude, it's all about the use and the misuse of spiritual privileges.

[ 32 : 18 ] Privileges which you have and I have had. Thomas Boston said that a barren tree would be much safer in the forest than it would be in the garden.

You see, the barren tree in the deep wood, it would go quite easily unnoticed, but it wouldn't go unnoticed in your garden. You think as you drive into Stornoway, you think as you drive down Sandwick Road and as you approach the roundabout there at Ingees and you've got that big forest on your right, and you would think that an unfruitful tree would probably survive in the middle of that forest for quite a long time.

Nobody would be checking it and nobody would be too worried about it. But see if that unfruitful tree was in your garden and see if you cared about your garden. What would you do with it?

Year after year, nothing. Year after year, no fruit. Making your garden look miserable. Drawing people's eyes away from the good things, the beautiful plants and onto this horrible tree in the corner.

What would you do with it? Well, you'd get rid of it, wouldn't you? You'd cut it down. You'd chop it down. It's cumbering up the ground. And so you'd plant something else there. Something that would give you joy.

[ 33 : 30 ] Something that would give you fruit. Something that would make your garden glorious. And so, friend, it is with you in the eyes of God. You've had privileges which other people haven't had.

You've heard things that other people haven't heard. You've been in the garden while other people have been in the wood. You've been in church while other people have been sitting at home. Not judging them.

There but by the grace of God go we. But you've been here and you've had the privileges. You've been fed and you've been watered with the truth. The sun of God's righteousness has blazed down on you.

You've been fertilized with Christian witness. You've been planted in the vineyard of the Lord whether you like it or whether not. This is where you are. But have you made use of these privileges?

Are you barren or are you fruitful today? Are you in Christ or are you out of Christ? Where are you? Because God, the heavenly gardener, is surveying your fruit or lack thereof.

[ 34 : 30 ] And based on what God sees, what do you think you'll do? What do you think you'll do? What decision do you think that God will come to with regards to you?

Friend, seek the Lord while you may be found and call upon him while he is near. Because the day comes and it's soon approaching for you when God shall no longer be found and when God shall no longer be near.

And if he finds you without fruit on that day, he will cut you down. He will cut you down. Amen. Let us pray. Amen.