

Scripture Portraits of the Church (6) - The Fig Tree in the Vineyard

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

- [0 : 00] Let's begin our singing first of all in Psalm 105, Psalm 105, and that's in the Scottish Psalter, page 374.
- The tune is Peterson. Give thanks to God, call on His name. To men His deeds make known, sing ye to Him. Sing Psalms, proclaim His wondrous works each one.
- See that ye in His holy name to glory do accord, and let the heart of everyone rejoice that seeks the Lord. We're singing verses 1 to 7 to the tune Peterson.
- Give thanks to God. Sing ye to them, sing Psalms, proclaim His wondrous works each one.
- Sing to Him, sing Psalms, proclaim His holy name to glory do accord, and let the heart of everyone rejoice that speaks the Lord.
- [1 : 32] The Lord Almighty and His friend, with steadfast heart seek He.
- His blessed and His gracious face, seek He contentially.
- Think on the works that He hath done, which admiration we.
- His wonders and the judgments of which from His mouth proceed.
- He that are of Abraham's race, His servant dwelleth full.
- [2 : 34] And He that Jacob's children are, whom He chose for His own.
- Because He and He only is the mighty Lord our God.
- And His most righteous judgments are in all the earth above.
- Let's join together now in prayer. Let's briefly pray. Our gracious God, we give thanks that You have given us that knowledge of You, so that we confess that You are the only Lord God Almighty.
- And that we come before You today, Lord, to claim You by faith as our God. We thank You for the way that Your Word reveals Yourself to us. And the ways in which You are revealed to us, Lord, are all revealed for our good and for our benefit.
- [3 : 46] And we thank You today that we are planted within Your church, and thereby that we have access to those things You have given to Your church, so that we might progress spiritually in our lives.
- And we thank You today for the Bible that we possess, and for the way that You have given us, Lord, the freedom to gather together today to worship You. We ask Your blessing to be upon all our gatherings today.
- We pray that You bless this Lord's day to us. Help us, we pray, to appreciate the holiness that belongs to Your day, that ought to mark it in our own observance of it as well.
- Bless our children today. We thank You for all who are here, and we pray for them and for all who are away at this time, for those who are on holiday, and grant to them, Lord, Your blessing and protective care.

And we ask that You bless our children. Bless them, Lord, in their own families. Bless them in their schoolwork. Bless them in their recreations. Bless and protect them in the world from all that is harmful and evil in the world.

[4 : 50] Lord, we ask that Your own truth might truly be their guardian, and that they might use Your Word each day they live, so as to know that God Himself is their God and protects them each step of the way through life.

Bless them now and bless us here together. And pardon our sin for Jesus' sake. Amen. Okay, children, it's good to see so many children out today.

There's some not just here with the twinnies, but also I can see throughout the church, and it's great to see you all here during a time of holiday. I wonder what your favourite food is.

You all have different favourites, I'm sure, when it comes to eating stuff. Hands up all those who like pizza. Anybody like pizza?

Yeah, there's one or two hands going up there for pizza. Yeah, okay. Well, pizza's not my favourite, but a lot of people like pizza.

[5 : 55] And we'll all have different kinds of food that we like. What about chips? Who likes chips? Yeah? Who of the oldies likes chips?

Oh yes, lots of hands going up for chips. Okay, so, now, there's a verse in the Bible that I want you to learn. It's in Psalm 34.

Psalm 34 and verse 8. And it goes like this. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.

How do you know whether or not you like food? Well, the answer is obvious, isn't it? You know whether or not you like food because you've tasted it.

You need to taste the food in order to know whether you like it or not. There are some foods that people say I don't like them, but they've never really tasted them properly.

[6 : 55] You need to taste the food in order to then say, I like this or I don't like that. Why do I not like mushrooms?

Sorry for those who do like mushrooms. Why do I not like mushrooms? Because I've tasted them. And personally, I don't like the taste of them. Other people love them, which is absolutely fine. That's how it should be.

But that's how we know we have a liking or disliking for food. Unless we taste it, we can't really see, can we? Now, here's a verse that tells us, taste and see that the Lord is good.

How do we know that the Lord is good? Well, because we come to know Himself. We come to taste Him. That means really we come to know Him for ourselves.

We come to know what He's like. We come in prayer to Him and reading the Bible. We come to find out about Him. But especially we come to know Him in a relationship with Him.

[7 : 56] Just like we are related one to another. Just like you relate to parents or grandparents. Spiritually, we have a relationship with God. And it's through that relationship with God that we come every day to taste and to see that He is good.

To find out that He is good for us. That He's always good in Himself in everything that He does. Now, you might have a book at home where your mums, dads even, and grandparents might have a book with recipes.

Pictures, usually in these books, of the food that you can prepare following the directions in the book. But if you look at a picture there, let's say it was a plate of mushrooms, and I had never tasted mushrooms before.

And you looked at that plate of mushrooms and they're beautifully presented, you would say, oh, that looks really good. Or else you might have a picture there that say, hmm, not so sure about that.

I don't think that would really be very nice, very tasty. But how will I know unless I've tasted it? And so it's like that with God as well. The Bible gives us a description of God.

[9 : 05] In other words, you get pictures of God from what you find in the Bible. But you need to taste and to see that He is good. It's the same for all of us as adults as for you children as well.

When you come to know Him yourself, when you come to trust in Him, to taste what He's like, then you'll know that He's really good. And that's what you're learning, isn't it? In Sunday school and at tweenies and at home or in church services like this, we're trying to present what the Bible says about God so that you and I will come to say for ourselves to other people, oh, taste and see that God is good.

So today, taste and see that God is good. Let's take what the Bible says and let's take that into our souls and we'll find that God is really good.

Let's say the Lord's Prayer then together. Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[10 : 28] For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. Now let's sing again to God's praise.

This time we're singing in Psalm 80 and that's on page 107. The tune is Stuttgart and it's verses 7 to 15. Stuttgart and it's verses 7 to 15.

Look on us, O God Almighty, let us see your glory bright. Turn us once again toward you, come and save us, give us light.

Once you brought a vine from Egypt, drove out kings with mighty hand. Set the vine and ground made ready, it took root and filled the land.

So that's 7 to 15 to the tune Stuttgart to God's praise. Stuttgart and it's verses 7 to 15. Let us see your glory bright. Let us see your glory bright.

[11 : 32] Turn us once again toward you, come and save us, give us light. Won't you brought a vine from Egypt, Let us see your glory bright. Turn us once again toward you, come and save us, give us light.

Won't you brought a vine from Egypt, Come and save us, give us light. Won't you brought a vine from Egypt, Throw our kings with mighty hand.

Won't you brought a vine from Egypt, Throw our kings with mighty hand. Set the vine and ground made ready, Here to root and fill the land.

So when branches o'er the mountains, Shining every cedar tree, Spreading from the great Euphrates Through the mighty western sea.

Why did you break down its fences, So that all made buckets grew, Creatures of the field devoured, Wild boars traded from the root.

[13 : 10] Turn to us, O God Almighty, Look and see from heaven above.

Tend this vine you hand us planted, And the sun you raised in love.

Now let's read a passage of God's Word from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 13. Luke 13, we're going to read verses 1 to 17. There were some present at that very time Who told him about the Galileans Whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

And he answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners Than all the other Galileans, Because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, But unless you repent, You will all likewise perish.

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell And killed them, Do you think that they were worse offenders Than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, But unless you repent, You will all likewise perish.

[14 : 37] 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. And he said to the vine dresser, 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? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, Until I dig round it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, Well and good.

But if not, You can cut it down. Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues On the Sabbath. And there was a woman who had a disabling spirit For eighteen years.

She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said to her, Woman, you are freed from your disability. And he laid his hands on her And immediately she was made straight, And she glorified God.

But the ruler of the synagogue, Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, Said to the people, There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, But not on the Sabbath day.

[15 : 48] Then the Lord answered him, You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath Untie his ox or his donkey from the manger And lead it away to water it?

And ought not this woman, A daughter of Abraham, Whom Satan has bound for eighteen years, Be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? As he said these things, All his adversaries were put to shame, And all the people rejoiced At all the glorious things that were done by him.

Amen. May God follow with his blessing that reading of his own word. Let's again pray. O Lord, our gracious God, As we worship you today, We pray that your Holy Spirit may be active within us.

We pray that our minds may be open to further understand your word. We pray that you would apply it to us, O Lord, So that spiritually and morally we may advance in our relationship with you, And in our journey through life.

We thank you that your word contains all we need to know for our salvation. We thank you that you have not revealed everything to us that is true about yourself, Or other truths that you have chosen, Lord, to keep hidden from us.

[17 : 12] And we thank you that we are not in a position to understand all your doings. For you are God, and Lord, we cannot expect to understand every aspect of your being or of your works.

And so we thank you for that greatness that belongs to you, That greatness that makes you unique. The greatness, Lord, that you revealed to us in your word, Brought the world and all that is in it into being.

We thank you for the grace, Lord, that you have revealed, The grace that you use in the salvation of your people. And we come before you today, Lord, as part of our worship, To give thanks for that grace.

And to give thanks for all the good things that you give to us from day to day. As we have been thinking earlier, Lord, with the children, Of the way that we taste and see that the Lord is good.

Oh, help us, we pray now, to do so during this time of worship. And help us throughout this day to taste and see that you are good. Help us to reflect, oh Lord, seriously and meaningfully on the ways in which your goodness reaches us each day we live.

[18 : 22] Enable us, we pray, to take that goodness to heart. And to realize, oh Lord, that we are undeserving of any of it. To realize that we are deserving of everything opposite to it.

And yet, oh Lord, you have dealt with us in this rich way. So as to reveal to us the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior. To reveal to us our own sinfulness.

And thereby bring to our notice our need of this Savior. And Lord, oh, we pray today that all of us may reach out in faith and claim him for ourselves.

And if we have already done this, oh Lord, we pray that today, once again, we may be conscious of receiving the grace of Christ into our souls. And thereby being empowered to continue with that life of faith and hope and love.

We ask today that your blessing will rest with us, oh Lord, as a congregation of your people. We give thanks as we reflect on your goodness to us as a people. We give thanks for the ways in which you have continued to bless us.

[19 : 29] And for the ways in which, Lord, you have overlooked our sin. We come together today to not only give thanks to your name, but to confess our sin together. But we know that each of us has sinned to confess every day we live.

And we have used these words, oh Lord, already that you taught your disciples to forgive our trespasses, our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And we ask today, oh Lord, that you would hide your face from our iniquities. And that you would teach us, oh Lord, the ways and the seriousness and the deceitfulness of sin.

Help us, oh God, to take to heart the teaching of your word in regard to this also. Lest we should see ourselves as better than we are.

Lest we should imagine, oh Lord, that we have some claim upon you through our own goodness. And yet we give thanks today that you offer life to us. Sinful as you see us and sinful as we are.

[20 : 31] And undeserving of any mercy from you, you extend to us, Lord, today that salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, your Son. And we pray, oh Lord, today that each of us here together with all God's people everywhere we may know for ourselves that goodness of God in our hearts.

We ask you blessing to be with those who cannot gather with us today. Oh God, we think especially of those who have particular needs at this time and are confined to their homes or to hospital beds or to care homes.

We ask that you would bless them, those who belong to us as families and as a congregation especially. We commit them to you. We ask that they may know your good hand upon them, your goodness surrounding them and providing for them.

We pray that you would draw them near to yourself, oh Lord. For every time we come to be ill, especially with serious illness, we know that we are conscious of eternity drawing near to us.

We pray that you would make us wise unto salvation. Teach us, we pray daily, to number our days and apply our hearts unto wisdom. We pray for those today whose hearts are heavy with sorrow and with grief.

[21 : 50] Those who have lost loved ones in this week gone by. Those who reflect also on times gone by where bereavement came to their experience and to their lives personally in the removing of those they loved.

Bless them all, we pray. Extend to them today your comfort. And we pray that any who in these times, oh Lord, have lost loved ones but have not yet reckoned with the reality and with the seriousness of death and with eternal issues that they may do so.

Using, oh Lord, even the providence of death in their experience to draw near to God and to seek to draw their strength and their comfort and life from you.

We pray your blessing to be extended, Lord, to us as a people in our communities. Bless us in all the activities we are conscious of from day to day, in our day schools, in our Sunday school, in everything to do with the education of our children.

Bless the teachers in our schools, the head teachers, those who have responsibility, Lord, to teach our children. We thank you for them. We thank you for their dedication.

[22 : 58] And we pray that you would grant your blessing to them, especially at times when so much is asked of them. And when there may be materials as there are that they themselves are not satisfied with and yet are promoted by government.

Lord, we ask that you would give wisdom to those concerned. We pray that you bless our local authority. Bless them in all the ways in which, Lord, they seek to do good to our society, to our people.

Bless them, we pray, in all their activities and in all the ways in which they engage with society as it is. We pray that you bless our government at this time.

Remember those in Westminster, Lord, amongst the turmoil that exist there at the present time. Oh, Lord, our God, we pray for days of peace, for days of stability.

We pray for days when there will be set over us those who will honor you, those who will be characterized by truth and by order and by all that would make for good government.

[24 : 07] We pray that your blessing, Lord, will be at this time with them in Parliament. We pray also for the Scottish Parliament. We pray that you would grant blessing to all the ministers, to the presiding government and all who assist with it.

We ask, oh Lord, that the first minister and our government, our cabinet, will be blessed. We pray that you would give them the resolve by which to govern in the fear of God and an acknowledgement of your ways.

Bless those of them who do know you and who do commend you to their fellow members of Parliament. We ask that you would continue to bless them and support them, Lord, by your own strength and give them of your own blessed spirit so that they may be guided in all their ways by you.

Now, bless, we pray, all those who around us are in particular need today. We pray for those who suffer from various addictions, from those, Lord, who find themselves in prison throughout our land.

We pray for those ministering to them, those who are seeking to bring them help and relief and guidance and stability. We ask for all of these efforts, oh Lord, that they may be blessed by you.

[25 : 25] We pray that we may see days when the gospel and the influence of the gospel will come to pervade our homes and our communities more than it does. And to that end, we pray for your own spirit, oh Lord.

We know that we look to a God who is able to do more than we are able to ask or think. You are able to do so exceeding abundantly. And so we pray to you today, oh Lord, as the one we know created the heavens and the earth, sustains all things by the power of your word.

And we ask that that power may be used for our good as a people. Hear us now, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Before we turn to the word of God, let's sing once again, this time in Psalm number one.

Singing Psalm 1 from the Scottish Psalter, page 200, the tune this time is Paisley. That man hath perfect blessedness, who walketh not astray in counsel of ungodly men, nor stands in sinner's way, nor sitteth in the scornish chair, but placeth his delight upon God's law, and meditates on his law day and night.

The whole of Psalm number one, again we stand to sing. God. I ask that men hath perfect blessedness, who walketh not astray in counsel of ungodly men, nor stands in sinner's way, nor sitteth him the same.

[27 : 18] The storm is yet but place of this delight. Upon God's law and meditate on his law day and night.

He shall be like a tree that rose here planted by a river.

Which in his season yields his fruit and his leaf fadeth never.

And all the angels shall prosper well. The wicked are not so.

But like thee are unto the chaff which with right to and fro.

[28 : 35] And judgment therefore shall not stand such as the sanctuary.

Nor in the assembly of the just shall wicked men appear.

For why the way of godly men unto the Lord is known.

Whereas the way of wicked men shall white be overthrown.

Let's turn together for a short time to Luke chapter 13. And today we're looking at verses 6 to 9 of this chapter.

[29 : 45] This parable that Jesus told the people at that time. The parable as it says in the title there of the barren fig tree. Scripture as you know frequently uses images drawn from agriculture.

Here it's viniculture or vineculture. Respecting a vineyard. That's the kind of imagery the Bible often uses to present to us spiritual truth.

Images of spiritual life in different ways. Think of Isaiah chapter 5. God is saying that Israel is his vineyard. And he goes there through to teach about their need to turn back to himself.

Jeremiah chapter 4 calling upon Israel to plow up their fallow ground. A ground that's been left unused for some time. Spiritually that's a neglect of course.

And they're being asked to or demanded God demands them to plow up that fallow ground. See to it that they repent of their sins. Proverbs chapter 20. A picture there of a vineyard that's been abandoned.

[30 : 56] Or certainly been badly neglected. All overgrown and full of weeds and so on. And that makes its own point of course with regard to our life too. John chapter 15. Well known words of Jesus.

Jesus I am the true vine and my father is the vine dresser. And then he goes on to speak about the relationship of the branches to the vine as he teaches the disciples there.

And the passage we have here is a passage about a fig tree. It's not about the vineyard as such. It's about the fig tree that was planted in this vineyard.

It's obviously fertile soil because otherwise they wouldn't have planted vines there for the culture, for the viniculture, for the production of grapes.

But in this vineyard, as very often was and still is the case, the owner of the vineyard had planted a fig tree. Making use of all the space possible in the vineyard and between the rows of vines planting this fig tree.

[32 : 00] And that had immediate application of course to the Jews in Jesus' time as Jesus was speaking to them or teaching them about the privileges that they had had as a people.

And that's really the essence of the lesson from this passage today. Spiritual privileges and advantages and the use or not use that we have in relation to those in our own lives too.

Here is Israel being addressed, the people of Israel, the Jews. Obviously it's an image of them in the immediate context. They had been so favored by God. They had been blessed above all other nations of the earth.

They had come to know God, this God of the covenant. They had come to know this God who had created the heavens and the earth. This God who had entered into covenant with them. This God who had taught them through the prophets, through the days of the Old Testament, all into the New Testament.

They were the vineyard of the Lord. And as they were the vineyard of the Lord, So the Lord was looking for them to be productive in their lives spiritually, to bring forth the kind of fruit that honored Him, the kind of fruit that showed they had made proper use of their advantages and privileges.

[33 : 18] And we're applying that today to ourselves because that's really what the passage is about. It's not there just to teach us a history lesson about what Jesus said to the Jews and about the Jews.

We have to translate this into our own present experience, our own present situation. It's a portrait, really. We're following through with our series of Scripture portraits of the church.

And this is really one of those portraits, if you like, where you find the Lord actually giving us this imagery, this portrait of the church and the gospel privileges that you and I have as belonging to that church visibly.

The gospel advantages that He has given you. In other words, we've been planted so favorably in our lives in relation to the gospel, in relation to the church of God, that today God is saying to us, You are essentially my vineyard.

This is where I have planted you. But especially we're focusing on this fig tree, because this is really what Jesus set before the people of the day. Here is this fig tree in this fertile ground, surrounded by vines bearing grapes.

[34 : 27] And yet this fig tree is fruitless. It is barren. It's not making the use of the ground that it ought to. It doesn't have any figs.

And so the Lord is using that of an imagery, just solemnly telling us today that it's possible to actually enjoy many advantages and many privileges in the gospel and not bear the fruit that God is looking for, not bear the fruit that God Himself requires of us as human beings.

So here are our two headings today. First of all, God has planted us in fertile soil. Secondly, therefore, God expects us to bear fruit for Him.

God has planted us in fertile soil. Therefore, secondly, God expects us to bear fruit for Him. Let's look at these two as we follow the teaching of the parable.

God has planted us in fertile soil. As we said earlier, this fig tree had all the advantages. It had the fertile soil. There was evidence around it that the soil could produce a good crop.

[35 : 48] And that's how you are as well than I am. We have been planted very favorably by God. We've been planted in the vineyard of God's church. This is what's leaving you here today. This is what is true about you all here today, and myself as well as individuals, as a congregation.

This is where God has planted us. He's planted us in the vineyard of the church. If you like, in the soil of the gospel. You know, it's something that we really sometimes don't really think seriously enough about, although it sounds almost too simple to really follow out in any detail.

But it is a very important point that God has planted us as human beings in the soil of the gospel. We have access to the pure water and the nourishment and the nutrients that we find in God's Word.

They're channeled into our lives, into our minds, into our hearts, into our consciences. As we're rooted in the soil of the gospel. As we come to know these nutrients of the gospel.

These nutrients from God's Word. The watering of our souls by the Word of God. By the Spirit of God persuading us of our need. We're also sheltered to a great extent compared to others in the world.

[37 : 00] We're not persecuted because we gather here today. We don't come through these streets or drive to church fearing that somehow or other there will be a bomb or a missile or a group of people waiting to just take it out on us because we're Christians.

That's our advantage. That's where God has placed us. And we have the warm sun of God's favor, therefore, shining upon us.

We could have been. Had God chosen it, we could have been where others are today. We could have been in places where the gospel isn't faithfully preached.

We could have been out there in the wilderness of secularism. We could be out there sharing with those who are atheists who reject God, who don't believe in God. We could be amongst them instead of being here in church.

God, in His providence, could have planted us somewhere else. But He hasn't. He's planted us in His church. He's planted us here in the soil of the gospel. He's planted us where we receive so many benefits, where we're surrounded by fellow believers, fellow people who worship God.

[38 : 16] What a great thing that is. And you know, Jesus was very much intending that His listeners at this time would really take to heart the truth of what He was saying.

You are a fig tree planted in the most favorable conditions. Now think about that today. Think how God has favored your life.

Think how God has given you all these advantages. Think of what it might be like today if you were out there amongst those people who don't care to go to church, who even some of them despise the church.

But that's not true of you. God has placed you in His church, in the soil of the gospel, under the favor that He has shown to you throughout your life.

God has planted us in fertile soil. Therefore, God expects us to bear fruit.

[39 : 27] See the way the parable goes? Let's just follow the terms of it there. The man who had the fig tree planted in his vineyard, this is the owner of the vineyard, and he's obviously employed this vine dresser, this manager, to look after his vineyard when he himself or he himself is away somewhere else, the owner.

And so he's given this task to the vine dresser to look after this vineyard for him. And the owner has returned seeking fruit on this fig tree. This is what God is doing right now.

This is what God's doing with me and with you. God is saying to me, look, you've been in this pulpit for well over 30 years. What fruit are you showing in your life? And here he is saying to you as well, you've been planted in the soil of the gospel.

He has a right. This man had a right to expect fruit of this fig tree. You see what he's saying? Look, for three years now, I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I find none.

And he had a right to expect fruit of this fig tree. He'd had it planted there for three whole years and that's enough time for a fig tree to bear fruit. A fig tree usually bears fruit within two to three years.

[40 : 37] It starts bearing figs. So he had a right to expect this fig tree would bear fruit. So God is saying, I have a right, you know, to come today to look at your life and to expect that you're bearing fruit for me.

He has a right to come and find in your life the growth of faith, the growth of love for himself and for his cause, the growth of repentance, turning from sin, leaving that sin, following a holy life as far as possible.

All the things the Bible tells you are true of a Christian life. Well, he's expecting that of you and me having actually rooted us and planted us in such fertile soil.

You can relate this passage to the previous one because Scripture is very closely tied together as you follow the various parts of it. Here is Jesus saying to those who were present at that time who told him about whatever had happened there.

We're not told the details of it. The Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifice, some outrage or other under Pilate's direction. And Jesus said, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

[42 : 00] No, he said, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Same in the following verses with the Tower of Siloam. No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

You find the same thing elsewhere in the Bible. You find Romans chapter 2 and verse 4, for example. Let me just read that to you.

It's very much in keeping with what you find in this passage in Luke. Here's Romans chapter 2. Here's Paul writing these terms to those who are making something of the fact that they have had a background where God has blessed them as a people, where they belong to people, with Abraham and so on as their ancestor.

Here is God saying to them there in verse 4, Do you not realize? Do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

That's a wonderful verse. That's a great powerful verse that God's kindness, God's kindness to you and planting you where you are, God's kindness in making you familiar with the gospel and giving you to have your life rooted and grounded in the soil of the gospel.

[43 : 20] The goodness of God. The goodness of God is intended to lead you to repentance, to repent of your sin, to accept Christ.

I hope we're not presenting this, and I hope I'm not presenting this in a way that sounds terribly negative and certainly not condemnatory. I have to say this to myself as much as to anyone else, but this is God's word to us today, friends.

This is our place of advantage. This is our place of privilege. This is where God has placed us, and now He's come looking for His fruit. And you have to answer to that like I have to. None of us can say to God, well, I have all the fruit that I really am, that you really require of me.

I've always had this fruit in my life, so I know that you will not actually accuse me of not bearing fruit. None of us can say that to the extent that we would say we have so much fruit that everything that God looks for is there in place in my life.

I can't say that. Neither can you say that. But what I'm asking is, are you bearing the fruit of repentance and of faith and of love and of all the things that are associated with being saved?

[44 : 33] That's really what it amounts to. These people who are listening to Jesus weren't saved. They weren't taking, they weren't making use of the advantages they have. And this is what God is impressing on us today.

This is our advantage. This is God's kindness. That's meant to lead us to repentance. Now you see what he says. Look, he says, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I find none.

None cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? These are certainly powerful, solemn, challenging words, aren't they?

Here is something that's very understandable in crop management. This is a very sensible thing. In terms of crop management, in terms of looking after this piece of ground and this fig tree and these vines, it makes sense.

This is how those who manage such things go about the business. I mean, if you had a fig tree set in a vineyard with all the advantages and all the care lavished upon it that you had lavished upon it and it didn't actually produce any fruit, what would you say?

[45 : 43] You'd say exactly the same as this man said. Well, that's no use leaving that there. It's just taking up a bit of ground that could be used for something else. So, take it out and put something else in its place.

That's crop management for you. That's how we would actually deal with things in the ordinary sense in the natural world in terms of crop management. But of course, this is not crop management that's meant by this.

It's soul management. It's human people, that is to human beings he's talking to. And what he's saying really is that we will take to heart what it is that ought to be done with us if we don't produce fruit to God's glory.

That sounds very severe, but it is Christ's own word. The space of this fig tree could be reused. And the words that he uses here, why should it use up the ground?

If you remember the old AV, the old AV translation has the word cumbereth. Why cumbereth it the ground? Why does it cumber the ground?

[46 : 49] And the literal meaning of these words in Greek, whatever we translate them, the literal meaning is it's really rendering useless. It's rendering something useless or of no effect.

In other words, that fig tree, because it wasn't bearing fruit, it was to, well, it was to all intents and purposes really rendering that piece of ground ineffective when it was being used and there was no production of figs on it.

And I think that's saying something to us that's also solemn, but we need to bear it in mind, and it's this. This fruitless fig tree was making it seem as if that ground was very little use, was infertile, as if there weren't really enough of the good conditions and the fertile soil there that this tree would really need to make it grow.

That's what it seemed like when you take account of the fact it didn't bear fruit. Now, you apply that to yourself and myself, and what's it saying? Well, it means that if we haven't come to turn to the Lord, if we're not yet saved, if we haven't put our trust in Christ, if we haven't received Christ for ourselves, then to all intents and purposes, it seems like the soil of the church and the gospel in which God has placed us is not really very fertile, not very good soil.

That's the impression it gives, doesn't it? And of course, we know that that's not the case with this ground. There's nothing wrong with this ground. The vines are growing there.

[48 : 30] There's nothing wrong with the ground of the gospel. Many people are growing successfully. They're growing fruit there to the glory of God. But if you and I are not, if we've not yet made the use of that piece of ground, if you like, in this church that God intends, that's the impression we're giving.

That's the impression we're giving both to God and to others and ourselves. In other words, to remain, how can I put it, to remain unsaved, if you're here today and you're still not saved, you haven't turned to Christ, you haven't put your trust in Him, you haven't given yourself to Him in your own individual life, it's really giving the impression that God hasn't really been kind to you at all, that God hasn't given you the proper conditions, that the soil in which you're placed is not very fertile.

Now, you don't want that to be the case. You don't want God's name to be doubted. You don't want people to actually get the impression that actually the church is little good after all, or that the gospel doesn't really do much for a person after all.

That's not what you want to have in your own life, that's not what you want the impression of the world of your life to be, because that reflects upon God. And it reflects upon God in such a way that does not give the glory to God that you and I were created for.

We were created to produce spiritual fruit, the fruit of faith, of love, of repentance, of righteousness, of holiness, to the glory of God. That's why we exist.

[50 : 15] That is our chief end as the catechism begins, to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. And so here is, in God's kindness, in God's goodness, He's impressing upon you and impressing upon me today the meaning of this passage.

He's doing this so that you can attend to the need of your soul if you haven't meaningfully and fully done so already. There are many of you here who are already bearing fruit.

It's obvious in your lives. There may be others of you who have the genuine desire to produce these fruits spiritually that will glorify God, but you've not yet seen to it that your life is fully rooted in Christ.

You haven't given yourself to Him as the Bible requires of you, as God requires of you. So here today, lovingly, tactfully, patiently, God is saying to you, why is this?

Why have you not yet come to accept me, to turn to me, to receive me, to put your trust in me? Is there something wrong with what I've provided for you?

[51 : 43] Are the conditions not exactly what you need? So God is urging you through the gospel today to look at your life and me to look at my life.

What evidence is there of fruit? And I know a lot of the Lord's people will say, well, I don't find much evidence of fruit in my life. But you wouldn't say you're not rooted in the Lord or not delighting in His ways.

Here is the challenge. Cut it down. Why should it cumber up the ground? Why should it use up the ground? But then you see this appeal, thirdly. He answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also until I dig round it and put manure on it.

Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good. If not, you can cut it down. You see, the person who's looking after this tree for the owner of the vineyard is really concerned to give it every opportunity to bear fruit.

So he doesn't want to cut it down right now. He appeals to the owner, give it another year. Let it alone. And during this year to come, I will make sure that it has even more by way of advantage and privilege.

[52 : 53] I will give it all that it requires of manure. I'll dig around it, make sure its roots are freed up so that the nutrients get into the roots properly. I'll make sure that everything that needs to be done on my part, I will do for this fruit tree.

So leave it alone for another year, he says. Now, doesn't that show you the amazing patience and kindness of God?

the amazing patience of God. How patient God is with me and with you. When our life is not as it should be, he doesn't just immediately cut us off.

He doesn't say, well, that's it, you've had enough time, you've had enough privilege, you've had enough opportunity. No, he says, I'm giving you another chance, I've given you another year, I'm giving you every opportunity to bear fruit in your life as you ought.

God, you see, is always reluctant to condemn. You'll find that throughout the Bible. 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 4, talks about God as not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, to know the truth.

[54 : 13] There is nobody here today over whom God is saying, I am willing to condemn you, I'm willing, and I would love just to condemn you. He's not willing that any should perish, but that all should come.

That's all of us today planted in the soil of the gospel, in the favorable conditions of God's church, God's vineyard. He's saying to you today, I'm going to give you some more opportunity to get some more spiritual nourishment from the gospel.

I'm not going to cut you down immediately. Hasn't God been patient with yourself? Hasn't He given you ever the opportunity up to now to know Him, to turn to Him, to love Him, to put your trust in Him, to believe in Him?

I'm sure everybody here will say, yes, of course He has. You're not going to deny the patience and the goodness of God. But why was this given, why was this said to the owner of the vineyard, let it alone until I dig round it and put on my new?

You notice the purpose of this further year was so that this tree would actually come to produce figs, produce fruit, fruit.

[55 : 44] It's not so that we could take from this the false impression that we can relax, that if He's giving us another year, well, that's fine, we'll just see to it somehow or other during that time that we'll come to know Him and come to love Him and come to place our life in His hands.

Every application, if you like, of the manure or the nutrients of the gospel in your life and in my life are intended to make us produce fruit, it's not so that we can delay.

It's not so that you can say, well, okay, then if I'm not going to be cut down immediately, it's now, that's fine, just leave it as it is, just now, then I'll think about it. No, it's so that you can actually say the goodness of God as it continues to be lavished upon you is so that you will come to attend to this immediately and turn to himself and know Him and love Him and trust in Him.

He says, I'll do this. I'll dig round it, I'll put on my new, and then, he says, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good. He's going to give it every opportunity.

There'll be no excuse for this tree if it doesn't bear fruit. Everything's been done for it that could have been done. If it bears fruit, then well and good. But if not, you can cut it down.

[57 : 17] The mercy, the patience of God are beautiful and precious. What is more precious to you than to know that God is merciful and forgiving when you take account of your sinfulness and mine and what we deserve?

Yes, the mercy and the patience of God are so beautiful and so precious. But be careful that you don't take a false assurance from that.

Be careful that you don't draw from this parable and the teaching of this parable something along the lines of God will never condemn me. Because that's a misuse of the passage.

God does condemn. God does possess wrath and anger. God will bring judgment, His own judgment upon those who have not responded to the gospel and borne fruit to His glory.

Because mercy and patience, while beautiful and precious in themselves, if you spurn them and if I spurn them, if we don't make the use of them that God intends, then we'll find out, sadly, the words of Hebrews 10 verse 31, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

[58 : 57] See, it would be easy for me today, relatively easy, to come to the pulpit and say, well, I don't think I should choose a passage or have a sermon that includes such things as God condemning people, or God's judgment bringing that rejection or condemnation of people.

Because I wouldn't be true to the Bible if I did, and you know that. I know these passages, if I can speak personally, are actually very difficult to preach.

They're difficult to preach to people that you know and love. Because God is bringing to you a truth which is really unpalatable to ourselves, naturally speaking.

So, we're not doing this just because we want ourselves simply to be orthodox, or in a reformed theology just to keep strictly and tactlessly, if you like, to the things of God's Word.

I'm doing this today, friends, because I love you. Because I don't want you to perish. Because God has placed you on my heart.

[60 : 10] Because God has brought us together as congregation and people. Because I believe this truth. Because I have to face God if I don't preach it.

Now, we're not told the outcome. You see, it's just such a brilliant parable in the way it's constructed in the teaching of the Lord. Because you and I would probably prefer to know, well, what happened to this fig tree?

did it actually bear fruit? Was it actually cut down after the year? We're not told. Why are we not told? Well, for this reason at least, that you and I can make this passage relevant to ourselves.

So that you and I can conclude, well, my life, with all that God lavishes upon it of His care and of His patience and the placement that He has given me so favorably, my life is not going to be fruitless.

That's why it doesn't have an outcome specified. So that you and I can say, well, whatever happened to that fig tree, I am not going to be rejected.

[61 : 36] I am going to bear fruit as God enables me to His glory, to His praise, and to my eternal advantage. May it be so for all of us.

Let's pray. Lord, we give thanks today for the solemn passages of Your Word, as well as those that are so encouraging. Yet even in the solemn ones, O Lord, we, give thanks that we find much to encourage our souls, even as we do in this passage today that You have given us.

We thank You for Your care, for Your patience, for Your dealings with us. We thank You for the gospel, for the richness of it, for the soil in which You have placed us, for the church we belong to.

Lord, our God, we give You the thanks for Your favor toward us in all of these things. Forgive us, we pray, when we don't bear the fruit that we ought, or to the extent that we ought.

Give us today, Lord, that resolve through the aid of Your Spirit to come to produce that fruit of righteousness to the glory of Your name. Hear us, we pray, for Jesus' sake.

[62 : 50] Amen. Let's sing now in conclusion in Psalm 67. 67, that's in the Sing Psalms version, page 84, the tune is Nettleton.

God, be merciful and bless us, shine upon us with Your face, that the earth may know Your actions and all lands Your saving grace. O God, may the peoples praise You, may all peoples sing Your praise, for You judge the nations justly, ruling over every race.

and so on, the whole of the psalm, psalm 67, to God's praise. Amen. God, be merciful and blessed, shine upon us with Your face, that the earth may know Your actions, and all lands Your saving grace.

O God, may the people taste You, may all people sing Your praise, for You judge the nations justly, ruling over every race.

may they sing with joy and gladness, may they all rejoice as one.

[64 : 33] O God, may the peoples praise You, as they all unite in song, come.

Then the land will yield its harvest, God will pour its gifts abroad.

God, our God, will surely bless us, all the earth will fear our God.

I'll go to the door to my left this morning. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

Amen. Amen.