

"The Barren Fig Tree"

by
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***"He spake also this parable: A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came and sought fruit thereon and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, 'Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree and found none. Cut it down; why cumberest thou the ground?' And he answering said unto him, 'Lord, let it alone this year, also, till I shall dig about it and dung it. And if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.' "* (Luke 13:6-9).**

"He spake also this parable." The word "also" connects this parable with the preceding context, and indicates that the parable was meant to illustrate the subject of the preceding teaching, namely, the necessity of repentance and good fruits in order to escape perdition.

He was told of certain Galileans who had been put to death by Pilate, when they were engaged in the religious work of offering sacrifices. Pilate had mingled their blood with their sacrifices, and it was the opinion, it seems, of those who made the rehearsal in the hearing of our Lord, that those Galileans had been greater sinners than others. This was the conclusion which they inferred from the fact that such a terrible judgment had overtaken them.

But this was an erroneous opinion, and Jesus proceeded to correct it. "And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay. But except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." He does not deny that the Galileans on whom that terrible death had been inflicted were sinners, but he contradicts and overturns the opinion that their suffering such a terrible death proves them to have been greater sinners than other Galileans.

Another calamitous event of a similar nature, and coming under the same principle, He finds in the case of those on whom the tower in Siloam fell. Their violent death was more clearly and evidently a providential visitation. But notwithstanding, it was not to be regarded as proof "that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem."

These sayings of Jesus seem to me to warrant us in adopting the following as the correct view on this subject: In the government of God over this world, sufferings and death are the consequences of sin. The general fact of sin is the cause of the general fact of sufferings and death. Had there been no sin, there would have been no suffering and no death. But while this is true, it is not true that the heavier calamities of certain individuals are the consequences of their greater sin and wickedness. In other words, it is not a rule in the government of God that individuals are in this life visited with calamities and sufferings in proportion to the degrees of their sins and iniquities. In some instances indeed, great blasphemy and wickedness are followed by heavy and manifest judgments. It was so in the case of Herod, of whom we read in the Acts of the Apostles (chap. 12) that he was eaten of worms till he died; because he gave not God the glory, when the people in their ignorant flattery applauded him, and said when he made his oration, "It is the voice of a god and not of a man."

But while cases of such a nature may occur occasionally, it is not an invariable rule in the government of God to visit sinners in this life according to the extent of their wickedness. Therefore when we behold a case of great suffering, we must not jump to the conclusion that the subject of the suffering is a greater sinner than ourselves or others, but on the contrary we ought to take warning that unless we repent of our own sins and do works meet for repentance, we shall assuredly sooner or later perish.

It was to illustrate this truth, and to enforce it still more strongly, that this parable of the barren fig tree was spoken. "He spake also this parable," spake it in addition to what immediately precedes it and in the same line of doctrine.

The meaning of the parable is pretty obvious. The proprietor of the vineyard and of the fig tree signifies God; the vineyard signifies the visible church, the ordinances of grace, and God's providential care over those on whom He has conferred religious privileges. A vineyard was a highly cultivated spot of ground, usually situated on a hill enjoying exposure towards the sun, and well fenced round about to protect it from the inroads of destructive animals. It therefore makes a beautiful and suitable representation of the privileges which those enjoy who are in possession of the word and the ordinances of God, such as the Jews in the days of old and we ourselves in the year of grace, 1874.

The fig tree signifies men who enjoy religious privileges. You may observe that the fig tree in the parable was planted in the vineyard. It was not a growth from a stray seedling that by chance had been dropped in the vineyard, but it was a planted tree. It had been set by the hand of man in that cultivated and protected ground. Hence we have in it a beautiful figure of individual men that have a place and name within the visible church. The Jews were thus planted in the vineyard, and Isaiah speaks of them under that figure in an allegory which in many of its features resembles this parable: "The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant" (Is. 5:7). And have we not ourselves been thus planted in the visible church and under the shadow of Christ's ordinances? We have been born in a Christian land. We have our abode where the gospel is preached and where ordinances are dispensed. We have the word of God. We have been, the most of us, if not all of us, baptized in the name "of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." And we have had our training and our education, more or less, under Christian influences. And now, I ask, how do we stand before God? What is the fruit that we bear? Is it such as He will approve of and accept?

The parable goes on to say, "And he came and sought fruit thereon and found none. Then said He unto the dresser of the vineyard, 'Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why cumberest thou the ground?' " The owner of the fig tree looked for fruit, for that [because] the tree was planted; and failing in that, it only cumbered the ground. It occupied space which might be used to better purpose. And therefore the owner pronounced its doom and commanded its destruction. Nor could he be charged with rashness and impatience; he had given it time and opportunity to bear fruit. Three years he had looked for fruit. Three years after the tree had come to maturity he had waited patiently. Three years, in each of which he might reasonably expect fruit, he had come looking for it. But he found none. Why then should he spare the tree any longer?

God likewise looks for fruit from us--His rational creatures--in whom, we must all confess, He has conferred many precious and distinguishing privileges. He reasonably expects fruit, and time after time He has come looking for it. And now I ask, I put it to your consciences, has He found

it? "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." I ask, are you confident that the all-seeing eye of God has found such fruit as this growing and ripening in your soul? Has He found you repenting and "doing works meet for repentance"? Has He found you believing in Jesus, renouncing all your own righteousness and relying alone for salvation on the righteousness of Christ? Has He found you "followers of God as dear children and walking in love as Christ also has loved us"? Has He found you "crucifying the flesh with its affections and lusts"? Has He found you avoiding all questionable amusements? Has He found you "making your calling and election sure"? Has He found you standing by the banner of the cross and fighting "the good fight of faith," while, it may be, the arrows of the world's scorn and ridicule were flying thick and fast around you? Has He found you bearing testimony for Christ in the various relations of life in which you are placed--as parents, and as children, and as neighbors, in your various avocations and in the transaction of all your business? In particular, has He found you that are parents, praying and laboring with anxiety for the everlasting salvation of your children? Do you seek for them "first the kingdom of God and his righteousness"? And by your own pious and Christian example, as well as by your precept, do you strive in reliance on divine grace for success to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord"?

Now, I have confidence and trust that there are some here who are bringing forth fruit "which is by Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God." I have trust that there are here some who, while there are still many imperfections about them, are nevertheless resting and building on the right foundation; who have passed from death unto life by the grace and power of the Holy Ghost; who have "fled for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before them in the gospel"; who have "presented their bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, as their reasonable service," and are "not conformed to this world" but are "transformed by the renewing of their mind," and are "proving what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God"; who have taken Jesus to be their Saviour and are determined to follow Him through good report and through ill report; and who by devout meditations, and believing prayers at the throne of grace, hold fellowship with the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit. To such our adorable Redeemer says, "Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abides in me and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing."

But while I have confidence that some are here who bear fruit, on the other hand I have fear--yea, I do not doubt--that there are here some like the unfruitful fig tree, on whom, when the Lord makes search, He finds no fruit, and concerning whom therefore He may have given the command, "Cut them down. Why do they cumber the ground?" I cannot but fear and be dismayed at the thought that there are some such here. Would to God I had grounds for thinking and believing otherwise! Oh, that God would hasten the day when none shall have occasion to say to his brother, "Know the Lord; for they shall all know Me from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord." But that happy period has not yet come; and we must therefore bear, as well as we can, the thought that friends, kind friends, respectable friends, after the world's fashion, and neighbors and acquaintances are in the eye of God fruitless fig trees, cumberers of the ground and therefore deserving of His highest censure, and are exposed to His terrifying and desolating judgments.

Think not, I beseech you, that I am your enemy when I denounce your impenitence and unbelief, and warn you of impending judgment. The physician is not the patient's enemy when he applies the burning caustic to the painful sore, or when he uses the sharp scalpel on the quivering flesh,

or the grating saw on the fractured bone, or when he administers the nauseous draught whose immediate effects only increase the sick man's misery. Nor is a father his child's enemy when, to root out some growing vice or to check and destroy some gathering habit of an immoral nature, he deliberately uses the rod and administers the necessary chastisement. Now I would be the kind but faithful physician who does not shrink from increasing the pain at first, if necessary, in order to effect a cure ultimately. And I would be the tender hearted but wise father who does not hesitate to use the rod when there is need for it, to break in wayward children to the ways of truth and honesty and industry.

You fruitless souls that only cumber God's ground, let me endeavor to point you out and to set your own state and character before your eyes. O, that God would enable me to describe your character and to analyze your sentiments in such a way as to carry conviction to your own souls! Could I awake you to a sense of your state, then I could entertain hope of your conversion and your everlasting salvation.

And who are the fruitless ones that cumber the ground? Well, there are some of you who know very well that if the Bible is really true--if it is true that man is by nature a depraved and sinful being, that Jesus has come to die for men, that all who do not believe in Him and love and serve Him must be lost--then it is also true that you are not yet saved. You have never repented. You do not believe in Jesus, nor love, nor serve Him. You are fruitless souls cumbering the ground and on the road to perdition. Your secret sentiment is that somehow or other it will turn out that these things are not exactly as the Bible represents them to be, and as ministers usually depict them. Scoffer, you are a fruitless soul. Profane swearer, you are another. Prayerless one, you are another. Hypocrite and dead professor, you are another. You that are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, you that give yourselves up body and soul and time and strength to the service of mammon--you are all among the fruitless ones that cumber the ground and on whom the sentence may have already gone forth, "Cut them down. Why do they cumber the ground?"

And if the command has been issued,--"Cut it down, why cumber it the ground?"--[then] why has it not been speedily executed? The parable goes on to say that the dresser of the vineyard answered and said, "Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it. And if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." And who is this dresser of the vineyard who intercedes on behalf of the fruitless fig tree? Whom does he signify in the spiritual economy? He must certainly signify the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the blessed Mediator and Intercessor. He is the dresser of the spiritual vineyard to whom the Father has committed all the interests of His cause on earth. He is the Head of His Church and the King of nations. All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Him; and being now exalted to God's right hand, He makes intercession for us.

And now, carefully consider the words of intercession which are ascribed to Him according to the imagery of this parable. There are three things in them. First, he prays for a continuance of the day of grace to the fruitless soul. Second, he proposes to take greater pains with it than he has been taking. And third, he intimates that he will acquiesce in its destruction if it do not bear fruit after another fair trial. Let us look at these things for a little [short time] in order.

First, Jesus, the Mediator and dresser of the spiritual vineyard, prays for a longer continuance of the day of grace to fruitless souls. We know from other places in scripture that He intercedes on behalf of His believing and faithful followers who bear fruit, that they may be delivered from dangers, snares, temptations, and made more and more fruitful in the vineyard of God. But here

He is represented as praying for the fruitless ones that already cumber the ground--that they may be spared a little longer, that further time and opportunity to repent may be afforded them. And who knows but some are here today still spared at the footstool of God, who should not have been here, who should long ago have been cut down and consigned to perdition were it not for the intercession of the Great Mediator the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, Jesus, the Mediator and dresser of the spiritual vineyard, proposes to take greater pains with the fruitless ones. This is represented in the parable by the proposal which the dresser makes to dig about the fruitless fig tree and to dung it. These are two important and necessary operations in all husbandry, as well as in vineyard keeping. The digging loosens the soil round about the roots of trees, and the manuring supplies nourishment. And in the spiritual vineyard, Jesus Christ conducts similar operations to bring souls into a fruitful condition. He digs about them with the spade of providence. Sharp and cutting dispensations turn up and loosen the soil about men's souls, exposing the roots to softening and salubrious heavenly influences. Sometimes He only works above the ground and among the branches, trimming and topping them. But when that fails, He goes down to the roots and tries His appliances there. Sickness, losses, bereavements are digging and piercing operations which Christ tries on fruitless souls when milder and less painful means do not produce the desired effect.

And now I ask, Has not Jesus been thus dealing with some of you? He has not only given you the Bible and opportunities to hear sermons, but He has also shaken your nests by some trying dispensation of His providence. He has touched the roots of your souls. He has stirred up your consciences, excited your fears, shaken your carnal confidence, and convinced you that earth is not your home, and that you need something better than anything which earth can afford to give you comfort in death and a good hope for eternity. Oh, how sad if you resist all influences and refuse to yield to any of His appliances. If you bear fruit, well. It shall be a happy thing indeed. Jesus will be satisfied, the Father shall be pleased, angels shall rejoice, and your souls shall be saved if you bear fruit. But if not, then what can you expect but a cutting down?

Third, the very Mediator, who now by His intercession secures for you a continuance of the day of grace, will acquiesce in your destruction when it comes. The dresser of the vineyard said, "If it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." Fruit or cutting down, these are the alternatives. Fruit in repentance, faith, obedience--or destruction. Nothing short of fruit will satisfy the great husbandman. Nothing else will satisfy the dresser of the vineyard.

O, you that have hitherto been unfruitful! Therefore, take warning. Take warning in time lest by delay your souls perish forever. It may be that you are now enjoying your last probation. The further continuance of the day of grace secured for you by the great Mediator may be fast drawing to a close. You may be fast nearing the end of your season of grace. The moments are slipping away, but you have still time and opportunity to repent and bring forth fruit. I beseech you, improve the moments as they pass. Neglect this business no longer. Awake out of your sleep. Consider your state--you are lost sinners. O, fly to Jesus! He can save. He can save "them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him." Accept Him in faith. Quench not His spirit. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Almighty God, Thy word is cast
Like seed into the ground,
Now let the dew of heaven descend
And righteous fruits abound.

Let not the foe of Christ and man
This holy seed remove,
But give it root in every heart
To bring forth fruits of love.

This is Sermon XVII of Part I of Dugald Currie, *Sermons by the Late Rev. Neil McKinnon* (Toronto: James Bain & Son, 1889). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.