



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 3

March 23, 2025

The Barren Tree

Luke 13:1–9

¹There were some present at that very time who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

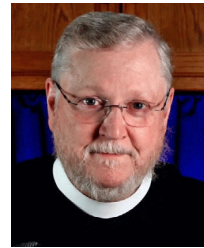
⁶And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ ⁸And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Has it ever seemed to you that certain attributes of God are contradictory? I mean, we know that God is *love*, but at the same time we know that He *hates* – He hates evil of any kind. We also learn in the Bible about His *mercy*, yet there's no question about His absolute *justice*.

Today's Gospel presents us with another one of these seeming contradictions: God's *patience* versus His *impatience*. On the one hand, God is impatient with those who reject His love. On the other hand, His love compels Him to be patient in exercising His just and righteous wrath. Jesus used the parable of the fig tree to help us understand how these two attributes of God work together.

The parable begins with the owner of a vineyard inspecting his fig trees. He finds one without fruit, and it had been without fruit for three years in a row. So he orders that the tree be cut down. The keeper of the vineyard, however, asks that the tree be given another year, during which time he offers to cultivate and fertilize it. Apparently an agreement is reached between the keeper and the owner that if a year of special care fails to produce fruit, the tree will be removed.

So, was this a story to illustrate the wisdom of proper orchard horticulture? Was it an admonition to the agricultural community, with special emphasis on the needs of fig trees? Or was it an appeal to the community at large regarding the prodigious use of negotiation?



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Some throughout history have understood this parable along those lines, but, of course, the parable bears much deeper significance. Jesus had just been warning the people with the repeated phrase: "Unless you repent." The crowd hearing Him that day could hardly have mistaken the point of the parable. Among other things, He was speaking about them and their nation.

You see, like the fig tree, Israel, had been privileged. Though they had suffered throughout their history, they had nevertheless enjoyed spiritual blessings that no other nation had ever experienced, not the least of which was that of having a special covenant with God. Israel had what no other nation will ever have – the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Hosea, Habakkuk, and others, who were God's spokesmen in their midst. They had the unique calling of making God's name known in all the earth. What great blessings! What incredible privileges! But with these privileges came responsibilities. It is the purpose of a fig tree to bear figs; leaves and shade don't make it. Israel, like the tree in the parable, had ceased to bear fruit.

God had been intimately involved with Israel; no other nation could claim this. He dealt with the Hebrew people directly. And yet they failed Him. In spite of His close relationship with them, they had repeatedly left Him for the worship of idols. In spite of the fact that His prophets had proclaimed God's message of humility and repentance, the Jews developed a religion of law. Why, He even went so far as to send His own Son, the Messiah, to live among them and be their Savior, but they rejected Him.

But, despite their lack of obedience, despite their rejection of Him, God was patient with them. He was willing to postpone His judgment a little while longer. Through His prophets He continued to plead with them. Through Jeremiah He cried: "Return, faithless Israel . . . I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful" (Jer. 3:12). Through David He admonished them: "[God] will not always chide, nor will He keep His anger forever" (Ps. 103:9). Finally, the Son of God Himself looked out over that rebellious nation and said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34).

God's patience was long, longer than anyone could imagine, but it wouldn't last forever. The history of Israel is a tragic commentary on the finite character of God's patience. And yet His patience is infinite. Though His righteous wrath had been directed toward Israel as a nation, His way to grace even to this day is still open to the individual. The owner of the vineyard was willing to "let the tree alone for another year." And the promise of the Gospel continues to be a source of comfort to repentant sinners today.

Here is where this parable becomes applicable to us. The Owner of the vineyard comes to us today and asks: "Where is My fruit? Where are the good works that flow from a living and vibrant faith?"



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And yes, He does have the right to expect fruit from all Christians. Just like the fig tree in the parable, we have been spiritually cultivated and fed. We, too, have enjoyed prophetic preaching which has proclaimed to us all the promises of God – the Law with all its sting and the Gospel with all its comfort.

But we must wonder: When the Owner comes to us asking the disquieting question: "Where is My fruit?" How do we answer Him? How do *you* answer Him?

The central focus of Lutheran theology is the doctrine of Justification by grace through faith, without the deeds of the Law. But equally Lutheran and equally Scriptural is the doctrine that a living faith bears fruit, that a genuine faith without works doesn't exist. And this is the point of the parable, that God is entirely impatient with a Christianity that manifests itself only in some verbal profession of faith without showing any corresponding works. What we need to ask ourselves today is: Does a careful inventory of my life reveal a lack of the fruits of faith? Has the tree of my life ceased to bear fruit?

Throughout its history Israel often turned to idolatry. Now, maybe we don't bow down to images of wood or stone, but silver and gold . . . security, position, power, honor, pleasure, prestige? In our day-to-day living, do we value faith, love, humility, patience, self-denial, thereby exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit? Or do we look more like the idolatrous world around us?

As you examine your heart today, maybe an honest appraisal reveals some of the offenses addressed in our text. Maybe you're not producing fruit like you should. Maybe your priorities have slipped into a worldly misconception of what the Lord calls you to be and do. Welcome to the club! You will never find someone who is completely focused and bearing all the fruit God has intended for him, but, by God's grace, you are also not likely to find a believing Christian completely devoid of fruit. The fact that you're here today is an indication that some fruit exists in your life. If the Great Vine-dresser were to inspect our lives, would the results be those of our text: "He went to look for fruit, but did not find *any*"? I don't think so. God's patience with us has produced its own fruit. In spite of our sins – our idolatry, our spiritless worship, our lovelessness toward God and others – He has, for the sake of His Son, looked on us with forgiving grace. His Spirit has touched our hearts and moved us to show forth His praises. That same Spirit enables us to confess with Luther: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." That's why you're here today, beloved; God has drawn you here through His Spirit, which He implanted in your heart by His Means of Grace, His Word and Sacraments.

Are there times when we backslide? Of course, there are. Are we perfect in the



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performance of our calling? Not even close! But our patient God – like the forgiving father of the prodigal son – has always been ready and willing to receive us back. The same patient God who said to backsliding Israel: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Is. 1:18), that same patient God has in equally beautiful language told you and me that we have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Today, you and I look at that barren fig tree with mixed emotions. We realize the dreadful fact that God's patience does have an end, and that we cannot remain rebellious and expect to receive His mercy. But at the same time we rejoice in knowing that if we repent of our sins, He will forgive them and be patient with us until the end of time. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.