

If It Bears Fruit

March 20, 2022

Luke 13: 1-9

¹ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

1st Corinthians 10: 1-13

¹ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. ⁶ Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.” ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. ¹⁰ And do not complain as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹ These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ¹² So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ¹³ No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.



We began worship today by reading Psalm 63. For those reading and meditating on the lectionary readings, these were familiar words. In the opening verse, the psalmist longs for God, reflecting that longing that we heard in Jesus’ lament last Sunday. In this verse we read, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Can you hear the longing to connect to God, the thirst for God? At the end of worship, we will sing these words. Moving to verse 3 we hear of why the psalmist longs and thirsts for God and of his response: “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.” This continues in verses 7 and 8, where we read: “For you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.”

The best possible way to live this life is to live in relationship with God and within God's steadfast love. Because of that, the psalmist praises God, the God who has been his help, the God who upholds him. What a beautiful reminder of who and what our God is. What a beautiful reminder of why we choose to live in relationship with God. As we prepare to look at the results of living this type of life, let us pray...

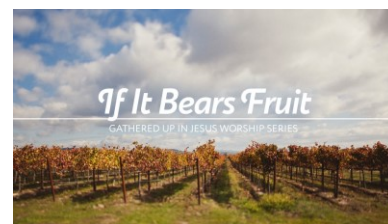
As we begin, first turn with me to Isaiah 55. This is the final chapter in the section of Isaiah that details how God will one day comfort the people living in exile. As such, it is a summary of God's love and care for the people. For some, perhaps some here today, perhaps some joining us online, perhaps someone watching this at a later time, the beautiful reminders of why we live in relationship with God are almost too much to consider. Maybe these reminders are too great to comprehend. So, for some, these words of Isaiah will be heard much as the exiles living in Babylon received them. Is it even possible? The chapter begins with an invitation: *"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."* For those living outside of relationship with God, whether in exile in Babylon during Isaiah's time or whether living in exile in this modern-day Babylon, the invitation to come free of charge, to come and eat, to come and have one's thirst satisfied – what an example of God's unconditional love. Many people today are searching for meaning and purpose in this world. To hear that God offers sustenance and satisfaction for this life is a wonderful offer to those searching. And not just offered but offered freely. But it is not just free. It is an offer of abundance and generosity. God does not offer water to drink. No, God offers wine and milk – extravagant and valuable offerings.

"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

- Isaiah 55:1

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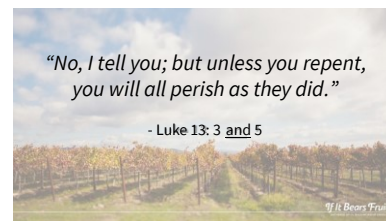
God does not offer relationship that will just get us by. God offers relationship that will bless us. The details of the relationship are explained in verses 7 through 9. In this explanation, we can see how faithful living bears fruit. Here is the first step to establishing that relationship: *“Let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon.”* Just return or turn to God. Why? So that God can be merciful, so that God can offer forgiveness, so that God can offer blessing.



Reading on we see God’s rationale for why God would make such an extravagant and generous invitation: *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* The depth and breadth of God’s love are not meant to be understood by humanity. God’s ways are not our ways. God’s ways are higher and grander than our ways. God is really saying, ‘Know that I love you’ and trust that it is more than enough. Trust that God will provide milk and wine – gifts of abundance. Sometimes, in this world, that is hard to do. Turn with me to Luke 13 as we look at Jesus’ response to those times when life is hard, when life seems unfair.

In our passage from Luke, we step into two hypothetical questions. We read that *“some who were present”* asked Jesus about two situations where innocent people experienced some very bad things. Both situations are couched in terms of that times understanding of good and evil: good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. If you are faithful, God blesses you. If you are a sinner, God curses you.

Those present offer these scenarios and ask Jesus if these folks died because they were worse sinners than others – especially compared to those asking the question. In both cases, Jesus answers exactly the same way: “No, I tell you;



but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” Let’s unpack this answer. First, no, these innocent people were not any worse sinners than anyone else. God did not wait for this group to be in the temple or that group to be standing under that tower. They just happened to be there when a bad or unfortunate thing happened. Second, Jesus reminds them that we are all sinners – none better or worse than our fellow sinners. Speaking to those there and to us sinners here today, Jesus says, “*unless you repent...you all will perish.*” Those present need to repent of their sins, just like we all do. Those present need to stop worrying about other people’s lives and just take care of their own life, just like we all do. Or do we?

It is a fine line between judging or looking down on others and holding one another accountable. What separates judging from holding accountable? What separates looking down from helping up? In a seminar I took last week on mental health first aid the presenter shared a quote from Colin Powell. He once said, “Never look down on anybody unless you’re dragging them back up.” This gets to the heart of the matter. It gets to the difference between helping and hurting. When we hold another accountable, we are approaching the situation from a place of Christian love. When we walk alongside another, we are sharing life with them, building relationship with them. When we are building another up, planting fruit, we are living faithfully.



Before wrapping up our Luke passage, let's shift to 1st Corinthians 10, beginning in verse 1. Here Paul speaks of the testing that we all face in this life. For the church in Corinth in particular, this testing was largely internal. Of all the churches that Paul planted and nurtured, this was the most conflict-filled church. Being in a city with an intercultural mix of many different ethnicities and backgrounds, there was no shortage of ideas and opinions, no shortage of ways to dally in the pleasures of this world. The church in Corinth was about to fracture at the seams. Paul was willing to do all he could to save this church. This city of sin could not afford to lose an important witness for Christ. Paul begins by talking of the struggles of faith that the Jewish people have faced. He speaks first of the unity provided by Moses and of the common baptism, the common spiritual food, the common spiritual drink that they all shared. Paul is indirectly reminding those in the Corinthian church of their common baptism in Christ, of the common elements on the communion table, of the unity found through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 5 Paul shifts to the struggles the early Israelites had – idolatry, sexual immorality, testing and complaining – again, all sins those in the Corinthian church were also struggling with. Bringing home his point in verse 11, Paul writes, *“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us.”* Paul is encouraging them to learn from the mistakes and failures of the past. Warning them, Paul cautions, *“Watch out that you do not fall.”* Be careful, church of Corinth. Generation after generation has struggled with these same things. Be aware and be careful, Corinthian church, lest you fall too. Before they throw up their hands in despair because of all these examples, Paul closes with an even greater reminder.

In verse 13 Paul writes, *“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to*

“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”
- 1st Corinthians 10:13
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endure it.” Yes, church, temptation and sin are common to us all. But God is faithful. God will be with you and will guard you. God will provide a way out so that you can stand firm for your faith. God will give you what you need to overcome. That was the message of the passage from Isaiah 55, right? Turn to God. Why is that important in our battle with sin? So that God can help us overcome. So that God can be merciful, so that God can offer forgiveness when we stumble and fall.

As we close this morning, let us go back once again to Luke 13, where we learn from Jesus what it means to bear fruit. In the first half of the passage, we were reminded of how quick



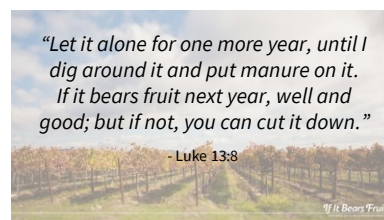
we can be to judge, to condemn, to think less of others. Jesus reminded his audience that sin doesn't cause bad things to happen, but that bad happens when we fail to repent. One might ask, then, if not sinning or if repenting won't save us from suffering or from dying, then why do we need to repent? I believe Jesus would respond by telling them that salvation is not about dying – it is about living. Living is the point of this parable about the fig tree.

Picking the passage up in verse 6 we encounter a vineyard owner that wants to cut down his fig tree. The man says to the gardener, *“See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the*

“See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”
- Luke 13:6
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soil?” Three years! Three long years without any fruit. Did you hear that – he’s come looking for fruit for three years and there still isn’t any fruit. Cut it down. Be rid of this non-productive tree! Imagine if that was how God treated the Israelites as they wandered the desert under Moses’ guidance. They wouldn’t have lasted three months, never mind forty years. Imagine if that was how God treated us after we proclaimed Jesus as the Lord of our lives. I thought, would I even last three months?

Hear the words of God spoken through the mouth of the gardener: *“Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and*



good; but if not, you can cut it down.” Be patient. This is the Lord’s word about us. Let me pour into them for just a little longer. Let me build them up, offering spiritual food and drink, nurturing and love them for just a little longer. This too is the heart of Paul for the Corinthian church. Just let me pour into you a bit more, just stick it out with you for bit longer. Let me offer a few more words of encouragement, seeing if that struggle within can change over and can lead to producing fruit in that worldly, sinful city of Corinth. Just a little more effort. Just a little more grace. Just a little more time.

This is also a parable about us, about you and me. The truths of Paul’s words apply to us as well. God is faithful. God will be with us. God will provide a way. If we are faithful. If we are working on our soil. If we are nurturing our faith. My friends, when we fail to nourish our souls, when we fail to dig up and nourish our soil, then we are not walking in relationship with God. Do you want to be like the tree, simply taking up space? Do you want to be like the tree, just wasting some good dirt?



Or do you want to be a tree that produces fruit? Do you want your life to amount to something more than gain in this world? Again, living is the point of this parable. Salvation is about living. Salvation begins with confession and

repentance. All must repent or perish. We must all tend to our souls, being made right again and again with God. We must all trust in God's faithfulness, clinging to God's power alone to stand strong in our faith. It is through Christ that we receive God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. When God pours our mercy and grace and forgiveness upon us, what is our response? When God is patient with us, yielding more time instead of giving up on us, what is our response? Is it to be thankful for a moment, only to return to living in the ways of the world, taking instead of giving, consuming instead of building up? Or is our response to pour our energy into loving God and loving neighbor, seeking to produce fruit for the kingdom of God? The choice is ours – to produce fruit or not. When God considers our lives and asks, "If it bears fruit..." what will be the response? May we glorify God as we seek to bear fruit for God's kingdom.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Reflect on the condition of your 'soil'. Have you been tending to your soul, nurturing it so that you can produce fruit for the kingdom of God?
- 2) *Pray*. In terms of how you see your salvation, is it more of a future event or more of a daily life practice? Pray that God would make it a more active part of your life.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 14:15-24. What does this teaching tell us about how God sees our excuses for not bearing fruit for the kingdom of God?