

"Grace Period"

Luke 13:6-9

Baxter Exum (#976)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Introduction:

Several days ago, our family finished grocery shopping at Aldi over on the far west side of Madison, and on the way home we stopped at Brennan's only to pick up a loaf of wheat bread. By the way, Brennan's has the best wheat bread in all of Madison. However, as we were pulling up to the store, we saw a sign for "Chin Drippin' Peaches." Wow! That really got our attention, that sounded good on a warm summer afternoon, and so we left that store with something that we did not expect, but those peaches certainly lived up to the way they were advertised—they were truly "Chin Drippin'." They were good. They were worth the mess. They were worth the investment.

I am sure that all of us here this morning have our favorite fruit. Another one of our favorites is ice-cold watermelon. For several years now, we have been the ones to bring the watermelon to the Memorial Day BBQ. I love packing it in ice. I love sharpening the watermelon knife on the night before the BBQ. I love opening that cooler and bringing out that large seedless watermelon. And it seems that the hotter the day the better it tastes!

Sometimes we enjoy growing our own fruit. I have told you before that when we lived in Janesville, we built a house and planted some fruit trees. I pruned and I watered, and after maybe 3 or 4 years we finally had one pear! I sprayed that tree all summer long. That was one beautiful pear, and I could hardly wait for that pear to be ready to eat. But one afternoon I went out there, the pear was on the ground, and there was a squirrel with his teeth in the pear! At that point I had a very important decision to make. If I had been armed, it would have been messy, but as it was I ran for the pear, the squirrel ran for his life, and when I got there I decided to go ahead and eat the other half that the squirrel had left for me! Who knows what kind of diseases I could have contracted, but I had worked too hard to let that pear go to waste!

All of us probably have our own stories of favorite fruits, but as we turn our thoughts toward the word of God, we start to realize that God also loves fruit. In fact, in **Genesis 3**, we find that God had specifically provided fruit trees to feed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. We can look at the world around us, and we know that God continues to love us and provide for us because of the great diversity of fruit that we continue to see around us. And so we are reminded of God's great love for us.

In the New Testament, we continue find that God uses the picture of fruit to teach us some amazing lessons. In **Hebrews 13:15**, for example, we read about the songs that we sing, and the Bible says, **"Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."** And so our praise is pictured as fruit in the eyes of God. Our singing is something that God enjoys—perhaps just as we would enjoy a pear, or a watermelon, or a chin-drippin' peach. God loves to hear us sing.

There are other examples of fruit in the Bible, but this morning I would like for us to focus on one of the shortest parables that Jesus ever told, as it is found in **Luke 13**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1627**. I would encourage all of us to turn together to **Luke 13**. **»PPT»**

In the opening verses of **Luke 13**, we find that Jesus is responding to several recent events. Pilate had just killed a group of Galileans, and in a separate incident, eighteen were killed when a tower collapsed. We know something about towers collapsing in this country, do we not? And so the people basically wanted to know, "Why did these things happen? Did these people deserve what they got?" And Jesus gave the same answer to both questions, **"I tell you no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."** And so the Lord used two recent stories from the news to emphasize the importance of repentance. And without any further explanation, we come to our parable, starting in **verse 6**. If you will, please look with me at **Luke 13:6-9**, and we will keep our thoughts focused this morning on these four verses—**Luke 13:6-9**...

⁶ And He began telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. ⁷ And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' ⁸ And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; ⁹ and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

As we look back at these four verses, I would like for us to think very carefully about what Jesus said here, and I would like for us to try to apply what Jesus said into our lives over the coming week. In other words, let us think about these four verses as we ask ourselves the question, "So what?" What does this mean for us today?

I. As we look back at this little paragraph of Scripture, and as we ask this question, one of the first things we notice is that GOD EXPECTS US TO BEAR FRUIT. **»PPT»**

As we look back at the parable, we find in **verse 6** that the owner of the vineyard **"came looking for fruit."** In **verse 7**, we find that he had **"come looking for fruit"** for three years. I think we start to see that expecting fruit from a fruit tree is a reasonable request. This was not something out of the ordinary, and yet in **verses**

6-7 we discover that in three years the owner has not been able to find any fruit on this tree—for three years—for a total of 36 months, 156 weeks, 1095 days, 26,280 hours, or 473,040 minutes. And so the tree should have had fruit by then, but it did not. The tree was a disappointment.

Probably most of us can appreciate how frustrating it is to make an investment in something, to make a purchase, and then to bring the item home only to discover that the item does not do what you expected it to do. Several months ago, we purchased one of those shiatsu massage chair cushions. We had seen them around at various stores, and they looked so good—I mean, you can get a shiatsu massage right there in your own living room. But when we got it home and tried it for a few days, we were incredibly disappointed. The massage was almost painful. The cushion was extremely uncomfortable in the chair. And the whole thing was large and bulky, and it was almost impossible to store. And we finally understood why we see so many of those things offered up for sale on Craigslist! It was a huge let-down.

And so maybe in a similar way, the owner of the vineyard was obviously looking forward to a huge harvest of figs. Figs were a big deal. Figs were promised by God as being in the Promised Land. It was something that made them look forward to going there—a land of figs, and a land flowing with milk and honey (**Deuteronomy 8:8**). And so this man planted a fig tree expecting to someday have some figs! This was not an unreasonable expectation.

So that we can appreciate what we have been talking about here this morning, I have placed a tray of figs on top of the television in the back of the auditorium. I am passing one around in a Zip-Loc bag, so you can at least look at it now. But after worship I hope everyone will have a chance to at least taste what we are talking about. And the picture on the wall behind me, by the way, is of a fig tree. But back to our lesson...

We notice that the man planted the fig tree in a vineyard. Apparently this is a little bit unusual. Normally vineyards were reserved for grapes. And so this tree had some unusual advantages. It was not just out somewhere by the side of the road, but it was basically in someone's garden. It was in the vineyard. It would have been protected by a fence or a wall. It would have had good soil. It would have been taken care of. It would have been pruned. It had probably been watered. It had been planted for a reason. It was not a tree that grew up when someone spit out a fig seed or something, but it had been planted there in the vineyard—it was put there for a purpose—not for shade, not for timber, not for firewood, not for beauty in the landscape, but for the purpose of bearing fruit.

Well, we know that a parable is an earthly story with a spiritual application. In other words, this story was not put in the Bible so that it could someday be put in a textbook on horticulture—fertilizing your fig trees is not the main point of this story! Unfortunately, though, Jesus never explains this parable as He usually does on other occasions. However, when we start looking at some of the other passages on bearing fruit, the point of the story is rather obvious.

Perhaps you can keep a finger here in **John 13** and turn back with me for just a moment to **Luke 3** (found on page 1600 in the pew Bibles). As John the Immerser began preaching, we come to **Luke 3:7-17**, where the Bible says...

⁷ So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds were questioning him, saying, 'Then what shall we do?' ¹¹ And he would answer and say to them, 'The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.' ¹² And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' ¹³ And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.' ¹⁴ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, 'And what about us, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.'"

John was very clear that fruit is something that we do. Fruit is something tangible. Fruit is what happens when we repent. We change our minds about something, and fruit is what happens as a result. We are to share, we are to be honest, we are to be content. According to **verse 8**, we are to, ***"...bear fruits in keeping with repentance."***

Probably the most famous passage concerning the fruit that God expects us to bear as Christians is found in **Galatians 5**—it is the theme for our camp this week. In **Galatians 5:22-23**, the Apostle Paul says that, ***"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*** What I notice with all of this is that these are things that all of us can do in the lives that we are living right now. And like the tree in the vineyard, bearing fruit is something that God expects us to do. Fruit is expected!

As Christians, we have been planted in the vineyard. We have been given care. We have been given every spiritual blessing. We have been fed and watered by the word of God. And in response, God wants us to bear fruit. But unfortunately, as we look back at the parable in **Luke 13**, we learn that the owner of the vineyard came looking for fruit and found nothing. The tree was using up valuable time, and resources, and real estate—it was taking space away from the grapes in the vineyard, but it was bearing no fruit. And so we find that the owner was disappointed, and he commands that the tree be cut down immediately. Isn't it amazing that we have the power to either disappoint or please the Creator of the Universe?

II. With that, we come to a rather significant shift in the story, however, as we find that the gardener recommends giving the tree a SECOND CHANCE. Perhaps we could refer to it as a GRACE PERIOD. »PPT»

Most of us are probably familiar with a grace period. Perhaps a bill is due on the first of the month. A lot of companies, though, will not get us in trouble for several more weeks, so maybe there is a grace period of two or three more weeks. There will be two or three weeks of grace before they come down with a penalty.

In some similar way, that is what we see here in the parable. The tree had met the deadline. The owner expected fruit, but there was no fruit. The tree did not deserve to live. The order was given to have the tree cut down. But right there at the last second, the gardener steps in and argues for the tree to be given a second chance. The gardener was arguing for a grace period.

And yet again, this story is not really about a tree! The parable is about God's people not bearing fruit as they should. Thankfully, though, God is incredibly patient. In the Old Testament, we see God's patience with the Israelites in the wilderness. We see God's patience in the time of the judges. We see God's patience during the time of the kings. Just a few weeks ago, we studied the book of Jeremiah. And there again, we saw the patience of God. The people deserved punishment, but God put it off as long as He possibly could. In the New Testament, we can look to 2 Peter 3:9, and the Bible says that, ***"The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."*** God is not eager to punish.

And so in the parable, we find in verse 8 that the gardener volunteers to go above and beyond—He begs for the privilege of putting in some extra work to try to get the tree to bear fruit. In verse 8, he offers to, ***"...dig around it and put in fertilizer."*** The word ***"fertilizer"*** translates the Greek word for ***"dung."*** The gardener was offering to get his hands dirty—he was offering to spread manure. He was willing to make a personal investment. And doesn't that sound familiar? In the words of my favorite verse in the entire Bible—2 Corinthians 8:9, ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."***

And so we find that Jesus is the one who stepped in and gave us a second chance. In effect, Jesus is our attorney. Jesus is arguing our case, and He is saying to the Owner, ***"Do not look at this tree's past. Do not look at those unfruitful years. Do not look at everything that has gone wrong, but please, give this tree one more year!"***

Through Jesus, then, we have gone past the deadline, but we are now living in the grace period. As Christians, we have been given a second chance. Jesus came to earth and invested His time in a tree that was not bearing fruit. Jesus came to earth and spent His time with tax collectors and thieves and prostitutes and sinners.

As we look at the parable of the fig tree, therefore, we need to ask ourselves: Are we living in our grace period? For most of us, the answer is: Yes! We have blown it in the past, but we have been given a second chance! In the parable, the grace period is for another year. Perhaps God will give all of us here this morning another year. Then again, maybe God gave you another year...starting last year! We do not know. Perhaps someone has been praying for you, and perhaps your grace period has been extended. Perhaps God sees your potential. Again, we do not know. But the point is, we are not to abuse the grace period. If we have been given a second chance, our job is to start bearing fruit. Our goal is to turn away from sin and to start living the Christian life.

III. But as we come to the end of this parable, there is one other very important application, and that is: A LACK OF FRUIT WILL NOT BE TOLERATED FOREVER. Or, as we might also put it: A TIME OF JUDGMENT IS COMING. »PPT»

In **verse 9**, as the gardener is making the deal with the owner of the vineyard, the gardener says, **"...and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down."** And again, this is coming from the gardener! This is coming from the one who was eager to give the tree another chance, from the one who was willing to dig in the manure. There is a time coming when even the one who advocates for the tree gets to the point where judgment is the only remaining option.

God is a God of mercy, but He is also a God of justice. There is a time coming when every person will need to give an account for the deeds that were done during this life. As Paul said in **2 Corinthians 5:10**, **"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."**

And as Jesus said in **John 15**, **"¹ I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.... ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (1-2, 6-8).** And so we find that a lack of fruit will not be tolerated forever, but that a time of judgment is coming.

Conclusion & Invitation:

As we come to the end of this rather brief parable, I'd like for us to notice that the parable is not finished! There is no answer here! How disturbing! It is like a little book that is missing the last page. The gardener argues for another year, but we are never told what happens at the end of that year. Did the tree start bearing fruit?

Was there a payoff for the extra investment? Or was the tree cut down and burned at the end of the year? We do not know!

The answer to this parable is that we provide the answer! The answer to this parable depends on whether we personally bear fruit for God.

If we are not doing so already, we need to live the kind of life that our co-workers notice as being different. We need to live the kind of life that bears fruit for God.

- This morning, we have learned that God has every right to expect fruit in our lives.
- We have learned that in spite of our failures in the past, we have been given a second chance—we are living in the grace period.
- And yet we have also learned that God will not tolerate a fruitless life forever but that a time is coming when we will have to answer to God for how we lived this life.

The good news is that the grace period is still open. We respond to the sacrifice of Jesus by turning away from sin, by confessing His name, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will talk to us after this morning's service. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org