

Parable of the Barren Fig Tree
Pastor John E. Dubler
Luke 13:6-9

Any reasonable person, upon reading this parable, will conclude that God's patience with men and nations is not without limit. There comes a time when judgment and consequences for rebellion and disobedience are meted out.

This parable, found only in the Gospel of Luke, contrasts with two other occasions where Jesus spoke about fig trees.¹ There is another parable in which the fig tree is prominent. The Parable from the Fig Tree, found in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, cautions us to be ready for the Lord's return.

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.
Matthew 24:32-34



In another instance, recorded in Matthew 21 (and in Mark 11), Jesus curses a fig tree when, upon becoming hungry and looking for fruit on it, found none. The fig tree was in leaf, indicating that it should be bearing fruit. As well, it was at the time of the Passover, when figs should be plentiful. Thus there was an outward show and promise concerning the fig tree, but no corresponding fruit within. Therefore the fig tree in this passage serves as a metaphor for Israel and for anyone who makes a show of righteousness but is barren in regard to fruit. This metaphor concerning barrenness is expanded into a parable by our Lord in Luke's record of the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree. [Illustration: a healthy fig tree (background) and its fruit.]

Luke 13:6-9

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

¹ There is a fourth mention of a fig tree by the Lord in reference to His first meeting with Nathanael, when He said, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." John 1:48.

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.”²

A message about the impending judgment and destruction of Israel

The signs of the times. The context of the parable is a discussion in Luke, Chapter 12 concerning people who are good at discerning the signs of the weather but not the signs of the times.

And He was also saying to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘A shower is coming,’ and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, ‘It will be a hot day,’ and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?”

Luke 12:54-56



There were great and momentous things happening all around them in Israel. Jesus, the very Messiah, was speaking to them, performing miracles among them, walking with them, and yet they were ignorant. Their judgment loomed as a cloud rising in the west. Yet for all the miracles and evidence of His kingship, the people (though not all) refused to acknowledge Him as Lord. Thinking themselves safe from judgment and destruction because of their status as children of Abraham and their membership as sons in the chosen race, they alternately tolerated, berated and eventually condemned the Lord.

Thus, like overconfident pilots of steamships, who see icebergs but refuse to acknowledge that danger lies ahead, they sailed on to their own destruction.

The Galileans who suffered under Pilate. The parable is told to His audience immediately after He is told of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He tells the crowd that those who lost their lives in this revolt (if that is what it was) were no worse sinners than the rest of the people who did not suffer this fate, rather that all will perish unless they repent. For as the master of homiletics, George Buttrick, noted: “All affliction is not due to wrongdoing, but all wrongdoing brings affliction.”³

Jesus then goes on to tell a parable about the necessity of repentance or else these people will lose not only their nation, but their lives.

² All scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated Version unless otherwise noted.

³ Buttrick, George. An English-born Congregational preacher and teacher known for uplifting Jesus in his messages. Buttrick served Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, and in his teaching ministry Union Theological Seminary and Harvard.

Elements of the Parable:

Vineyard and Fig Tree. Two striking elements are the vineyard and the fig tree. Both are representative of the nation of Israel. Combining them in one parable gives double emphasis to the point He is making.

- a. The Vineyard. Isaiah 5:1-7 refers to Israel as the vine

Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
2 He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.

3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.

4 " What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?

5 "So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.

6 "I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it."

7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel

And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

- b. The Fig Tree. Jesus is alluding here to Micah 7:1

Woe is me! For I am
Like the fruit pickers, like the grape gatherers.
There is not a cluster of grapes to eat,
Or a first-ripe fig which I crave.



The owner of the vineyard and the vineyard keeper. The owner is nearly and almost uncontroversially accepted as referring to God the Father, while the vineyard keeper is the Lord Jesus Christ. The owner expects that the fig tree

(Israel) will produce fruit. However, no fruit is forthcoming for three years. Presumably the tree had been there much longer, but the time for ripe fruit had come without any results.

Three years and an additional year. We find that the fig tree has been given grace upon grace. Beyond the three years which the owner has given the fig tree for fruit production, the vineyard keeper successfully pleads for another year. Much has been made of what these years might mean. Some see it as the three years of teaching of our Lord upon the earth followed by a year for the establishment of the first century church.

I find it unlikely that so fine a detail is here intended. The parable is about the impending judgment and destruction of a nation (Israel). Three years would hardly be the time that God has been seeking fruit from His tree. Indeed, He had warned Israel many times that if they did not repent, destruction was imminent. As far back as Exodus 32 concerning the incident of the golden calf we find the Lord's anger nearly consuming the nation.

The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."
Exodus 32:9-10.

Numerous prophets were sent to Israel to warn her over centuries, not just three years, that judgment is coming if they do not repent.

Further, in my opinion the additional year cannot represent the time of establishment for the early church, especially considering that the nation was not destroyed for approximately 40 more years after Jesus' resurrection.



Poussin's Adoration of the Golden Calf

Thus, I am content to see the three years and the additional year as representing no specific time, rather that God works with His planting, Israel, for some time before the judgment falls. The vineyard keeper suggests the additional year so he can dig around the tree and put in fertilizer. The word in the Greek, βάλω κοπρία (balo kopria) literally "dung," is not so complimentary as our English translation in the NASB has it: "fertilizer."

Looking for fruit. The fruit the owner is looking for is repentance. None is to be found. Destruction is the result.

A simple message. Jesus' message is startlingly simple: the nation of Israel has been given extra time to repent. But the nation is still carelessly turned away from recognizing Jesus (no fruit) and is headed straight for destruction if they do not change their ways. Even the vineyard keeper agrees with her condemnation if the situation does not change for the better.

" . . . and if it bears fruit next year fine, but if not cut it down."

Any reasonable person, upon reading this parable, will conclude that God's patience with men and nations is not without limit. There comes a time when judgment and consequences for rebellion and disobedience are meted out.

A message about the impending judgment and destruction of all who will not repent

The United States of America in the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree. Applications of the message in this parable to men and nations are entirely appropriate. Because the United States of America has been blessed with abundance of every kind, and yet persists in obstinately dissociating herself from the majesty of God Most High, the nation will be judged. The blood of the innocents cries to the Lord of Heaven from the ground. Abortion, the rise of euthanasia and sodomy call for judgment. Who knows how long before judgment will fall? Right now the vineyard keeper is digging around the roots of the tree.

