

“Wasting the Soil”

1 Corinthians 10:12-13; Luke 13:1-9

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We all have friends... well, most of us (Charlie/George). Just kidding! And of those friends, we can always count on that one or two (or MORE?) who can put the ‘brutal’ in ‘brutally honest.’ Ones that aren’t afraid to speak their minds, whether it’s ‘PC’ (no, NOT ‘Pres. Church’... but ‘politically correct’) or NOT. One of those friends of mine that fits in this category (who shall remain ‘nameless’) will on occasion refer to individuals who have in large part wasted their all-too-human potential. People whom he would consider to be “a waste of human flesh.” Disappointments whom my friend would term, in their consumption of valuable resources that could be put to much better use, “oxygen thieves.”

Most of us have come across such ‘thieves’ before. People who have miserably squandered whatever talents, abilities, and resources given to them by their Maker. Those individuals who, no matter how many opportunities that they are given, just can’t seem to give a ‘return on the investment’ that God (and God’s *children*) have made in them. That despite what they’ve been given, they don’t give much in return.

Enter, ‘stage left,’ the ‘**fig tree**’ from today’s story. A tree designed by God to be a sweet, succulent, healthy fruit. And this particular one has borne NO fruit for some THREE years. And the owner of the vineyard in which this tree stands has had it. He tells the gardener, the one who is entrusted with the care of this tree, to get rid of the tree. It’s useless. It’s not contributing anything of value and worth to the vineyard. In fact, it’s actually taking away from the other more fruitful parts of the larger group. It’s a drain on our resources... an ‘oxygen thief.’ “**Cut it down,**” he says. “**Why should it be wasting the soil?**” And who could blame him?

And what does the owner’s worker say? “*Sure boss. Whatever you say.*” Nope. He asks for a ‘stay of execution,’ if you will. Rather than cut the fruit-less tree down, the Gardener asks the landowner to spare the tree for one more year. Give him a chance to give it some special care, to dig a ‘hedge of protection’ around it, which will allow for more water to keep it refreshed; to put more ‘manure’ on it to give it more nutrition. (See, to be full of ‘b.s.’ is NOT

such a bad thing! ☺) And THEN, if this poor little 'Charlie Brown tree' doesn't bear any fruit, then OK, then 'off with its limbs', and 'trunk,' etc.

Now I know that parables are not always 'crystal' clear in their meaning, but I think that there is a lot of 'transparency' in this one. Let's see what YOU think. Who might the **owner** of the **vineyard** be? **God?** I think a pretty good bet. The **Gardener?** I'm going to go with **Jesus**. The **fig tree?** Well, clearly one who does not respond to the care of the gardener. One who has a lot of resources at its disposal but has yet to make good use OF those resources. A **non-believer** in Jesus Christ? Sure. But just what constitutes BEING a 'non-believer?' Because one doesn't LOOK like a 'Christian?' Hmmm. That fig tree sure LOOKED like a fig tree. But did it ACT like one? I seem to recall a well-known 'horticultural tip' from that famous 'Gardener': ***"By their fruits you will know them."*** (Matthew 7:20)

Because of the 'universal' importance of 'fruit bearing,' I believe that this 'fig tree' relates BOTH to **others**, and to **US**. That there are valuable lessons to be learned both in how we deal with those who are wasting their resources... as well as our own... AND to be honest enough with ourselves to assess just how we too might be **"Wasting the Soil"** in which God has planted us...

First, let us consider how we care for OTHER 'plants.' For one, how long does it take for us to judge whether or not another 'growing organism' is **useful** or not? Have we given adequate time to observe another's value, worth, productivity. In the fig tree's case, there were three years, three growing seasons allowed to observe before making a judgment. If you can give a fruit tree that long, how much longer should a human 'bean' get?

And if an adequate time to observe HAS been given, then what? In our parable, the Gardener asked for more time. One more year. One more growing season. He asked for a 'second chance.' And if there is one Gospel truth that we must NEVER forget is that **we serve a "God of second chances!"** And that 'second chance's' NAME is **Jesus Christ**. Our 'first chance' came by the "Covenant of Works." That our salvation might come through our **obedience** to God's **Word** and **Will**. And we see how well THAT came out! So, God gave us a 'second chance'... the "Covenant of Grace." That, in Paul's words, ***"We are saved by grace, through faith... not of works, lest anyone should boast."*** (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Our long-term... read 'eternal'... health and well-being is NOT dependent on ourselves... NOT on our ability, or IN-ability, to live by His commands. THANK GOD, quite literally, that our eternal destiny is not about US... but dependent on the **grace** and **mercy** of **our Lord Jesus Christ**. In the words of a great contemp. song by Stuart Townend, *"In Christ alone, my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song."*

And it is just such dependence on the 'Master Gardener', Jesus Christ alone, that makes that final opportunity for growth of a 'fruitless fig tree' possible. That by virtue of its **relationship** with the Gardener, who digs around it, bringing water, and air, into the fertile soil around it... who adds the fertilizer of God's creation to help foster growth... only by full reliance on the intercessor between 'earth and sky' can that tree hope to grow. Otherwise it will be cut down and discarded.

Sooo... if one is bearing no fruit in life, they can... and must... be given a second chance to change their 'fruitless' ways. BUT, than can only happen IF they are in right relationship with the One who will make growth possible: Jesus Christ. Helping someone to change their ways is not simply a matter of OUR ability to be patient, encouraging, offering guidance and example... but in pointing them to the ONLY One who can bring TRUE change; by sharing how God brings hope to hope-less situations; telling others why you BELIEVE in a "God of Second chances."

In being critical of the fruit being borne by others, we must also take an honest look at **ourselves**. We must ALWAYS take care that in keeping an eye on the shortcomings of others, we don't wind up tripping over our OWN! In the words from *1 Corinthians* that we head not once, but *twice*, this morning, Paul \geq warns that **"If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."** That **"no testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone."** (*1 Corinthians 10:13*)

The same 'dryness' that plagues another person's 'soil' can just as much affect our own. Those 'toxins' of doubt, fear, immorality, addiction, greed, pride... of thinking 'oh THAT would never happen to ME'... can poison our own 'field' just as much as the next man's, or woman's. One verse that I personally believe should be in ALL of our 'quivers' is *Romans 3:23*: **"For ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."** NOT 'some'... not 'all NON-Presbyterians'... ALL have sinned.

Which brings me to what I believe makes the difference in whether or not one is 'wasting the soil' of life... be it in someone else's 'field' or your own. It's what prefaced this whole parable in the first place. This Luke passage began with some 'wise guys' trying to get Jesus to say that some sinners were worse (or better?) than others. Not once, but twice. And both times, Jesus' response was the same: ***"Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."*** (Luke 13:3, 5)

"Repent." NOT a word that our culture (both secular and religious?) likes to use. Kind of like some other words not so much in vogue: accountability, consequences, respect, forgiveness. Along with phrases like "I'm sorry." "You're right." "It's my fault." "Here, take mine." But if we are to bear the kind of fruit of LIFE that God wants, we must first 'till the soil' of our hearts to remove the rocks, the weeds, the impurities that inhibit good growth. We must **REPENT...** which means to turn away from, completely, to literally 'make a 180*' from anything that does not honor 'the Master Gardener.' Which includes any 'obstacles' that might inhibit US from helping OTHERS in doing the same. Whether 'them or us,' we must remind others and ourselves of the truth of Paul's words to the church at Corinth and Welsh/LC: ***"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength... but with the testing he will provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."*** (1 Corinthians 10:13) ***The 'way out' is THE 'way'... the Truth... the Life. JESUS CHRIST.*** As He said, ***"No one comes to the Father but by me"...***

In our attempts to help more people 'come to the Father by the Son,' the Lake Charles church has purchased property on which to build a new church. A LOT of preparation has been involved. A lot has had to go IN to this project. Time. Money. Ironically, more dirt will need to be added to what is already there. And that soil will need to be graded, prepared. But it's NOT just about what is to be ADDED to the soil. There also has to be great concern about what needs to be taken AWAY. Rocks. Sticks. Trash. No chemicals, no toxic substances. No impurities that will affect the integrity of the ground on which

So it is with us.

My brothers and sisters, as I said before, we most certainly serve a God of second chances... that opportunity for a fresh start made flesh in Jesus Christ. To 'repent' to the

Father... 'repair' to the Son... and be 'replenished' by the Spirit. But unless we do the first one... 'repent'... we will perish. Not my words. Jesus'. May we all be conscious of NOT 'wasting the soil' that God has given us... and that others be given the opportunity to do the same. And believe me, in saying this... I pray that I am NOT being an 'oxygen thief'...

CHARGE

"I planted, Apollos watered, but it was GOD who made it grow." (1 Cor. 3:6)