

## INTRODUCTION

Last spring I preached this parable for the first time—I evidently had passed it by in previous years of preaching. And last spring I mentioned in my opening remarks that the text (for today) was about “*manure*.” After the service someone recalled that the guest preacher from the previous Sunday (Bob Pryor, Camp Hanover) also had a sermon about manure!

That was a surprise! But let me clarify!

Bob’s sermon actually was not primarily about **manure**—as I understand it. He did point out that manure has this interesting aspect to it. If it is left in a pile it stinks. But if you spread it around it works as a fertilizer and not only do the *nutrients* get spread out—the *aroma* is dispersed as well. That’s a good thing!

**Story:** PA Amish spread liquid manure (all on the same day—pungent, ripe)

You have heard the text for today—it is a little parable from Luke’s gospel. If you were teaching a lesson about this parable or preaching a sermon about this bible passage, what would you title it? You can see that I actually think the text is about a *tree* rather than *manure*. *The Case of the Fruitless Fig Tree*. Manure, however, does make a cameo appearance in the story!

The human **characters** in the story are two: a landowner *farmer* who had a vineyard with at least one fig tree AND a vinedresser or a head *gardener*.

**Example:** visiting wineries (owner, winemaker, *conversation...*)

The story is mostly a conversation, a dialogue between the owner and the gardener. The owner is bothered (exasperated) that the fig tree has been barren for three years. Three years! No figs! What a disappointment!

**Example:** my neighbor has a fig tree—I might get a few. Too few this year!

So the owner says let’s get rid of this tree! *Chop it down! Why should it use up ground, take up space? Let’s use the good earth more productively!*

But the gardener says, “*hold on a minute.*” He counsels patience and offers a strategy. *Let me try one more gardening tactic. Let’s pour some fertilizer (manure) upon this fig tree. Let me work to dig a trench around it and apply manure so it can reach the roots. Give the tree one more year—let me work on it.* Then the story ends—presumably the gardener was persuasive.

That's what the story says. By the way, is it unusual for a fig tree to be mixed up with a vineyard? No, not at all! In fact the word for *vineyard* could be translated *fruit garden*. In ancient Palestine the vineyard often had fruit trees planted within it.

What does the story mean? Why did Jesus tell it? In what way is the tree in its context being compared to something about the kingdom of God? There are two kinds of reference material we need to consider.

1. Larger passage is about **repentance** (13:1-9)

Jesus cites two examples recorded in Luke 13:1-5; some Galileans punished by Pilate and others who died when a tower fell on them. And Jesus concludes: unless you *repent* you too shall perish. Then he tells this fruitless fig tree story.

So the tree, fruitless and faithless, needs to repent. Remember, "*repent*" means to turn around (*metanoia*) and go in a new direction. The tree needs to start bearing fruit! And a fig tree as a symbol in Scripture sometimes represents Israel—God's covenant people—as we shall see in one of the next references.

Our Deuteronomy passage forbade the destroying of trees that supplied food. Even in war you do not destroy sources of food. *Fruit trees* are **valuable** and thus are protected. On the other hand, listen to another passage from Luke (John the Baptist, Luke 3:7-9).

7John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Recall how John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Messiah. He seems to be comparing fruit trees with *Israel*. The children of Israel were called to keep the covenant and produce fruit.

2. Here is one other *fig tree* passage. This is the famous one—remember when Jesus **cursed a fig tree**? Here is Mark's version (11:12-14).

12On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 13And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. 14And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

Mark's telling of this story is sandwiched into another story about the cleansing of the temple and the driving away of the money-changers. Jesus is saying in the acted *parable of the fig-tree cursing*, that the tree is guilty of false advertising.

It has green leaves and should be full of figs. Likewise the Temple advertises healing and hope and prayer and sacrifices to worshippers but it is filled with commerce and unfair

money-changing practices (and all that is set up in the Court of the Gentiles); some folks cannot even find room to make their way into the Temple courts in order to pray.

Here is a preliminary conclusion. God expects his people, his congregations to be fruitful. To offer healing and hope and prayer and worship and fellowship and service to people who need it—insiders and outsiders. But when they or we cease to be fruitful (like a fig tree or temple) there is the need of repentance and the threat of judgment.

Sometimes we readily want to be agents of judgment ourselves. When someone makes a mistake we say, “*let’s get someone else in that job.*” When someone is unkind or unfaithful we think, “*let’s remove him or her.*” Get out the axe and chop it down. They came to arrest Jesus and Peter swung his sword—he even cut off a servant’s ear.

But in our Case of the Fruitless Fig tree the judgment is postponed. The *axe* is laid aside and the *wheelbarrow* of manure intercedes on behalf of the non-productive fruit tree. Jesus often speaks and tells us to do something.

But the message in this parable is “don’t do something!” “*Let it alone.*” “*Wait.*” Give it another chance. What an unexpected word from Jesus!

Sometimes we would rather act more quickly and decisively. Remove the offending party. Chop it down. Eugene Peterson comments on this passage: “*in human history killing is the predominant choice to make the world a better place.*” Kill the weeds, chop down the tree, and clear the ground for someone or something more promising. The Tree & Manure story stops us in our tracks and bids us slow down.

Manure is not a quick-fix. It has no immediate results. It has to work its way into the soil and those nutrients have to work their way first into roots and then into the plant’s whole system. It is slow-going.

**Example:** *compost pile* (two compartments)

Counting on compost or manure takes patience!

So here is the next question. Is this Tree Story about **God** being patient, mercifully patient, as we repent and draw close to the King and to the kingdom?

Or, is this tree parable a word to **us** about being patient in our lives of discipleship and ministry. Should we be fertilizing (helping people and ministries grow) and patiently wait for fruit?

Could the answer be both-and or is it either-or?

Let me try a synthesis answer. Because God is patient, because life in the kingdom takes time to develop, we too, the followers of Jesus, ought to learn patience in all our kingdom business. Let’s think about fruit-bearing patience in two aspects.

## 1. Waiting on God

Are we trusting Him for fruitful results of our endeavors? Are we praying prayers that persevere? Are we waiting on God?

**Example:** Helen Roseveare

**Story:**

## 2. Waiting on people

Can you think of anyone you wish would straighten up and fly right? Anyone about whom you pray would come to her senses? Anyone you would dearly love to see come inside the church house? Anyone you hope will someday see the light and come to faith—in Christ as Savior and Lord. Sometimes we pray for family members because we have known them a long time. We have to relate to family members and live with them so, of course, we want them to share in knowing Christ. But your family can frustrate you because of that proximity...

This is a good parable for you when your brother or sister frustrates you...

**Story:** Kele Meenan comes home (parents wait);

“there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country.” Jeremiah 31:17

So many of Jesus’ parables are **agricultural**, aren’t they? Someone scatters and sows seed. A seed as small as a mustard seed. Seeds grow into Wheat and Tares. Be careful when you separate them. Sheep and Goats will be separated but not by you and me.

A veteran farmer knows that in farming you have to put in many long hours. Sunrise to sundown. Day after day you work. You cannot skip feeding the livestock. You cannot miss the planting or harvesting seasons. Timing is everything. Well, almost everything.

There is also a lot of **waiting**. Waiting for seeds to germinate. Waiting for the rains to come. Waiting for the grapes or the apples to grow. Don’t tear that vineyard down. Give it another year. Don’t chop that tree down. Let’s dig in some manure. Give it some more time. Give it another chance.

Yes, friends. That’s good news for you and me!

6And he told this parable: "A man had<sup>(A)</sup> 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.<sup>(B)</sup> Cut it down. Why should

it use up the ground?' **8**And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. **9**Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" Luke 13:6-9

**19**"When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it,<sup>(A)</sup> you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? **20**Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it falls.  
Deuteronomy 20:19-20

**9**Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.<sup>(A)</sup> Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Luke 3:9

**19**<sup>(A)</sup> And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. Matthew 21:19