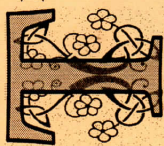


Action Plan

“Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.”

[Luke 13:9 & 10]



HIS parable is primarily about repentance and God’s mercy.

“Repentance is to leave

The sins we loved before,

And show that we in earnest grieve

By doing so no more.”¹

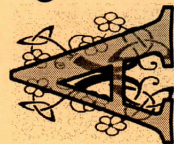
Repentance must be genuine. The natural man will readily make excuses for himself that he is reluctant to accept in others. It’s human to measure oneself negatively, by pointing to sins that we have neither committed, nor have even contemplated; it’s a sign of Divine intervention to say humbly, as did the publican in Christ’s parable, *“God be merciful to me a sinner.”* [Luke 18:13]

Active Sorrow

In short, repentance is sorrow in action. It actively turns to God for forgiveness. It puts faith in Christ as the sinless Sin-bearer at Calvary. It looks to God, and it leans on His mercy through faith in Jesus Christ,² who came not to *destroy men’s lives, but to save them.*³

When it was first told, this parable was primarily directed at the Jewish nation of Israel. Two millennia later, it equally applies to any part of the spiritual Israel, being the Christian Church throughout the world. We begin with -

1: The Fruitless Tree



CERTAIN man had planted a fig tree. Fig trees are notable for two things — their leaves, which provide welcome shade in hot countries, and for their longevity. They are said to be less reliable for their fruit where they grow wild.

Yet this one had been *sown* — in better soil than that found on the wayside. Nor had it been left to fend for itself. It had had someone to look after it, called by various Bible translations as a “dresser”, or a “keeper”, or a “gardener” - which, when taken together, describe the favoured attention that it had received. Despite this, it was fruitless.

1: From “If Jesus Christ was sent” by Ann & Jane Taylor.

2: See: Acts 20:21

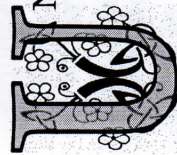
3: See: Luke 9:56

In any event, good land is both finite and precious; and it is essential that it should be put to the best use. Like other plants, fig trees are prone to attacks from both fungi and insects; in which case, the fruit is either prematurely shed, or it shrivels up. That could happen in any year; but in this parable, the landowner had already waited for three years without harvesting anything. To wait a further year involved the risk that, even if fruit were to appear, it might be blighted by disease.

Reasonable

This, then, was not the first time that the owner had been disappointed; and on his part you might well say that he had displayed a fair degree of patience. The parable does not make any reference to the *amount* of fruit that he expected. He wasn’t looking for the tree to be absolutely laden with figs — but he did expect something. Taking all these things into consideration, his proposal to dispose of the tree there and then was, in the circumstances, not unreasonable.

2: The Forbearance Shown



UNSURPRISINGLY, there was a conversation between the landowner and the keeper of the vineyard, in which the former was effectually persuaded by the latter to forbear judgment, and to give the tree just one more chance.

In understanding this conversation, the dresser of the vineyard may be regarded as Christ Jesus to whom the government of the Kingdom of God has been assigned. We might reflect upon the relationship between God’s justice and His tender mercy through which Christ was sent to this world as the Dayspring from on high [Luke 1:78]. The relationship between judgment and mercy may be seen as follows: -

Justice	Mercy
Grives what each deserves.	Grants what is not deserved.
Justice declares that: <i>“The wages of sin is death...”</i> To which Mercy adds:	<i>“but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”</i> [Romans 6:23]
Thus Justice sees the sin,	and Mercy sends the Saviour.
Justice spells out the punishment;	and Mercy suffers as a Substitute.
Justice will accept a substitute;	so Mercy fulfils this role.

That is the essence of the Gospel, which Christ Jesus Himself began His ministry by saying: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." [Mark 1:15] Notice the word "repent". It appears again in Luke 13:5, just before this parable: "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Repentance results in a clear change in lifestyle. John the Baptist emphasised this when he said: -

"Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham [as] our father: for I say unto, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

[Luke 2:8]

By Their Fruits

Thus it becomes shown whether a profession of faith is one of true belief by our actions. Christ Jesus declared it, saying: "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can an evil tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them." [Matthew 7: 19 & 20]

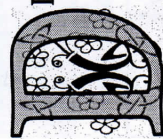
This equally applies where no fruit appears at all. That is perfectly just. And so we return to the conversation between the owner of the vineyard and its keeper, which as has been suggested takes place between Justice and Mercy: -

JUSTICE: *Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?*

MERCY: *Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.*

This brings us to —

3: The Final Chance



WOULD the tree bear fruit? Who knows? The agreement was that it would be left alone for just one year, during which strenuous efforts would be made to remedy the situation. It was, in short, an action plan.

That is how many people begin each year with action plans in the form of resolutions; but most of them fail to get through the first fortnight. Christians, too, need an action plan, based firmly upon the Word of God. That is very clear from Proverbs 24:27 that begins: "Prepare thy work without..."

Charles Wesley wrote: -

**'Unless the power of heavenly grace,
The wisdom of the Deity,**

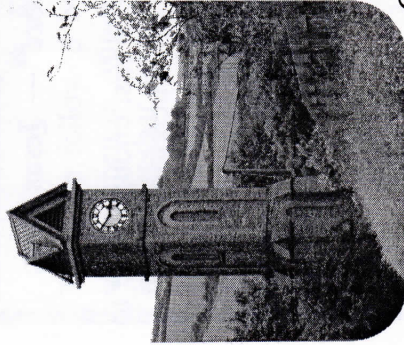
**Direct and govern all our ways,
And all our works be wrought in Thee,
Our every work we know shall fail...'**

Therefore the year must start, continue, and end with a resolve to be guided by God. Since each believer occupies a particular portion of God's vineyard, the action plan, should have Christ as its first and foremost focus — to shed the love of God abroad, through Jesus Christ, our sovereign Lord.

The powers of darkness all these years past have also had their plans, which have been vigorously pursued. They will not ultimately succeed, but that is no excuse for inactivity on our part. Often our numbers are small, and, statistics suggest that they are decreasing. But it's not the numerical size of a church that matters: it's the commitment. Christ's army marches well on its knees. Therefore the starting point is prayer.

The Fruit of the Righteous

A favourite text on Manx Methodist plans in the nineteenth century was: "*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise*" [Proverbs 11:30] The next verse goes on to encourage active steps: "*Behold the righteous shall be recompensed [“rewarded”] in the earth...*" And the greatest reward, of course, is knowing that you are doing God's will.

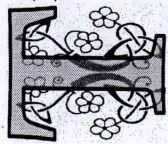


This focuses the mind wonderfully. But let us ask ourselves: "What is the fruit that God seeks?" It is changed lives. It is holiness in conversation and conduct. It is a whole new way of thinking and acting, distinctively different from the ways of the world. It is a life that glorifies the Father in heaven, because it stands out, starkly and strikingly different, so that like a city on a hill,⁴ or a clock upon a tower, it just cannot be hidden.

On this, here are —

4: See: Matthew 5:14.

4: Thoughts on Fruitful Living



THROUGHOUT the New Testament it is clear that: *By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast...* [**Ephesians 2:8 & 9**] That, and other texts, such as **2 Timothy 1:9** are so clear that it is extraordinary that anyone should have any misunderstanding on the matter.

Salvation's Fruit

Scripture teaches that having been saved, good works are to follow, being the **fruit** of salvation, not its cause. As Jesus said, it is *by their fruits ye shall know them* [see: **Matthew 7:20**]. This is how the parable of the unfruitful fig tree is to be approached and understood, except to add that it may take time to show who is, and who is not, truly saved.

James 1:13 takes up the theme where he says: *"Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you? Let him show out of a good conversation [or "conduct"] his works with meekness of wisdom."*

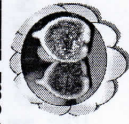
Specimen Questions

The start of a new year is a good time to assess where one stands with the Lord. Here are a few specimen questions: -

- * **What are your leading principles and aims in life?**
- * **Do you set the Lord always before you?** [See: **Psalm 16:8.**]
- * **Where does your heart truly lie?**
- * **How highly do you rate the unity of the brethren?**
- * **Do you esteem others better than yourself?** [**Philippians 2:3**]
- * **Do you know the true joy of the Lord — Jesus first, Others second, and Yourself last?**

Remember that life at best is very brief. There is just enough time to complete everything that God would have you do. Therefore -

**"Hear, believing, hear with prayer;
This your ground for seed prepare;
Pray that truth may deeply root,
Spring, and bear immortal fruit."**



More about Figs

Figuratively Used

Figs are mentioned in several places in Scripture to illustrate: -

- Peace and prosperity: **1 Kings 4:25**; **Micah 4:4**;
- The righteous and the wicked: **Jeremiah 24:1-10**;
- The fathers of the Israelites: **Hosea 9:10**;
- Rejoicing in times of hardship: **Habakkuk 3:17-19**;
- Where religion is barren: **Mark 11:13 & 14**;
- The Jewish nation: **Luke 13:6-9**;
- Christ's Second Coming: **Matthew 24:32 & 33**; and
- The Final Judgment: **Revelation 6:13**

Factual Information

Fig trees can grow to a considerable height, or they may be somewhat sprawling, like vines. You could call them spacious, since they can occupy sizeable amounts of soil. They are leafless during the winter, and produce the buds of the first crop of fruit before the new leaves appear. These are the early figs, and are commended in various portions of Scripture as being -

- * *Good* [**Jeremiah 24:2**];
- * *Desirable* [**Micah 7:1**]; and
- * *Easily gathered* [**Nahum 3:12**].

They are followed by a second crop, known as summer figs, which ripen in August or September. There may be a third crop in August that ripens in November.

There is a variety of fig tree that bears fruit only every third year. It may be that this gave rise to the parable of the unproductive fig tree. Obviously, the landowner had not intentionally sown such a tree.

