***Soil Analysis***

**Beginning in Beginnings: Luke 13:6-9 February 13, 2022**

***Then [Jesus] told this parable: A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard,  
and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any.  
So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard,   
“For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this tree  
and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?”  
“Sir,” the man replied, ”leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it   
and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”*Luke 13:6-9**

**Some ideas for reading parables**

1. Parables are not allegories – focus on the main point

2. The ending matters – pay special attention to the tension at the conclusion

3. Parables often explain themselves – context matters

**It's all about the soil**

*“A farmer went out to sow his seed. . . . .”*

*18 “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. 22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. 23 But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”*

Matthew 13:1-23

1. God does the sowing and sends the rain, but there is still work to be done

2. The test of the soils takes time

3. The seed is the “message of the kingdom” (see Romans 10) which must be received

**What the context tells us**

5 “I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”  
 Then he told this parable . . . .

Luke 13:5-6

1. Jesus’ original audience needed a shocking change of perspective

2. This parable is the object lesson of a serious call to self-examination

**A theology of fruit**

*43 “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. 44 Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briers. 45 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.*

Luke 6

*5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”*

John 15

*22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,   
23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

Galatians 5

Q 86. Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our   
 own, why then should we do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, is also restoring us by his Spirit into his   
 image,   
 so that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits,  
 so that he may be praised through us,   
 so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits,and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 32

1. The fig tree’s DNA is already programmed to bear fruit – it just has to be nourished

2. Pastor Fakkema thinks Lord’s Day 32 has a great description of fruit!

**From biology to mission – elements of healthy soil**

1. What spiritual manure looks like

[Centrality of the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/centrality-of-the-word-of-god/)

[Life transforming walk with Jesus (John 3:3, 30; Phil. 1:6)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/life-transforming-walk-with-jesus/)

[Intentional evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/intentional-evangelism)

[Transforming communities through active compassion, mercy, and justice ministries (Micah 6:8)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/transforming-communities-through-cmj/)

[Global perspective and engagement (Acts 1:8)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/global-perspectiveand-engagement/)

[Compelling Christian community (Acts 2:42-47)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/compelling-christian-community)

[Heartfelt worship (Psalm 138:1a; John 4:23)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/heartfelt-worship)

[Sacrificial and generous living and giving (Romans 12:1-8)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/sacrificial-generous-living-giving/)

[Culture of godly leadership (Hebrews 13:7)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/culture-of-godly-leadership)

[Fruitful Organizational Structures (Acts 6:1-7; Exodus 18:13-26)](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/fruitful-organizational-structures/)

Church Vitality’s 10 Missional Markers

2. Who is the “I”?

*8 “ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ ”*

Luke 13

3. I can start with what to remove from the soil: rocks and weeds

*20 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. 22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.*

Matthew 13

**Resources for the**

*Bible.org* has some wonderful resources at [*https://bible.org/book/Luke*](https://bible.org/book/Luke)

I. Howard Marshall’s Greek commentary is the text is very helpful (Paternoster Press, 1978)

Bob Deffinbaugh’s sermon on this text is at [***https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21***](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21)

I appreciate J.C. Ryle’s commentary on Luke 13 at [*https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/l13.htm*](https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/l13.htm)

Spurgeon has a classic sermon on this text at

[https://www.spurgeongems.org]( https://www.spurgeongems.org › chs650) *[› chs650]( https://www.spurgeongems.org › chs650)*

The ECC’s Vitality material at [*https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/*](https://covchurch.org/vitality/healthy-missional-markers/)has a helpful description of the

###### Metrics that Matter:  How to measure a healthy missional church

It is hard to measure spirituality.  Some say it is even unwise to do so.  Yet when we look at the New Testament, the disciples are coaching churches forward.  They are using a frame of reference of what a vital congregation looks like.

Jesus himself is speaking to the churches in Revelation (chapters 2 and 3) about their own strengths and weaknesses.  One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to guide churches into telling the truth about themselves, not just telling the truth about Jesus.  In the Bible, evaluation is normal and natural.

Although there is no perfect list that describes a healthy missional church, we in the Covenant are using the ten healthy missional markers.  By “healthy” we mean *pursuing Christ*.  By “missional” we mean *pursuing Christ’s priorities in the world.* It is our fervent prayer that every Covenant church becomes a healthy missional church.  These markers help us to listen to the Holy Spirit…so that our ears are open to what Jesus is saying to each church.

For help in reading parables, I liked these short articles:  
[*https://unlockingthebible.org/2013/07/10-tips-for-understanding-jesus-parables/*](https://unlockingthebible.org/2013/07/10-tips-for-understanding-jesus-parables/)  
[*https://www.ligonier.org/posts/interpreting-parables-of-jesus*](https://www.ligonier.org/posts/interpreting-parables-of-jesus)  
[*https://www.olivetree.com/blog/how-to-read-a-parable/*](https://www.olivetree.com/blog/how-to-read-a-parable/)

Earl Palmer’s *Laughter In Heaven* (Word, 1987) is a wonderful place to start with the parables.

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|  |  |  | Were present |  | but |  | some |  | in |  | same |  | the |  | season |  | telling |  | to him |  |
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| about |  | the |  | Galileans |  | of whom |  | the |  | blood |  | Pilate |  | mixed |  | with |  | the |  |
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| θυσία |  | αὐτός |  |  |  |  |  |  | καί |  | ἀποκρίνομαι |  | εἶπον |  | αὐτός |  |  |  | δοκέω |  | ὅτι |  |
| sacrifices |  | of them |  |  |  |  |  |  | And |  | having answered |  | he said |  | to them |  |  |  | you think |  | that |  |
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| the |  | Galileans |  | these |  | sinners |  | along |  | all |  | the |  | Galileans |  |
| AMPN |  | JMPNX |  | OADMPN |  | NMPN |  | PA |  | JMPAX |  | AMPA |  | JMPAX |  |

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| became |  |  | because |  | these |  | they have suffered |  |  |  |  |  |  | Not |  |  | I say |  | to you |  |  | but |
| V3PAMI | SN |  | CSC |  | ODENPA |  | V3PRAI | SJ |  |  |  |  |  | TN | SN |  | V1SPAI |  | OP2 PD | SN |  | CCV |

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|  | ἐάν |  | μή |  | μετανοέω |  | πᾶς |  | ὁμοίως |  | ἀπόλλυμι |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | except |  | [n/a] |  | you might change mind |  | all |  | likewise |  | you will destroy yourselves |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | CSE |  | TN |  | V2PPAS |  | JMPNX |  | BX |  | V2PFMI | SJ |  |  |  |  |  |

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| ἤ |  | ἐκεῖνος |  | ὁ |  | δεκαοκτώ |  | ἐπί |  | ὅς |  | πίπτω |  | ὁ |  | πύργος |  | ἐν |  | ὁ |  |
| Or |  | those |  | the |  | eighteen |  | on |  | whom |  | fell |  | the |  | tower |  | in |  | the |  |
| CCD |  | OADMPN |  | AMPN |  | JMPNX |  | PA |  | ORRMPA |  | V3SAAI |  | AMSN |  | NMSN |  | PD |  | AMSD |  |

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| Σιλωάμ |  | καί |  | ἀποκτείνω |  | αὐτός |  |  | δοκέω |  | ὅτι |  | αὐτός |  | ὀφειλέτης |  |
| Siloam |  | and |  | it killed |  | them |  |  | you think |  | that |  | themselves |  | debtors |  |
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| became |  | along |  | all |  | the |  | men |  | the ones |  | residing |  | Jerusalem |
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|  |  |  |  |  |  | Not |  |  | I say |  | to you |  |  | but |  | except |  | [n/a] |  | you might change mind |  | all |  |
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|  |  |  | He was saying |  | but |  | this |  | the |  | parallel story |  |  |  | fig tree |  | had |  | some |  |
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| φυτεύω |  | ἐν |  | ὁ |  | ἀμπελών |  | αὐτός |  |  | καί |  | ἔρχομαι |  | ζητέω |  |
| having been planted |  | in |  | the |  | vineyard |  | of him |  |  | and |  | he came |  | seeking |  |
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| καρπὸν |  | ἐν |  | αὐτῇ |  | καὶ |  | οὐχ |  | εὗρεν | . |  |  |  | **7** |  | εἶπεν |  | δὲ |  | πρὸς |  | τὸν |  | ἀμπελουργόν |
| καρπός |  | ἐν |  | αὐτός |  | καί |  | οὐ |  | εὑρίσκω |  |  |  |  |  |  | εἶπον |  | δέ |  | πρός |  | ὁ |  | ἀμπελουργός |
| fruit |  | in |  | it |  | and |  | not |  | he found |  |  |  |  |  |  | He said |  | but |  | to |  | the |  | vineyard worker |
| NMSA |  | PD |  | OP3FSD |  | CCK |  | TN |  | V3SAAI | SJ |  |  |  |  |  | V3SAAI |  | CCB |  | PA |  | AMSA |  | NMSA |

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| · |  |  | ἰδοὺ |  | τρία |  | ἔτη |  | ἀφʼ |  | οὗ |  | ἔρχομαι |  | ζητῶν |  | καρπὸν |  | ἐν |  | τῇ |  | συκῇ |  |
|  |  |  | ἰδού |  | τρεῖς |  | ἔτος |  | ἀπό |  | ὅς |  | ἔρχομαι |  | ζητέω |  | καρπός |  | ἐν |  | ὁ |  | συκῆ |  |
|  |  |  | look |  | three |  | years |  | from |  | which |  | I come |  | seeking |  | fruit |  | in |  | the |  | fig tree |  |
| SJ |  |  | I |  | JNPAX |  | NNPA |  | PG |  | ORRNSG |  | V1SPMI |  | VPAPMSN |  | NMSA |  | PD |  | AFSD |  | NFSD |  |

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| ταύτῃ |  | καὶ |  | οὐχ |  | εὑρίσκω | · |  |  | ἔκκοψον |  | [ | οὖν | ] |  | αὐτήν | , |  | ἱνατί |  | καὶ |  | τὴν |  | γῆν |  |
| οὗτος |  | καί |  | οὐ |  | εὑρίσκω |  |  |  | ἐκκόπτω |  |  | οὖν |  |  | αὐτός |  |  | ἱνατί |  | καί |  | ὁ |  | γῆ |  |
| this |  | and |  | not |  | I find |  |  |  | Cut off |  |  | then |  |  | it |  |  | why |  | also |  | the |  | earth |  |
| OADFSD |  | CCK |  | TN |  | V1SPAI | SJ |  |  | V2SAAM |  |  | CCQ |  |  | OP3FSA | SN |  | CCG |  | BX |  | AFSA |  | NFSA |  |

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| καταργεῖ | ; |  |  |  | **8** |  | ὁ |  | δὲ |  | ἀποκριθεὶς |  | λέγει |  | αὐτῷ | · |  |  | κύριε | , |  |
| καταργέω |  |  |  |  |  |  | ὁ |  | δέ |  | ἀποκρίνομαι |  | λέγω |  | αὐτός |  |  |  | κύριος |  |  |
| does it abolish |  |  |  |  |  |  | The |  | but |  | having answered |  | he says |  | to him |  |  |  | master |  |  |
| V3SPAI | SJ |  |  |  |  |  | AMSN |  | CCV |  | VAPPMSN |  | V3SPAI |  | OP3MSD | SJ |  |  | NMSV | SN |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ἄφες |  | αὐτὴν |  | καὶ |  | τοῦτο |  | τὸ |  | ἔτος | , |  | ἕως |  | ὅτου |  | σκάψω |  | περὶ |  |
| ἀφίημι |  | αὐτός |  | καί |  | οὗτος |  | ὁ |  | ἔτος |  |  | ἕως |  | ὅστις |  | σκάπτω |  | περί |  |
| allow |  | it |  | also |  | this |  | the |  | year |  |  | until |  | when |  | I might dig |  | around |  |
| V2SAAM |  | OP3FSA |  | BX |  | OADNSA |  | ANSA |  | NNSA | SN |  | MG |  | OIRNSG |  | V1SAAS |  | PA |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| αὐτὴν |  | καὶ |  | βάλω |  | κόπρια | , |  |  | **9** |  | κἂν |  | μὲν |  | ποιήσῃ |  | καρπὸν |  | εἰς |  |
| αὐτός |  | καί |  | βάλλω |  | κόπριον |  |  |  |  |  | καί |  | μέν |  | ποιέω |  | καρπός |  | εἰς |  |
| it |  | and |  | might throw |  | manure |  |  |  |  |  | And if |  | indeed |  | it might make |  | fruit |  | in |  |
| OP3FSA |  | CCK |  | V1SAAS |  | NNPA | SN |  |  |  |  | CSE |  | TM |  | V3SAAS |  | NMSA |  | PA |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| τὸ |  | μέλλον | · |  |  | εἰ |  | δὲ |  | μή |  | γε | , |  | ἐκκόψεις |  | αὐτήν |
| ὁ |  | μέλλω |  |  |  | εἰ |  | δέ |  | μή |  | γέ |  |  | ἐκκόπτω |  | αὐτός |
| the |  | being about to be |  |  |  | if |  | but |  | not |  | indeed |  |  | you will cut off |  | it. |
| ANSA |  | VPAPNSA | SJ |  |  | CSE |  | CCV |  | TN |  | TM | SN |  | V2SFAI |  | OP3FSA |

[[1]](#footnote-1)

J.C. Ryle’s commentary on Luke  
**Section 85. The Barren Fig Tree, Luke 13:6-9**

at [*https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/l13.htm*](https://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/l13.htm)

*He spoke also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbers it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, until I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that you shall cut it down.*

The parable we have now read is particularly humbling and heart-searching.The Christian who can hear it and not feel sorrow and shame as he looks at the state of Christendom — must be in a very unhealthy state of soul.

**We learn first from this passage — that where God gives spiritual privileges, He expects proportionate returns.**

Our Lord teaches this lesson, by comparing the *Jewish Church* of His day to a "fig tree planted in a vineyard." This was exactly the position of *Israel* in the world. They were separated from other nations by the Mosaic laws and ordinances, no less than by the situation of their land. They were favored with revelations of God, which were granted to no other people. Things were done for them, which were never done for Egypt, or Nineveh, or Babylon, or Greece, or Rome. It was only just and right, that they should bear fruit to God's praise. It might reasonably be expected, that there would be more faith, and penitence, and holiness, and godliness in Israel — than among the heathen. This is what God looked for. The owner of the fig tree "came seeking fruit."

But if we mean to get the full benefit of the parable before us — then we must look beyond the Jewish Church. We must look to the *Christian* churches. They have light, and truth, and doctrines, and precepts — of which the heathen never hear. How great is their responsibility! Is it not just and right, that God should expect *fruit* from them?

We must look to our own hearts. We live in a land of Bibles, and liberty, and Gospel preaching. How vast are the advantages we enjoy — compared to the Chinese and Hindu! Never let us forget that God expects *fruit* from us!

These are solemn truths. Few things are so much forgotten by men — as the close connection between *privilege* and *responsibility*. We are all ready enough to eat the fat and drink the sweet, and bask in the sunshine of our position both as Christians and Englishmen — and even to spare a few pitying thoughts for the half-naked savage who bows down to sticks and stones. But we are very slow to remember that we are *accountable* to God for all we enjoy; and that to whomever much is given — of them much will be required. Let us awake to a sense of these things. Let us not forget that the great Master looks for *fruit*.

**We learn, secondly, from this passage — that it is a most dangerous thing to be unfruitful under great religious privileges.**

The manner in which our Lord conveys this lesson to us is deeply impressive. He shows us the owner of the barren fig tree complaining that it bore no fruit, "These three years I have come seeking *fruit —* and find none." He describes him as even ordering the destruction of the tree as a useless cumberer of the ground, "Cut it down; why does it cumber the ground?" He brings in the dresser of the vineyard pleading for the fig tree, that it may be spared a little longer, "Lord, let it alone this year also." And He concludes the parable by putting these solemn words into the vine-dresser's mouth, "If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not — then cut it down!"

There is a *plain warning* here to all professing churches of Christ. If their ministers do not teach sound doctrine, and their members do not live holy lives — then they are in imminent peril of destruction. God is every year observing them, and taking account of all their ways. They may abound in *ceremonial* religion. They may be covered with the leaves of forms, and services, and ordinances. But if they are destitute of the *fruits* of the Spirit — then they are reckoned to be useless cumberers of the ground. Unless they repent — they will be cut down.

It was so with the Jewish Church forty years after our Lord's ascension. It will be so yet with many others, it may be feared, before the end comes. The ax is lying near the root of many an unfruitful Church. The sentence will yet go forth, "Cut it down!"

There is a plainer warning still in the passage, for all *unconverted professing Christians*. There are many in every congregation who hear the Gospel — who are literally hanging over the brink of the bottomless pit! They have lived for years in the best part of God's vineyard — and yet borne no fruit. They have heard the Gospel preached faithfully for hundreds of Sundays — yet have never embraced it, and taken up the cross, and followed Christ. They do not perhaps run into open sin. But they do nothing for God's glory. There is nothing *positive* about their religion. Of each of these the Lord of the vineyard might say with truth, "I come for these many years seeking *fruit* on this tree — and have found none. It only cumbers the ground. Cut it down!"

There are myriads of respectable professing Christians in this plight. They have not the least idea, how near they are to destruction. Never let us forget, that to be content with sitting in the congregation and hearing sermons, while we bear no fruit in our lives — is conduct which is most offensive to God. It provokes Him to cut us off suddenly, and that without remedy!

**We learn, lastly, from this parable — what an infinite debt we all owe to God's mercy and Christ's intercession.** It seems impossible to draw any other lesson from the earnest pleading of the vine-dresser, "Lord, let it alone this year also." Surely we see here, as in a looking-glass — the loving kindness of God, and the mediation of Christ.

*Mercy* has been truly called the darling attribute of God. Power, justice, purity, holiness, wisdom, unchangeableness — are all parts of God's character, and have all been manifested to the world in a thousand ways, both in His works and in His Word. But if there is one of His attributes which He is pleased to exhibit to man more clearly than others — beyond doubt, that attribute is His *mercy*. He is a God who "delights in mercy." (Micah 7:18.)

Divine mercy founded on the mediation of a coming Savior. Divine mercy was the cause why Adam and Eve were not cast down to Hell, in the day that they fell. Divine mercy has been the cause why God has borne so long with this sin-laden world, and not come down to judgment. Divine mercy is even now the cause why unconverted sinners are so long spared, and not cut off in their sins.

We have probably not the least conception how much we all owe to God's mercy. The last day will prove that all mankind were debtors to God's mercy, and Christ's mediation. Even those who are finally lost, will discover to their shame — that it was "of the Lord's mercies, they were not consumed" long before they died. As for those who are saved — covenant-mercy will be all their plea!

Are *we* fruitful — or unfruitful? This, after all, is the question which concerns us most. What does God see in us year after year? Let us take heed so to live — that He may see *fruit* in us.

**JUDGMENT THREATENING BUT MERCY SPARING NO. 650**

**DELIVERED ON SUNDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 17, 1865,**

***BY C. H. SPURGEON,* AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.**

***“Cut it down; why cumbers it the ground?   
And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also.”***

***Luke 13:7-8.***

THE comparison of a man to a tree, and of human works to fruit is exceedingly common in

Scripture, because it is most suggestive, natural, and appropriate. As fruit is the production of the tree’s

life, and the end for which the tree exists, so obedience to the divine will, and holiness unto the Lord

should be the product of man’s life, and for it he was at first created. When men plant trees in a

vineyard, they very naturally expect to find fruit on them, and if at the age and season of fruitbearing

they find no produce, their natural and justifiable expectation is disappointed.

Even thus, speaking after the manner of men, it is natural that the great Maker of all should look for

the good fruit of obedience and love from the men who are the objects of His providential care, and be

grieved when He meets with no return. Man is very much more God’s property than a tree can ever be

the property of the man who plants a vineyard. And as God has spent so much more skill and wisdom in

the creation of a man than a husbandman can have spent in the mere planting of trees, it becomes the

more natural that God should look for fruit from His creature man. And the more reasonable that His

most righteous requirements should not be refused.

Trees that bear no fruit must be cut down. And sinners who bring not repentance, faith, and holiness,

must die. It is only a matter of time as to whether or not the vineyard shall be cleared of the incumbrance

of its barren trees. It is but a matter of time as to when the world shall be delivered from the burdensome

presence of barren souls. It stands to reason that barren trees, which soon become the haunts of all sorts

of mischief-doing creatures, should be a nuisance to the vineyard, neither can sinners be permitted

forever to become the dwelling places of evil spirits, and the dens of iniquity—a thorough riddance must

be made of impenitent sinners as well as of rotten trees. There is a time for felling fruitless trees, and

there is an appointed season for hewing down and casting into the fire the useless sinner.

**I.** We shall not linger on the threshold of our solemn work this morning, for our burden is very

heavy, and we would be rid of it speedily. We shall address ourselves at once to those persons who are

living without God and without Christ, among whom many of my hearers must be numbered. We shall

speak to those who are not saved—there are such in the professing church everywhere. O may the Holy

Spirit find them out by our word, and bring them in real earnest to consider their ways. To all

unprofitable, unfruitful sinners, we utter this hard, but necessary sentence—TO CUT YOU DOWN

WOULD BE MOST REASONABLE. It is right and reasonable to fell barren trees, and it is just as right

and reasonable that *you* should be cut down.

**1.** This will appear in the first place, if we reflect, that *this is the shortest and the surest way to deal*

*with you.* It will cost the least trouble, and be most certainly effectual in removing you from the place to

which you are an injury rather than a benefit. When the owner of the vineyard says to the gardener

concerning the tree, “Cut it down,” the remedy is very sharp, but it is very simple. The felling is soon

done, the clearance is thorough, and when another tree is planted, the benefit is evident.

To dig about the tree, to trench it, to feed it, to prune it, and water it—all this is a long affair—

requiring care, and labor, and attention, while after all that, the process may fail and love’s labor may be

lost. To spare is difficult and involves trouble. To cut down is easy and effectual. Unconverted hearer, to

preach the Gospel to you, to call you to repentance, to entreat, exhort, instruct, and warn you is a

laborious process, and will probably be unsuccessful after all. The work will require much thought.

Providential agencies must be directed with wisdom, saints must pray with earnestness, ministers must

plead with tears, the Scriptures must be written, and those Scriptures must be expounded and explained.

All this is more than you have any natural right to expect that God should do with you, when He has

in His hands a far simpler remedy by which He may at once ease Himself of His adversary, and prevent

your being any further offense—He has but to take away your breath, and permit your body to descend

into the grave, and your soul into hell, and the vineyard is clear, and there is room for another tree. This

sharp, short, simple process is one which commends itself to men in the case of trees, and it is one in

which it is a thousand wonders that the Lord has not used with you.

There will be no more blaspheming God, sinner, when the axe has laid you low! There will be no

more rejecting the promise of His mercy, no more violating of Sabbath days, no more despising

Scripture when the day of doom arrives! Death shall end all these abominations forever. We shall no

more have to agonize for you in vain, no more shall we weep bitterly because of your hardness of heart,

no longer study to meet your objections, and sigh at your constant oppositions. The flames of hell will

end all this, to your sad and awful cost.

No longer will a long-suffering God be wearied with your sins, and pressed down under the load of

your iniquities. He will make short work in righteousness, and a clean work too. He will sweep you

away with the broom of destruction, and your rebellions will end, and your iniquities a reward most sure

and terrible. Barren fig tree, you will draw the fatness from the ground no longer, and overshadow with

evil influence your fellow trees no more. You have become a mere waste and worse than a waste.

Sinner, I ask you, is not the readiest plan to be rid of you suggested by the text, “Cut it down”? You

yourself would do thus with a tree. What reason is there why the Lord should not deal thus with you?

Do you argue that you are of far greater importance than a tree? How do you make this appear? A

tree is far more valuable to you than you can be supposed to be to the infinite God. The gardener would

possibly lose something by cutting down his tree, but how can you suppose that your ruin would be any

damage to the great God! The man who has many acres of vineyard is not much distressed if one barren

vine is cut down, for there are so many more. If God had but one man in His dominions, it might seem

to be very important whether that man were saved or not, but there are so many of our race that your loss

will be no more than the blowing of one atom of sand from the shore, or the removal of one drop from

the sea.

You yourself could not well complain of being cut down, for you do not think much of your own

soul—you are not concerned about its salvation. You trifle with its best interests. Why should you

expect another to value you at a higher rate than you have set upon yourself? You fling away your soul

for passing joys. You neglect the great salvation. You live in daily disobedience against God, who alone

can do you good. Even the preaching of the Gospel, that all-powerful engine, seems to have no effect

upon you because you despise yourself. Well, Man, if God despises you, too, and commands His angels

to cut you down, you cannot complain—it is but reasonable that God should estimate you at your own

price, and weigh you in your own balances.

You have wantonly used the axe to yourself on many occasions, why should not the proper

executioner use it in earnest? Some men ruin their health by their sins. They wildly dash the axe against

their own root, and wound themselves terribly. On your soul you are using that axe continually, for you

damage it by sin, and seek out folly, and choose the way to damnation, and labor to be lost. You cannot,

therefore, complain. The crushing of you will be of no more consequence in this great universe than the

killing of some one ant upon the hill. You will never be missed. You may think greatly of yourself, but

you are no more than a mere worm compared with the great universe of God. Beware, O rebellious,

unrepentant sinner! My love yearns for your salvation, but my reason approves of your ruin, foresees it,

and expects it speedily unless you turn unto the Lord and live.

**2.** Another reason makes the argument for judgment very powerful, namely, *that sufficient time for*

*repentance has already been given.* If there had been any hope of your repentance, I think many of you

would have repented long ago. I do not know what can be done for some of you more than has been

done. You have been dug about—the digging, I suppose, is to loosen the roots of their hold upon the

earth. And you have had affliction, trial and trouble—like the gardener’s great spade—to wean you from

earth, and loosen your hold of carnal things. You have had sickness—you have tossed to and fro upon

the bed of pain. You have been in the jaws of death, and the horrid teeth seemed above and beneath you,

as though they would enclose you forever—but all this has been of no avail.

Why should you be stricken any more? You will revolt more and more. Already some of you have

been smitten until your whole head is sick and your whole heart faint, but you will not hear the rod. By

the blueness of the wound, says Solomon, the heart is made better, but in your case it has not been so.

Those blue wounds of yours—those great and grievous afflictions—have not been sanctified to you, but

rather you have gone on offending God, and provoking the Most High.

The gardener spoke of dunging as well as of digging, and some of you have had plentiful helps

toward repentance. The Gospel has been put close by your roots hundreds of times. You have a Bible in

every house. You have had, some of you, the advantage of godly training from your youth up. You have

been warned again, and again, and again, sometimes sternly, sometimes affectionately. You have heard

the wooing voice of mercy, and the thundering notes of judgment, but yet, though Jesus Christ’s own

Gospel has been laid close to your roots, O barren tree, you are barren still.

What is the use, then, of sparing you? Sparing has been tried, and it has had no effect—the other

remedy is certain*, “Cut it down.”* O God, cut not down the sinner! And yet we dare not say it would be

unreasonable, but on the contrary, the most natural result of slighted mercy. O sinner, you may well

say—

***“I have long withstood His grace,***

***Long provoked Him to His face.***

***Would not hearken to His calls,***

***Grieved Him by a thousand falls.***

***Depths of mercy! Can there be***

***Mercy still reserved for me?***

***Can my God His wrath forbear?***

***Me, the chief of sinners spare?”***

**3.** Sinner, I argue your case somewhat harshly, you think. Ah! man, would God I could make you

think *me* harsh, if you would but have pity on your own soul, for my harshness is only apparent, not real,

and your carelessness for your soul is real harshness, for you care not for your own soul, but treat it as a

thing to be cast away, and its ruin to be laughed at, as though it were contemptible.

*All this while there has been no sign of improvement whatever in you.* If there had been some little

fruit, if some tears of repentance had been flowing from your eyes, if there had been some seeking after

Christ, if your heart had been a little softened, if you had but a little faith in Jesus, though it were but as

a grain of mustard seed, then there were indeed reasons for sparing you.

But sorrowful to add, *your sparing has had an ill effect upon you.* Because God has not punished

you, therefore you have waxed wanton and bold. You have said, “Does God know? Is there knowledge

in the Most High?” You think that He is altogether such a one as you are, and that He will never bring

you into judgment. You fancy that His sword is rusted into the scabbard, and His arm waxed short.

Strange madness of evil that you should pervert the longsuffering which calls you to repentance into a

reason for running to greater lengths of sin!

What, when JEHOVAH spares you, that you may turn to Him, shall that very sparing make you lift

up the foot of your rebellion and spurn Him? It has done so. Up to this time you have grown hardened

instead of softened. You have grown older, but you are no wiser, except it be with Satan’s subtlety to be

more wise in sin.

The Gospel has not now the effect it once had on you. This voice could make your soul shiver, and

your very blood chill in its veins, but it cannot do so now. These eyes have sometimes looked on you

and seemed as though they flashed with fire, but now they are dull as lead to you. Once, when we spoke

to you of the wrath to come, the tears would flow—there were some tears of gentle pity for your own

soul. But ah! it is not so with you now. You will go your way and our most earnest tones will seem but

as the whistling wind, and our most persistent entreaties as a child’s playful song.

O God, it is reasonable, indeed, that You should lift up that sharp axe of Yours and say, “Cut it

down.” I think I could abundantly justify the severity of God, if now He were to use it, when I thus

perceive that all His sparing has had no effect but to make you worse, when I perceive that,

notwithstanding these years of waiting, there are no tokens of improvement in you. If He says, “Cut it

down,” justice and reason say, “Ay, Lord, it is well it should be so.”

**4.** But there are other reasons why, “Cut it down,” is most reasonable, *when we consider the owner*

*and the other trees.* First of all, *here is a tree which brings forth no fruit whatever, and therefore is of no*

*service.* It is like money badly invested, bringing in no interest. It is a dead loss to the owner. What is the

use of keeping it? The dead tree is neither useful nor ornamental—it can yield no service, and afford no

pleasure. Cut it down, by all means.

And even so with you, sinner. What is the use of you? You are of use to your children, to your

family. In business you may be of some service to the world. but then the world did not make you. And

your children, and your family, they did not create you. God has made you, God has planted you, God is

your proprietor—you have done nothing for God. Even in coming up to His house today, you did not

come with any desire to honor Him. And tomorrow, if you should chance to give something to the poor,

it will not be because they are God’s, nor out of love to *Him*.

You neither pray to God, nor praise God, nor live for God. You live for anything, for everything, for

nothing, sooner than live for the God that made you. Then what is the good of you to God? All His other

creatures praise Him. There is not a spider spinning its web from leaf to leaf but does His bidding. “The

ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib,” but you do not know. Would you keep a horse that

never did you service? Would you have a dog in your house that never licked your hand or fawned upon

you, or did your will? You would say, “What is the good of this? A servant in my house to feed upon my

bread, to be clothed with my bounty, and yet never to obey me, but to live in constant reckless disregard

of my most reasonable commands!” You would say to such a servant, “Get out. You are no servant of

mine.”

Well might the Lord say this to you. All these years preserving goodness has winked at the past.

Long-suffering has borne with your follies and your faults, but it cannot be so forever, for reason

demands that a useless thing should not always stand, and “Cut it down,” is the natural inference from

the uselessness of your life.

Nor is this all. While you have been thus living without yielding anything, *you have been a very*

*costly tree.* The tree in the vineyard does not cost much except to dig about it, and to dung it, and to

prune it. There is, of course, the expense of the gardener who has to watch over it, but this is very little.

You may let the barren tree stand, for it is no great expense. but see what it costs to keep you!

You have to be daily fed. The breath in your nostrils must come from God every moment. There has

to be an emanation from omnipotence at every single tick of that clock, or else you would not live. The

complicated machinery of the human body needs to be tended and kept in order by the great Master

Craftsman, or else before long the cogs would cease to act upon one another, and the wheels would be

broken, and the whole machine would be put out of gear. Your body is a mass of thousands of strings,

and fails if one is gone. The good harpist must watch with sedulous care to prevent the strings from

snapping. You cost God much, much patience, much bounty, much skill, much power. Wherefore

should He spare you?

What is there in you that He should go on with you in this manner? You would not spare the gnat

that was always stinging you, buzzing in your face, and every moment insulting you. If it cost you much

of your poor gold to spare that poor gnat’s life, you would not be long about it—you would crush it. And

oh! it is a marvel that JEHOVAH does not deal thus with you, for you are more impertinent than that

gnat could be. Sinner, if you were in God’s place, and were as ill-treated by your creature as the Lord is

by you, would you lavish love and goodness upon him, to receive hardness of heart and rebellion in

return? Assuredly not. Judge, then, whether it is not right that the Lord should say, “Cut it down.”

But there is a worse consideration, namely, that *all this while you have been filling up space which*

*somebody might have been filling to the glory of God.* Where that barren tree stands, there might have

been a tree loaded with fruit. You are cumbering the ground, as the text says, that is, doing nothing but

just being a cumbersome nuisance. If another mother had those children, she would pray for them, and

weep over them, and teach them of Christ, but you do no such thing. If another man had that money, it

would be laid out for God’s glory, but you lay it out for your own pleasure, and forget the God who gave

it to you. If another had sat in that seat which you occupy, it may be that he had long ago repented in

sackcloth and ashes. but you, like the men of Capernaum, have been hardened instead of being softened

under the Gospel. It may be, man of influence, if another had stood where you have stood in the world’s

judgment, he would have led hundreds in the path of right, but you, standing there, have done no such

thing.

Oh! if another had your gifts, young man, he would not be making a company laugh at the tavern,

but pleading with all his might for Jesus. If another had but your gifts of utterance, he would be

spending time in prayer, and teaching what you now spend in fun and frolic to make amusement for

fools. Oh! if another had that time to live in, he would live in earnest for his Master. If that young saint,

just going through the flood, had your health and vigor, how would he spend and be spent!

I recollect a minister of Christ who had but one talent, but much heart. I remember hearing him pray

this prayer, “O God, I wish I had ten talents, that I might serve You better.” When I think of some that

have them, and do not serve You with them, I am inclined to pray, “Lord, take away their ten talents,

and trust me with them if You will, for I do desire to have something more to lay out for You.”

Take heed, O my dear but sinful hearer, lest the Lord remove you suddenly, and fill up your place

with one who will be obedient to His will.

Moreover and to make bad worse even to the worst degree, *all this while ungodly men are spreading*

*an evil influence.* Thinking over the two lines of the verse we have been singing, I felt a horror of great

darkness as I realized fully their solemn truthfulness with regard to some of you.

***“I have shed His precious blood,***

***Trampled on the Son of God.***

***Filled with pains unspeakable***

**I who yet am not in hell*.”***

Well may the question arise—

***“Whence to me this waste of love?”***

It is so apparently a waste of long-suffering and mercy that some transgressors should be spared at

all, that they may well marvel. Look at it, and I think you will see it very clearly so, *the very fact that*

*God does not punish sin on the spot is mischievously interpreted.* Men in all ages have drawn a wicked

inference from the patience of the great Judge. The Preacher, in Ecclesiastes, says, “Because sentence

against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them

to do evil.”

“Why,” you say, “So-and-So drinks and swears, and he has lived to be a hale, hearty old man. Such a

one has plunged into all sorts of folly and wickedness. He was a thief and everything bad besides, and

yet he prospers in the world, and grows rich. Instead of God sinking him down at once to hell, He has

favored him, and fattened him as a bullock in rich pasture.” “Oh,” the worldling says, “there is no justice

in God. He does not punish sin.” The very fact that you are spared, O sinner, is doing mischief in the

world. Do you see that? Your mere existence in this world is to others an inducement to continue in sin.

For while you are spared, others look at you and say, “God has not punished him.” Therefore they infer

that He will not punish sin at all.

Moreover, how many there are of you *whose example is fearfully contagious*—whose lips and lives

combine to lead your associates astray from God. In this dreadful disease which has ravaged our fields

and destroyed the cattle, farmers have been advised as soon as ever the cow is attacked with the disease,

to kill it on the spot, and bury it five feet deep out of the way.

Let us reflect that the murrain of sin is much more pestilential and more certain to kill than this

murrain among the cattle, and therefore stern justice cries, “Let the sinner be at once sent where He

cannot increase the plague of iniquity—it is of no use sparing him—he grows no better. All the means

used only make him worse, and meanwhile we must look to the welfare of others, lest he perish not

alone in his iniquity. He teaches his children to swear. He makes others worldly. The whole current of

his life is to incite men to rebel against God—let his desperate course be stopped at once. The leprosy is

upon him, and all that he touches he pollutes—for high sanitary reasons, therefore he must be removed.”

It is better that one die than that many should be smitten, and therefore, the highest consideration for the

good of mankind in general renders it necessary that the mandate should go forth, “Cut it down.”

**II.** Our second most solemn work is to remind you, O impenitent sinner, that FOR GOD TO HAVE

SPARED YOU SO LONG IS A VERY WONDERFUL THING. That the infinitely just and holy God

should have spared you, unconverted man, unconverted woman, up till now, is no small thing, but a

matter for adoring wonder.

Let me show you this. Consider, *negatively*, *God is not sparing you because He is insensible*

*towards your sins*—He is angry with the wicked every day. If the Lord could be indifferent towards sin,

and could bring His holy mind to treat it as a mere trifle, then it would be no wonder that He should let

the transgressor live. But He cannot endure iniquity—all the day long His anger smokes and burns

towards evil, and yet He holds back the thunderbolt, and does not smite the guilty. If *you* had been angry

for half-an-hour, you would have come to hard words or blows, but here is the Judge of all the earth

angry every day for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, or eighty years with some of you, and yet

He has not destroyed you.

*It is not because the offense is at a distance,* and therefore far from His observant eye. No—your sins

are like smoke in His nose—your iniquities provoke Him to His face. You touch the apple of His eye,

and yet for all that, though this accursed thing called sin intrudes into His presence every instant, yet still

He has spared you until now. Mark, sinner, He has spared you *not because He was unable to have*

*destroyed you.* He might have bid the tiles fall from the roof, or the fever might have smitten you in the

street. The air might have refused to heave your lungs, or the blood might have ceased its circulation in

your veins. The gates to death are many. The quiver of judgment is full of sharp arrows. The Lord has

but to will it, and your soul is required of you.

He said to the foolish rich man, “This night your soul shall be required of you,” and he never saw the

morning. And He might as easily have sent the same sad message to you, *and what then?* As I have said

before, this great patience is not manifested towards your sinful soul because the Lord is at all dependent

upon you*—*your living will not increase, and your dying will not diminish His glory. You will be no

more missed than one dry leaf is missed in a forest, or one dewdrop in a thousand leagues of grass.

Judgment needs but a word to work its utmost vengeance, and withal you are so provoking that the

marvel is that divine severity has spared you so long. Admire and wonder at this longsuffering.

Remember that this wonder is increased when you *think of the fruit He deserved to have had of you.*

A God so good and so gracious ought to have been loved by you. He has treated you so well, and given

you such capacities for pleasure, that He ought to have had some service of you. You are not to God

precisely what the ox is to its owner—you give to the ox but his grass or his straw, and you have done

with him. but God gives to you not only your daily food, but your very life—you are wholly dependent

upon Him.

Nothing can be so much yours as you are God’s. You ought to have served Him, to have delighted in

that service, to spend and to have been spent for your Lord. He asks no more of you than He ought to

have had, and yet He asks you to love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your strength—

this was His first and great commandment—but this you have constantly, persistently broken. Oh, think,

then, when you have given to God such a bad return, when He ought to have received so much better—

think, I pray you, how you must have provoked Him.

And ah, my hearers! I have to touch upon a very solemn part of the business now, when I notice

again that some, perhaps here present, *have been guilty of very God-provoking sins.* Some offenses

provoke God much more than others—I believe that *cursing* does, for it is wanton insolence, by which

nothing can be gained. It is altogether a gratuitous piece of insult. To swear, to imprecate the curse of

God upon one’s limbs and souls, is an unnecessary, superfluous sin. There cannot be any pleasure in

pronouncing oaths, any more than in uttering any other form of words. It is just because man *will* hate

his Maker, and will provoke Him, that he does this. O sinner, did you ever ask God to damn you, and are

you not astonished that He has not done it? Did you ever desire that the blast should come upon you, and

do you not marvel that He has not long ago swept you where His wrath would wither you forever?

Swearing is a sin that provokes the Most High. O sinner, abhor this most detestable of vices.

*Infidelity,* again, and how many are guilty of that? How provoking to God for a man to deny His

very existence. Standing up and breathing God’s air, and living upon God’s life, and yet saying that

there is no God? An insignificant worm dares challenge the Almighty to prove His Godhead and

existence by a tremendous act of justice. This is a God-provoking sin.

So again is *persecution*. There may be some here present who have persecuted wife and child

because of their following Christ. “He that touches you touches the apple of my eye,” says God. Beware,

sinner, you will not touch the Lord’s eye long without feeling His heavy hand. If any man injures your

children, the blood is in your cheek at once, if you are a father, and you feel that you will show yourself

strong in their defense—even so the heavenly Father will avenge His own elect. Therefore, take heed

lest you persevere in *this* heaven-provoking sin.

And *slander*, too, lying against God’s servants, inventing and spreading wicked tales against those

who walk in God’s fear, this is another evil which awakens the anger of God, and stirs up righteous fury

against the man who is guilty of it. Beware! Beware!

*Filthiness*, filthiness of body and of life, will also provoke the Most Holy One. This once brought

hell out of heaven upon Sodom. God sent down fire and brimstone because of the lusts of the flesh that

made Sodom to stink in His nostrils. The harlot and the adulterer, and the fornicator, shall know that

they sin not without provoking God very terribly.

And let me add here among these God-provoking sins, there is that *quenching of conscience* of

which some of you have been guilty. Ah, my dear hearers, there are not many of you to whom I spoke

under these first heads, for I know that very few of you would indulge in these grosser sins, but there are

some of you quite as bad in another sense, for you know the right and choose the wrong. You hear of

Christ and do not give your hearts to Him. We had hoped of some of you that long ere this we would

have seen you walking in the Lord’s fear, but you are still strangers to Christ.

It must have had hard work to do this. You must have had a terrible tug with conscience, some of

you. I know you have been stifling many a holy desire, and when the Spirit of God has been striving

with you, you have been so desperately set on mischief, that still you have gone on in the error of your

ways. Now these sins provoke God.

I do not believe that I stand in this pulpit and plead with you in God’s name, and then go back and

tell my Master that you have rejected His warnings, without God’s being angry with your hardness of

heart and stiffneckedness. I know if we send an Ambassador to a foreign court to try and make peace,

and he honestly and earnestly lays down proper stipulations for peace, if they are rejected, you will soon

find the newspapers and public opinion ringing with indignation. “Why,” they say, “will not the men

have peace when the terms are so reasonable? Get out the iron-dads, let them have war—war to the

knife. If they will not yield to what is reasonable, then let us dress ourselves in thunder, and go forth

across the sea.”

And what do you think? Shall God be always provoked? Shall mercy be preached to you in vain

forever? Shall Christ be presented and always rejected, and will you continue to be His enemies, and

shall He never proclaim war against your souls? It is a marvel. It is a wonder that these God-provoking

sins have so long been borne with, and that you are not yet cut down.

**III.** And now, WHAT IS THE REASON FOR ALL THIS LONG-SUFFERING?

Why is it that this cumber-ground tree has not been cut down? The answer is, because *there is One*

*who pleads for sinners.* I have shown you, and some of you will think I have shown you with very great

severity too, how reasonable it is that you should be cut down. I wish you felt it, for if you felt how

reasonable it was that God should send you to hell, then you would begin to tremble, and there would be

some hope for you. I can assure you I have trembled for you when I have thought how rational, how

just—nay, it would seem to me, how necessary it was that some of you should be lost—it has made me

tremble for you, and I would to God you would tremble for yourselves.

But what has been the secret cause that you have been kept alive? The answer is, *Jesus Christ has*

*pleaded for you, the crucified Savior has interfered for you.* And you ask me, “Why?” I answer, because

*Jesus Christ has an interest in you all.* We do not believe in general redemption, but we believe in every

word of this precious Bible, and there are many passages in the Scripture which seem to show that

Christ’s death had a universal bearing upon the sons of men. We are told that He tasted death for every

man. What does that mean? Does it mean that Jesus Christ died to save every man? I do not believe it

does, for it seems to me that everything which Christ intended to accomplish by the act of His death, He

must accomplish or else He will be disappointed, which is not supposable.

Those whom Christ died to save I believe He will save effectually, through His substitutionary

sacrifice. But did He in any other sense die for the rest of mankind? He did. Nothing can be much more

plain in Scripture, it seems to me, than that all sinners are spared as the result of Jesus Christ’ death, and

this is the sense in which men are said to trample on the blood of Jesus Christ. We read of some who

denied the Lord that bought them. No one who is bought with blood for eternal salvation ever tramples

on that blood, but Jesus Christ has shed His blood for the reprieve of men that they may be spared, and

those who turn God’s sparing mercy into an occasion for fresh sin, do trample on the blood of Jesus

Christ. You can hold that doctrine without holding universal redemption, or without at all contradicting

that undoubted truth that Jesus laid down His life for His sheep, and that where He suffered He suffered

not in vain.

Now, sinner, whether you know it or not, you are indebted to Him that did hang upon the tree for the

breath that is now in you. You had not been on praying ground and pleading terms with God this

morning if it had not been for that dear Suffering One. Our text represents the gardener as only *asking* to

have it spared, but Jesus Christ did something more than ask—He pleaded, not with His mouth only, but

with pierced hands, and pierced feet, and pierced side. And those prevailing pleas have moved the heart

of God, and you are yet spared.

May I speak to you, then? If your life had been spared, when you were condemned to die, by my

intervention—suppose such a case—would you despise *me?* If I had power at the Court, and when you

were condemned to die, I had gone in and pleaded for you, and you had been reprieved, year after year

would you hate me? Would you speak against me? Would you rail at my character? Would you find

fault with my friends? I know you better—you would *love* me. You would be grateful for the sparing of

your life.

O sinner, I wish you would treat the Lord Jesus as you would treat man. I would you would think of

the Lord Jesus Christ as you would think of your fellow-man who had delivered you from death. You

are not in hell, where you would have been if He had not come in and pleaded for you. I do beseech you,

think of the misery of lost souls, and recollect that *you* would have been in such a woeful case yourself

this morning, if He had not lifted up that hand once pierced for human sin. There, there, where the

flames can no abatement know, where a drop of water is a gift too great to be received—there, where

hope is excluded, and despair sits upon a throne of iron, binding captive souls in everlasting bands—

where “Forever!” is written on the fire, and “Forever!” is printed on the chain, and “Forever! Forever!

Forever!” rings out as the awful death-knell of everything like hope and rest—there you would have

been this morning—this morning—if sparing grace had not prevented.

Where are your companions, your old companions? You sat in the tavern with them. They are in

hell, but you are not. When you were younger, you sinned with them, and they are lost, but you are not.

Why this difference made? Why are they cast away and you spared? I can only ascribe it to the gracious

longsuffering of JEHOVAH. O, I pray you look at Him who spared you, and weep and mourn for your

sins. May the Spirit of God come down on you this morning and draw you to the foot of His dear cross,

and as you see the blood which has spared your blood, and the death which has made you live until now,

I do trust that the divine Spirit may make you fall down and say, “O Jesus, how can I offend You? How

can I stand out against You? Accept me and save me for Your mercy’s sake.”

While I have thus spoken of the general interest which Christ has in you all, I have good hope that

Christ has *a special interest in some of you.* I hope that He has specially redeemed you from among

men, and bought you not with silver and gold, but with His own precious blood, having loved you with

an everlasting love. I trust He intends with the bands of His kindness to draw you this morning.

“Oh,” says one, “I cannot think that such can be the case.” But suppose you were to find out ere long

that you were chosen of God, and dear to Christ, and were to be a jewel in His crown forever—what

would you say then of yourself? “I would mourn that I could ever have hated Him that loved me so well.

Oh! that I could ever have stood out against Him that was determined to save me! What a fool I was to

quarrel with Him who had paid my price, and chosen me by His grace, and taken me to be married unto

Himself forever!”

I tell you that God will forgive you, but you will never forgive yourselves for having stood out and

resisted so long. Oh! may eternal mercy, which has not yet said, “Cut it down,” now dig about you, and

dung you that you may bring forth fruit, and then it shall be all to the praise of Him whose precious

blood has saved us from eternal wrath.

May God bless these feeble words of mine. He knows how I meant them. How I meant to speak

them, how I meant to have wept over you, how I wanted that my soul should heave with passionate

desire for your conversion, but if there have been no such outward manifestations, yet I pray God that

the truth itself may be irresistible, and may He get to Himself the victory, and His shall be the praise,

evermore.

Taken from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software. Only necessary changes have been made, such as

correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic

words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.

# A Problem of Perspective (Luke 13:1-21) Deffinbaugh at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21*](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21)

*1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all [“likewise,” NASB] perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all [“likewise,” NASB] perish.”*

*6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. 7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ 8 “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ “*

*10 On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, 11 and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” 13 Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. 14 Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” 15 The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? 16 Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” 17 When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.*

*18 Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? 19 It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in [“threw into,” NASB] his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.”*

*20 Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into [“hid in,” NASB] a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”*

### Introduction

One’s perspective makes all the difference in the world. To most of you, a car that is “sick” or “dead” has no appeal. If you own it, you probably will try to think of a way of getting someone else to purchase it, or even to take it off your hands. On the other hand, when I look through the “car” section of the want ads, I have no interest in those cars which are running well. I want the sick and the dead ones.

The son of a farmer looks at cow manure as something which he must endlessly shovel out of the barn—a pain in the neck. The flower gardener, on the other hand, looks at manure as free fertilizer. They delight to get the stuff. They shovel it around the flower beds with joy. A mere matter of perspective.

Our perspective is very much a reflection of who we are. A Christian’s perspective is very much determined by his or her spiritual gifts. To the apostle Paul, John Mark was a liability, a man who could not be counted on, and thus a man who should not be taken along on a missionary journey. To Barnabas, whose gift was encouragement, Mark was an opportunity and a challenge. Mark was a man who needed encouragement, and Barnabas was the man to do it, just as he had ministered to Paul (Saul) in the early days of his Christian walk.

In our text, we find two very different perspectives reflected. One is that of the Jewish leadership and of many of their followers. The other is the perspective of God, as seen in the viewpoint of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In verses 1-5, a certain group of people viewed the tragic and untimely death of a group of men as an indicator of great sin and of God’s wrath. To Jesus this tragedy took on an entirely different meaning, one which He shared with His listeners. The parable of the fruitless fig tree in verses 6-9 is our Lord’s response to the previous incident, teaching Israel about themselves and about God.

The account of the healing of the hunchback, the Israelite woman who had been stooped over for 18 years (verses 10-17) again reveals a very different set of perspectives. The woman’s long-term suffering produced one response, and her healing evoked praise from her and delight for many, but it greatly irritated the ruler of the synagogue, who did not want the Sabbath violated by such “work” as healing. Jesus has an entirely different perspective from this man, as we shall see in our study.

Finally, in verses 18-21 our text ends with two very short parables. These parables, one about a mustard tree (vv. 18-19) and the other about leaven (vv. 20-21), give a divine perspective on the kingdom of God, one, as we might expect, very different from that of most Israelites.

Man’s natural way of viewing things is never the same as God’s ([Isaiah 55:6-9](javascript:%7b%7d)), and thus we can only know God’s thoughts from His Word, as revealed to us through His Spirit ([1 Corinthians 2:14-16](javascript:%7b%7d)). Let us approach this text as those whose perspective is warped and distorted by sin, and let us look to God to give us that perspective which is like His. Let us listen well to these words of Scripture and heed them as the Word of God.

### A Reminder

As we approach this text it is especially important for us to remember Luke’s audience and his purpose in writing this gospel. Other gospels were known to Luke, but he wrote this gospel for Gentile believers. He is not writing to a Jewish audience, as Matthew has done, but he is writing to Gentiles, showing them how a Jewish Messiah, in fulfillment of His promises to Israel, can bring salvation to the entire world.

Our text from this lesson is one which helps to explain why Israel rejected Jesus as her Messiah, and of the way in which God used Israel’s hardness of heart and rejection of Christ to bring about His promised kingdom. The nature of the kingdom of God is very different from that which Israel expected, and it is brought about in a very different manner than they thought it would be. Few texts will give us more insight into the reasons why God took the kingdom away from Israel and gave it, as it were, to the Gentiles.

### The Meaning of the Massacre of the Galileans (13:1-5)

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all [“likewise,” NASB] perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all [“likewise,” NASB] perish.”

Jesus was still surrounded by a multitude of thousands ([Luke 12:1](javascript:%7b%7d)), sometimes teaching the masses (e.g. 12:54) and at other times teaching His disciples (e.g. 12:22). Sometimes it was not clear just who He was speaking to (cf. 12:41). At one point in time a delegation came to Jesus with some tragic news—a report that Pilate had recently slain a group of Galileans[237](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5088_1607676) as they were worshipping. He mixed their blood with their sacrifices, we are told (v. 1). We do not know whether those who came bearing this account were Galileans themselves, or (more likely in my opinion), whether they were not.[238](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5089_1608597)

There was a meaning to this message. The report was conveyed to Jesus for a reason. Those who were the bearers of this bad news viewed it through their own perspective, a perspective which differed from our Lord’s. Jesus’ response to them exposed both their thinking and the error it betrayed. They had already drawn a **false conclusion**: **these Galileans were greater sinners than others**. This false conclusion was based upon a **faulty premise**: **one’s suffering in life is indicative of one’s sin, just as one’s prosperity is proportional to one’s piety**.

Jesus rejected both the conclusion and its premise as being false. He asked the question, which He answered with a simple, but emphatic, “no.” Then He immediately changed the focus. The tragedy which befell those Galileans should not be viewed as an opportunity to judge those who died at the hand of Pilate to be great sinners. Instead, it should be perceived as a warning to all sinners, namely themselves, of a judgment which awaits them.

Before we turn to the words of our Lord, found first in verse 3 and then repeated in verse 5, let us first take note that our Lord turned the attention of these men to another tragedy. This was also a tragedy which occurred in Jerusalem, at the tower of Siloam.[239](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5093_1610290) Here, 18 men were killed when the tower in Siloam suddenly collapsed and fell on them. These men were not greater sinners than others either.

Some point out that while the Galileans died at the hand of man (namely Pilate), the 18 people who died in Jerusalem died at the hand of “nature,” at what we would call an “act of God.” We may also conclude that while the first group of men who died were those from Galilee, the second group seems to be those who lived in Jerusalem. If these Jerusalemites tended to look down their noses at the Galileans, Jesus will provide them with an example of their own peers dying in a similar way, tragically, prematurely, unexpectedly. While they compared Galileans with themselves, Jesus compared Galileans with Galileans (v. 2), and Jerusalemites with Jerusalemites (v. 4).

There are differences between these two groups of men who died, but the similarities seem more striking to me. **First, those in both groups died**. Jesus is not speaking of suffering in general terms, but specifically of death. He also warns His audience of the death which they will experience. **Second, both groups died in a similar way**—**quickly, unexpectedly, tragically**. **Third, both groups died at a place and time when they may have felt very safe**. When would a legalistic Jew feel more spiritual and “closer to God” (thus “safe” from divine judgment) than when he was performing his religious ritual of sacrifice. They died while offering sacrifices! And the 18 men who died in Jerusalem died while standing near a tower, undoubtedly a tower that was a significant part of their defense network. The tower would be that place where guards were stationed, the place from which an attack from outside the walls of the city would be countered. Where could anyone have stood that would have made them feel more secure? And yet they died by the tower. Literally, they died under the rubble of that tower. That which they viewed as their salvation was their destruction.

Judaism, from the perspective of the self-righteous (and lost) Israelite, was his salvation. Being a physical descendant of Abraham was all one needed to be assured of a place in the coming kingdom. This was what the typical Israelite thought. Jesus’ words should have sent a chill down the spine of every listener. These people all died doing that which made them feel safe and secure.

Jesus’ words, as I understand them, and as they are twice stated in our text, are specifically directed toward the nation of Israel:

“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all [“likewise,” NASB] perish.

The Lord calls upon all of His hearers to repent. The word “repent” is not new, but here it underscores the fact that those who are listening are sinners, too. Would they play the mental game of weighing the sins of those who died? Jesus let them know they were sinners. Would they ponder the death of those Galileans? Let them recognize that they, too, will die. Will they look at these few as especially sinful? Then they must be told that they will all die in a similar way.

I do not think that our Lord is speaking of death in a general way. He is not saying that all men will eventually die, and thus they must repent of their sins in order to be ready for their time of death. Jesus is speaking to the nation Israel. Jesus is speaking to that generation of Israelites which has seen God’s Messiah and has failed to accept Him as their King. This generation will perish, but it will, as a group, face an even more terrible death than those about whom they have just been speaking. That generation of Israelites will come to a tragic ending themselves, the sudden and irreversible destruction that will come when Rome comes in full force to annihilate the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to destroy the city.[240](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5101_1614345) I believe that this is what Peter was referring to in his powerful sermon, recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts:

And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” ([Acts 2:40](javascript:%7b%7d)).

There is, of course a general (and very important) sense in which “be saved” should be understood, but here the salvation of Peter’s audience specifically includes a salvation from that generation and the destruction which lies ahead for all who persist in their rejection of Christ. This is the same destruction of which our Lord speaks in our text in Luke’s gospel. If Jesus’ listeners think that these two small groups of people died suddenly and unexpectedly for their sins, it is nothing compared to that which lies ahead for them. Let them not bother to ponder the sins of others. Let them repent of their own, and quickly!

### The Parable of the Fruitless Fig Tree (13:6-9)

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

The relationship between the preceding five verses and this parable may not be immediately apparent, but it is clear and direct.[241](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5108_1617165) In the previous paragraph, Jesus was speaking to Israelites as Israelites, and warning them of the destruction which was coming for the nation. This parable of the “fruitless fig tree” is drawing attention to the same thing, only in a different way. The fig tree was a frequently employed and well-understood symbol of the nation Israel.[242](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5109_1618512) Jesus uses this parable to underscore for His audience, once again, the utter failure of Israel to live up to the standards and expectations which God had held for it over its centuries of history. The parable is not only going to underscore Israel’s sinful fruitlessness, but also the nearness of its destruction, in tree-terms, its time for being cut down.

Typical of ancient and modern practice, a fig tree was planted in the midst of a man’s vineyard.[243](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5111_1619436) The farmer expected the tree to be producing figs, and for three years he had come to look for fruit, only to find none. He had concluded (and long experience would confirm) that the tree was never going to produce, and so he ordered it cut down. The vinedresser appealed to him to wait just one more year, and then cut it down if it persisted in failing to produce a crop. The tree was not only fruitless and useless, it used up valuable ground. It should be cut down if it continued not to produce.

Farmers understand this imagery very well. An egg farmer will keep careful record of the production of his hens. A non-producer will not be kept long, but will be put to better use in the stew pot. So, too, with cattle or with other kinds of fruit trees. Useless and unproductive plants are not tolerated, nor should they be. A farmer has the right to expect a return on his investment. This farmer is “fed up” with this fig tree, but he is persuaded to wait one more year. Time for this “tree” is short indeed.

This parable not only teaches the sinfulness of the nation Israel, it also underscores the shortness of the time and thus the urgency for the nation to repent and be saved from the wrath of God which is to come. That “fire” of which John the Baptist has warned ([Luke 3:8-9](javascript:%7b%7d)) and more recently our Lord ([Luke 12:49](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.) is drawing near in time. Let the Israelites cease to ponder the sins of others and begin to act in repentance concerning their own sins.

Do the “three years” that the owner has waited for figs (v. 7) correspond to the length of time our Lord has already spent preaching the gospel to the nation Israel? Perhaps. I am inclined to think so. This would mean that there is little time left for the nation to repent. Jesus is already pressing toward Jerusalem (9:31, 53; cf. 13:31-35). As the time of His death draws near, so does the time of Israel’s destruction.

While this parable, like the account of the tragic deaths of the Galileans and those who died by the tower of Siloam, conveys a message of warning to the Israelites, it also corrects another error in the thinking of the people. The inference underlying the conclusion of the people in verses 1-5 is that God hastened the death of those who died, in judgment of their (greater than normal) sins. Our parable tells us the exact opposite. The people were wrong to conclude that these people who died prematurely were greater sinners than their peers. God had not come to judge them early because of their greater evil. Indeed, **the parable of the farmer and the fruitless fig tree speaks rather of the patience and longsuffering of God with respect to the stubborn rebellion and sin of Israel**. This extended time, this delay in judgment, was for the purpose of allowing God’s people further opportunity to repent. While some sinners may very well interpret and apply His delay as an occasion to expand in their sin (cf. 12:45), the righteous will know better. The erroneous conclusion of the people reveals the perspective of the people; the point of the parable reveals the perspective of God.

### The Healing of the Hunchback (13:10-17)

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

The next paragraph, you will note, is the longest in our passage. That should tell us something of its significance. At first it would seem that the story of the healing of this woman is totally out of context. It almost seems like an interruption. This is not the case however, for this incident vividly demonstrates the difference in perspective between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus, a difference which will shortly climax at the cross of Calvary.

The scene has now changed. Jesus is no longer teaching the multitude; he is teaching, for the last time in Luke,[244](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5121_1624347) in a synagogue. There was a woman there who had been demonically afflicted with a spinal problem for 18 years. Jesus took the initiative and sought out the woman, laying His hands on her (something Jesus seemingly never did to demoniacs) and healing her instantly and completely.

Her response was almost instantaneous. She began glorifying God. Here was worship like this synagogue had probably never seen before. Many of the crowd joined her in rejoicing at her healing. Many, but not all. The ruler of the synagogue and some others (cf. vv. 15, 17) were not happy at all. Unlike Jesus, they had no compassion on the woman, nor did they rejoice in her deliverance. In contrast to the joy of many, the ruler of the synagogue was mad. He was incensed, but he did not confront Jesus. Instead, he went about rebuking the people, demanding that if they wanted to be healed there were six days in the week for such things, but not the Sabbath.

Jesus called the man and those who agreed with him[245](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5124_1625623) hypocrites. There was much about this ruler’s objections which were hypocritical. For example, he says that there are six days on which people can be healed. How many healings do you think occurred in that synagogue? Do you think that this woman could have come back on the following day and been healed? Not if Jesus were gone. I suspect that this woman was a “regular” at this synagogue, but she had not found healing (let alone sympathy) in 18 years. How could the ruler of the synagogue dare to even suggest that healing would be available at some other time?

Another form of hypocrisy, as I read between these lines, is that this man was to be a leader in worship, as well as in teaching. While most of those present were actively praising God—worshipping as they had never done before—this leader was doing everything possible to “shut down” what was going on.

The greatest hypocrisy however must be that which Jesus chose to highlight. Jesus accused the religious leaders of hypocrisy because they would routinely sanction “breaking the Sabbath” for the benefit of one of their animals, but not for the benefit of this woman, a daughter of Abraham. They would loose their donkey on the Sabbath, and let it drink,[246](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5127_1627185) but they would prohibit Jesus from loosing this woman from Satan’s grip, from her bondage, which had lasted now 18 long years. Their compassion was selective, self-centered, and hypocritical.

Jesus’ stinging rebuke of this hypocrisy brought a two-fold response. The people who rejoiced with the woman loved it, rejoicing over all that Jesus was saying and doing. The opponents, however, were humiliated. They were not sorry. They were not corrected. They were just put to shame. Their day, they must be telling themselves, will come. So it will seem.

What was the difference in perspective, in the thinking of the Jewish religious leaders, which brought about this totally opposite response to the healing of this woman? How could they be indignant when the people were ecstatic? I believe that the answer is really quite simple. The Jewish religious leaders felt that they were righteous, deserving of divine blessings. The others seemed to know better. The Jewish leaders therefore not only refused and rejected the grace of God (as seen in the woman’s healing), they despised it. How could this be? They felt that both divine blessing and divine indignation were God’s response to man’s deeds. They thought legalistically. In their minds, EVERY ACTION HAS AN EQUAL AND CORRESPONDING RESPONSE FROM GOD.

When you read the Mosaic Covenant, this is precisely what you find. When Israel sinned, God brought chastening and discipline. When Israel obeyed the law which God gave, God blessed them. Thus, we can see how those who came with the report of the tragic slaughter of the Galileans revealed a legalistic outlook. If something really bad happened to people, they must have been really bad. If something really good happened to them (e.g. prosperity or long life), they had to have been good. In the words of the song Julie Andrews sings in the Sound of Music, “**I must have done something good … ”**

What the Israelites had forgotten was that the Mosaic Covenant was temporary and provisional. The promises God made to Abraham would not be fulfilled through the Mosaic Covenant, but through a new covenant. This new covenant was prophesied and described, for example, in [Jeremiah 32](javascript:%7b%7d) and 33. The blessings of God and the coming of the kingdom of God would not be the result of Israel’s obedience to the law, but due to the righteousness of Messiah, and through His death on behalf of sinners, bearing the condemnation of the law which man’s sins merit ([Isaiah 52:13–53:12](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Why would Israelites reject the Messiah and the new covenant which He came to establish? Why would they prefer the condemnation of the law to the blessings of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ? There is only one answer: These Israelites were self-righteous. They did not regard themselves to be sinners, but rather as those who were righteous before God and thus deserving of His blessings on the basis of their good works. They would, in contemporary terminology, “rather do it themselves.”

It is the difference between Jesus’ perspective and that of His opponents which is spelled out in the final two parables of our passage. Let us consider them and their message as we attempt to draw this lesson to a conclusion.

### The Mustard Seed and the Yeast (13:18-21)

Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in [“threw into,” NASB] his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.” Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into [“hid in,” NASB] a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Before we consider the meaning of these two very brief parables, let us draw back for a moment to think through the gospel from a broader point of view, as it is explained in the context of all the gospels, and in the remainder of the New Testament. We know that Israel did not, as a nation, turn to Jesus as God’s Messiah, and that the nation as a whole rejected Him, agreeing with His crucifixion. We know also that Jerusalem was destroyed and that the nation was scattered, not to be brought back to the land until a few years ago, and they are still in a state of unbelief so far as Jesus is concerned. We know that the Jews rejected the grace of God and that the gospel has subsequently (and consequently) gone out to the Gentiles, and that God is now working through the church, rather than through Israel, although in a future day this will change (cf. [Romans 9-11](javascript:%7b%7d)). The Messiah and the message which Israel rejected, some of the Gentiles (and a few Jews) have believed. These two parables describe this, I believe, in somewhat veiled language.

#### The Parable of the Mustard Seed

The first parable is that of the mustard seed. Elsewhere the emphasis falls upon how small the seed is and how great the tree which results (cf. [Matthew 13:31-32](javascript:%7b%7d)). Here, however, Jesus places the emphasis on the action of the man, who carelessly casts the mustard seed aside, into his garden. The NIV is clearly inaccurate here, veiling the clear sense of the language. The NASB says it literally, the man **threw** the seed into the garden.[247](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5141_1632906) He did not “plant” it (another word, which is found above in verse 6). This parable must be understood in contrast to the parable above, of the fruitless fig tree. The fig tree was purposely planted (a different word in verse 6 than our word here in verse 19), and it was carefully tended and nurtured. This mustard seed was cast into the garden. I am inclined to think it was a part of his throwing compost into the garden, as fertilizer. The man did not intend for a tree to grow here, and surely not a mustard tree. The birds which gathered in it would only tend to steal the things growing in the garden (as any of us farmer-types know from painful experience).

The message of this parable is simple and pointed, I believe. Jesus has warned Israel of God’s impending wrath. They have been the fruitless fig tree that is about to be cut down. The mustard tree is that tree which God has chosen to replace it with. The imagery of a tree, providing a place of protection for birds, is one commonly associated with the Gentiles in the Old Testament.[248](https://bible.org/seriespage/problem-perspective-luke-131-21#P5143_1634547) It is the careless “casting away” of the seed by Israel which results in the great tree of the largely Gentile “kingdom.”

Isn’t this amazing? Many of the Jews wanted to “work” for their place in the kingdom of God by meticulously “keeping the law.” No wonder the ruler of the synagogue was so upset about “breaking the law” as he saw it at least. But in striving to earn God’s blessings, they rejected their own sinfulness and thus the Savior as well. When they threw salvation away, the fig tree was cut down, but the mustard tree flourished. The rejection of Messiah by Israel has brought salvation to the Gentiles.

#### The Parable of the Leaven

The second parable in this pair is that found in verses 20 and 21. Here, Jesus likens the “kingdom of God” to the leaven which a woman seeks to **hide** in three pecks of meal. The NASB speaks of the leaven as being “hidden” in the three pecks of meal, while the NIV says it was “mixed into a large amount of flour.” The word clearly means to “hide” (cf. its use in [Luke 8:17; 18:34; 19:42](javascript:%7b%7d); [Matt. 13:44; 25:25](javascript:%7b%7d)). While the woman attempts to hide the leaven, the result is the opposite, for it permeates the entire portion of meal.

You will remember that God saved Israel to be a “light to the Gentiles.” The Jews did not like the Gentiles, as the book of Jonah graphically reveals. They did not want to share their blessings with the Gentiles, and thus they sought to “hide” the truth and keep its blessings only to themselves. It was foolish and futile for the woman to attempt to “hide” the leaven in the meal. So, too, it was foolish and futile for the Israelites to try to “hide” the light of the gospel from the Gentiles. You will recall that Jesus spoke clearly about the salvation of the Gentiles to His people, and that their reaction was a violent one (cf. [Luke 4:16-30](javascript:%7b%7d)). In the very act of their trying to prevent the gospel from going forth to the Gentiles they only caused it to spread more quickly and effectively. In the book of Acts Luke will demonstrate that Jewish persecution in Jerusalem will only scatter the church and the gospel more and more.

The kingdom of God is like this, Jesus says. The Jews who think they are righteous will reject Christ and will refuse to repent, and thus they will be judged as a nation. The fig tree will be cut down. And in its place will be a mustard tree, as it were, the church. By trying to conceal the truth from the Gentiles, the nation has only proven to have unwittingly spread it abroad—God’s unfaithful and uncooperative evangelists. Let all Israel listen and learn from Jesus’ words of warning and instruction.

### Conclusion

This passage concerns the nation of Israel, its rejection of Messiah, its self-righteousness, and the impending judgment which will fall on all those who do not renounce their faith in Judaism and identify Jesus as their Christ, their Messiah. It explains why the kingdom of God was taken from Israel, and why the Gentiles have come to play a very prominent part in God’s program for the church.

This text surely underscores the urgency of Israel’s need to repent, before the time of judgment comes upon that generation. But if it contains a message of warning to that generation, it also speaks to us of the urgency of repentance and of evangelism. If you have not come to a personal faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior whom God sent into the world to bring about the forgiveness of sins, you should sense the same urgency of which Jesus spoke. You see, when Jesus ascended to heaven, to sit at the right hand of the Father, He did so to wait until the Father indicated that it was time to return to judge the world and to deal finally with the wicked. He is coming again, and that coming is soon. Those who have not trusted in Christ as their Savior may soon find themselves standing (or falling) before Him as their judge, even as Paul warns in Philippians chapter 2. Jesus will return to purify the earth with fire, as Peter spells out in the third chapter of 2 Peter. The delay in His coming is not do to His disinterest, but is due to His compassion and longsuffering. He is giving men further time to repent, just as the “fruitless fig tree” was given addition time to produce. But there is a day of judgment and “fire” coming soon. Be ready for it. The only way to be ready is to repent of your sin and to trust in Jesus as the One who died in your place, for your sins.

This text also admonishes Christians that as the time of Christ’s return draws near, we need to be found watching and waiting for Him. We need to be faithful to proclaim and hold forth the gospel, which is the “light” that we are to carry to all men. We are no more to “hide” this light than Israel was to do so. Let us be faithful to call upon men to be ready for the coming kingdom of God.

Finally, let us beware of the same kind of thinking which was typical of the Israelites of Jesus’ day. Let us beware of thinking that those who die early or in some tragic way are worse sinners than we. Let us view a more prosperous and lengthy life not as our reward for being righteous, but as God’s grace.

I find that we Americans often exude the same kind of national pride which typified the Israelites. They thought that God blessed them because they were more pious, more spiritual. This was not so. God blessed His people in spite of their sin, and out of His grace, rather than their goodness. We Americans often think (and even are so bold as to say) that we are prosperous because we are a “Christian nation,” and we send out missionaries, and so on. Any prosperity we have and continue to experience is, in my understanding, solely the outgrowth of divine grace, rather than of human merit. Let us realize that the kingdom of God comes to the earth because of the righteousness of Christ and the grace of God manifested through His Son. And let us be humbled by the fact that the kingdom has come to include the Gentiles because of Israel’s failure and sin, not due to our own righteousness.

237 “‘The Galilean zealots were notoriously turbulent, and Pilate was ruthlessly cruel. Many massacres marked his administration’ (Major, The Mission and Message of Jesus, p. 281)… The fact that Josephus makes no mention of this particular instance of Pilate’s cruelty is of no importance. He leaves many incidents unmentioned. In any case he mentions a sufficient number of Pilate’s actions to make us realize that this Roman ruler was an utter brute who on more than one occasion acted as in this case.” Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, The New International Commentary on the New Testament Series* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975 [reprint]), p. 370, fn. 4.

238 If the Galileans were offering their sacrifices in Jerusalem, as it would appear, then the tragedy occurred there. This could mean that the ones who came to Jesus with this report were, themselves, from Jerusalem. They may have been residents of Jerusalem. If so, they would be inclined to look down on Galileans (cf. [John 1:46](javascript:%7b%7d); [Matthew 26:69](javascript:%7b%7d); [John 19:19](javascript:%7b%7d); [Acts 1:11; 4:13-16](javascript:%7b%7d)). There may thus have been some pleasure in giving this report.

239 “The pool is Siloam was near the angle where the southern and eastern walls of Jerusalem came together. The tower of Siloam which fell was probably part of the ancient system of defense on the walls in the vicinity of the pool of Siloam.” Geldenhuys, p. 371, fn. 7.

240 “‘The fate of these people is a reminder not of their sins—they were neither better nor worse than many others—but of the urgency of the Gospel. Had they only known what was astir, been warned that Pilate was in a black mood or that the building was dangerous, they might have saved their lives. But there was nobody to warn them, and they perished. So this generation, says Jesus in effect, is walking—politically and religiously—straight for disaster. But the warning has been given, first by John the Baptist and now by Jesus. It is a warning to change direction before it is too late’ (T. W. Manson, pp. 565ff.).” Geldenhuys, p. 371, fn. 6.

“The parable here evidently refers to Israel, to whom God gave full opportunity to bear fruit but who remain unfruitful, as appears from their rejection of Him, the promised Christ. But nevertheless God will give them a last chance, and if they should then still persist in unbelief and sin they will be irrevocably cut down from their privileged and protected position as the chosen people of God… The majority, however, refused to repent and thus they drew upon themselves the disasters which accompanied the Roman-Jewish wars (A.D. 66-70), when their national existence in the Holy Land was irrevocably cut down.” Ibid, p. 372.

241 “This parable fits in exceptionally well with what is described in verses 1-5, for through this parable Jesus once more calls attention to the urgent necessity of true repentance—a repentance which will bring forth fruit.” Geldenhuys, p. 372.

“The preceding passage has stressed the importance of repenting and this one highlights the fact that opportunity does not last for ever.” Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To St. Luke, The Tyndale Bible Commentary Series*, R. V. G. Tasker, General Editor (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 222.

“The point is that the absence of judgment here and now cannot be construed as a sign of one’s righteousness. Rather, if judgment does not strike immediately, it is a sign of God’s mercy, not his approval (cf. [Acts 14:15-17; 17:30](javascript:%7b%7d); [Rom 2:4](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.; [2 Pet 3:9](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.). One is being given a last chance.” Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), p. 145.

242 “The fig tree is frequently used as symbolical of the Jewish people (cf. Hos. ix. 10; Joel i. 7). ‘The position of the parable after the preceding narrative points to an interpretation of the fig tree as symbolical of the Jewish people, which is to be allowed yet a short period for repentance’ (Creed, in loc.).” Geldenhuys, p. 373, fn. 1.

John the Baptist ([Matthew 3:10](javascript:%7b%7d); [Luke 3:9](javascript:%7b%7d)) warned Israel that she, like a bad tree, was near to the time of being chopped down.

243 “It was and still is the custom in Palestine to plant fig trees and other trees in a vineyard.” Ibid, p. 372.

Note the linking of the fig tree with the vineyard in these texts, for example: [Joel 1:7](javascript:%7b%7d); [Zechariah 3:10](javascript:%7b%7d); [Micah 4:4](javascript:%7b%7d); [Joel 2:22](javascript:%7b%7d).

244 “This is the last instance in Luke where Jesus appears teaching in a synagogue. The hostility of the Jewish authorities increased to such an extent towards the end of the Savior’s activities that He would afterwards no longer be allowed to appear in the synagogues.” Geldenhuys, p. 374.

245 In verse 15 we are told Jesus answered him, the focus being on this one man, but then Jesus went on to accuse others with the plural expression, “You hypocrites.” We see in verse 17 that the synagogue ruler and all Jesus’ opponents were being humiliated. The rebuke of this one man was, in effect, a rebuke to the others who agreed with him.

246 “The rabbis were greatly concerned that animals be treated well. On the Sabbath, animals could be led out by a chain or the like as long as nothing was carried (Shabbath 5:1). Water could be drawn for them and poured into a trough, though a man must not hold a bucket for the animal to drink from (Erubin 20b, 21a). If animals may be cared for in such ways, much more may a daughter of Abraham be set free from Satan’s bondage on the Sabbath. In fact Jesus uses a strong term and says she ‘must’ (*dei*) be loosed.” Morris, p. 223.

247 The word “threw” in the NASB is “planted” in the NIV. The term Ballo seems to have the meaning, “to throw or let go of a thing without caring where it falls” as indicated (among two other choices) by Thayer, p. 93. Thus, in [Luke 23:34](javascript:%7b%7d) (and parallels) it is used for the “casting of lots” of the soldiers. It is found in the very text we are studying in 13:8, for “putting in fertilizer.” One throws manure. In [Luke 21:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d) the term is used to describe those who are “casting” their offerings into the treasury. The “planting of the fig tree” above in Luke uses another term for its planting.

248 “The birds roosting in the branches are often a symbol for the nations of the earth ([Ezk. 17:23; 31:6](javascript:%7b%7d); [Dn. 4:12, 21](javascript:%7b%7d)).” Morris, p. 224.

“Plummer here writes: ‘This was a recognized metaphor for a great empire giving protection to the nations’ (in loc). T. W. Manson agrees with this: ‘Both in apocalyptic and Rabbinical literature `the birds of the heaven’ stand for the Gentile nations’ (loc. cit.).” Geldenhuys, p. 378, fn. 4.

1. Nestle, E., Nestle, E., Aland, B., Aland, K., Karavidopoulos, J., Martini, C. M., & Metzger, B. M. (1993). [*The Greek New Testament*](https://ref.ly/logosres/na27int?ref=BibleNA27.Lk13) (27th ed., Lk 13). Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: Stuttgart. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)