

## A Word about Fruitfulness

Luke 13.6–9, 18–21

### *Sermon*

Before begin msg, two notes: Holy Wk events, family traveling.

Age in which we live obsessed w data. Statisticians have created elegant formulae to analyze everything from economy to sports. Through compilation & analysis of various data, can id who is helped most by a proposed legislative policy to who is greatest QB of all time. So only natural for bels to carry same thinking into ch: are there metrics by which we can analyze whether we're doing a good job? Some would say abs yes. Measurement of whether a ch is doing well is found in outward success: growing attendance, increased membership, more baptisms, bigger giving. #s mean souls. Not just present-day: ill of M Bowman re Xians living in late 19th c. But is outward success a reliable gauge? What about chs in rural comms (baptisms)? What about Jer? So some conc this can't be right, not what Scr says. Measurement of whether a ch is doing well not found in outward success but in persistent faithfulness. Can't tell from "success" whether a ch is fulfilling mission, look instead to see whether they're being faithful. Doing right things? Preaching B? Evangelizing? Then they're all right, regardless of outward success. A lot to like about this view: pushes back against Amer pragmatism, emphs Scr practices, guards vs temptation to compromise for #s sake. & yet something lacking as well. Most of us have encountered chs that might be described as dead orthodoxy: doctrine is sound, programs traditional, doing right things, yet lifeless. & in those cases, faithfulness can actually become a justification for that very lifelessness: "we're just sticking by the stuff." IOW faithfulness can become mirror opp idol of success, another way to justify ourselves before G.

In today's psg J ids what he's looking for in chs like ours. Had Lazar read a split section of Lk 13, not bc parts before or in between are

unimp, but bc I wanted you to hear these parables side by side. Both talking about same thing, dramatically applicable to our context.

"Isn't this about kingdom? Why are you talking about our ch? Is k same as ch?" No, but related. Take 3 mins to set bib context. In Scr G's k describes his rule over everything (§ Ps 145.19): constant, overarching, unending. & yet if G ruling over everything right now, seems that he's not doing a very good job: world marked by violence, injustice, greed, exploitation & a host of other vices. Things are not way they ought to be, absence of shalom. So here's this tension: G says he rules over all, but humanity marked by all sorts of things that G says (& we know) are terribly wrong. How to resolve? One solution: G really doesn't rule over all. Atheist version ("there is no G"), theistic version ("G isn't really sov"). But both of those options create more probs: if no G, then no way to id what is wrong w world; if G exists but not sov, then no hope that shalom will ever come, wrongs righted, love will win. Another sol: G is sov but isn't actively ruling now, letting things carry on, get worse & worse, but one day in one climactic moment, will fix it all. Kingdom is future not present. Much more to be commended here. Frankly pretty close to what peo of Isr in J's day expected: waiting for M to come, push back Roman Empire, relaunch Davidic monarchy from Jeru.

Now this conflict bet the world as we see it & G's eternal dom over all things is precisely what's in view in these parables/reason J talking about k of G. Very much concerned w this tension precisely bc he loves peo & he is just. Wants them to see that G's k not just a theoretical rule but has profoundly practicalimps. Ergo these parables. But what J tells us is not what we'd expect: at least three ways.

Doesn't arrive w cataclysm we expect. § In v 19 J compares G's k to mustard seed. Notable for its small size, grows to 10ft or more. Nothing astonishing about growth of that tree, rather normal/natural. § In v 21 compares k of G to yeast. Like mustard seed, yeast quite small by

comparison to 60 lbs of dough. & yet as woman kneads dough, yeast works itself through whole thing so that all 60 lbs affected by that small amt of yeast. See what J is saying? The *k* is like mustard seed/yeast, not something big & powerful but something small & seemingly insignificant. W these parables J confronting notion peo had in his day that M would come in cataclysmic wonder to reestablish throne of D. But J says no, G's *k* doesn't arrive w cataclysm we expect. But a 2nd pt here.

Doesn't resolve tension as quickly as we expect. Step back a moment & consider these parables in light of that broader BT of G's *k* I shared a min ago: G rules over all, but humanity marked by precisely opp of what the *K* decrees. What does resolution look like? Well, cataclysm. But more than that, looks like wrongs righted at that moment. At very time G's *k* comes, justice served, love wins, shalom comes. But that can't be way it works in light of these parables. *K* of G not G throwing out bad dough & deciding to bake a pie instead; *k* is like a small amt of yeast put into lbs of dough that slowly over times influences & changes chemistry of whole. *K* of G not G destroying his corrupt garden & speaking a new one into existence; *k* is like mustard seed in garden that slowly becomes choice spot for birds to nest. Peo in Isr's day wanted justice right now, but J said that when G's *k* comes, not cataclysmic & change not imm. & while we might wonder why G doesn't just swing sword of justice quickly, actually good news.

Doesn't include the peo we expect. This is pt of 1st parable **8**: fig tree typically bears fruit after 2 or 3 yrs, so this tree likely 5 or 6 yrs old by this time. But not fruitful & so he instructs gardener to cut it down. But gardener encourages patience, give it one more year, provide more drainage, add some nitrogen, maybe it'll be fruitful. But if not, then we'll cut it down. What's this all about?

Let's go back to broader bib story about G's *k* for a moment: G rules over all, but humanity rejected his reign. So what did G do in Heb Scrs?

Set up a kingdom, a literal, earthly k w Dav as its king. & through that k in keeping w G's promise to patriarch Abr, G's peo to bless world. Here & there you see it: Q of Sheba, Jonah & Nineveh. But ult J is saying w this parable, this well-cared-for fig tree, k of Isr, didn't bear fruit. True when Moses led them out from Egypt, true when prophets like Isa exposed the peo's persistent sinfulness, & true when J the M arrived to announce coming of G's k to G's peo. You can almost see in this parable G the F ready to execute vengeance on the peo who'd broken cov w him & G the S saying, Give me one more chance. But not quite right, bc F & S didn't argue about this. Better to see landowner as justice personified (cut down this fruitless tree, it's worse than nothing, it's using up nutrients that could serve other plants) & gardener as mercy (one more opp, maybe it can be spared). But w this parable J is saying that time was up, mercy had been given, patience had been shown, but peo wouldn't repent. & so day of judgment approached, for G's peo.

Why I say G's k doesn't include peo we expect. Seems that there's life in that fig tree, not diseased, simply not fruitful. & yet that fruitlessness the very cause for its removal. This gets to q w which I opened msg: what is J looking for from chs like ours? Some say success (#s are souls) & other say faithfulness (stay true), but J says what he's looking for is neither bare success nor bare faithfulness but fruitfulness. Not satisfied w pretty leaves & a lack of disease. Wants fruit from our lives. & in this respect ch today not much dift from nat of Isr in J's day. No, ch is not the kingdom, but bels have been transferred into k (Col 1.13). That means ch is manifestation of G's k on earth right now. & yet what characterizes us? Many of the same sins as mark soc at large. & what does that mean? That our fruitlessness is an evidence that we shouldn't be part of G's garden/deserve to be cut down. Ryle: "To be content w sitting in the cong & hearing sermons, while we bear no fruit in our lives, is conduct which is most offensive to G. It provokes Him to cut us off suddenly & that wo remedy." Friends, this is the law: be fruitful or be cut down. & that law condemns every one of us.

But see right in the middle of this damning statement of the law, here is hope: *one more year* (8). What patience! What grace! Gardener would be just to cut down this fruitless tree straightaway, but instead gives it more time. & isn't this what our LX has done for you? How patient has he been w you? How many occasions has he given you to repent? How long has he suffered w you? But even here still that's not full extent of the good news. Bc even after tending that fig tree of Isr for centuries, still they rejected their k. & even after tending our lives for decades, so still do we. So what did J do? As the ult display of his infinite patience, he still didn't cut down the fig tree. Instead he submitted himself to the ax. He, the fruitful tree/true vine/faithful one, was cut off by G's justice as the supreme act of G's mercy. & it is through his death that we the lifeless/fruitless be rescued. J didn't just dig around you & fertilize you, he was cut down for you so that in his death you might be spared. & then he rose from the dead to give you life. & his seed of res life is now at work in you/Sp of X is in you to do what you can't do by yourself: become a fruitful tree.

"But what does that mean? What does fruitfulness entail?" In a word, fruit describes those things in your life that can be explained only by the work of G. Fruitfulness is not mere discipline, that can be explained by you. Loving strange peo, rejoicing in sorrow, living in harmony.

& that's what J expects from our ch. Ergo our goal as a ch. Not success: not filling this sanc/being the hot ch in the nabe/most amazing worship exp in the city. Nor is it mere faithfulness: doing our thing regardless of whether it benefits anyone else. No, our goal is fruitfulness: that we as a ch be so connected to the Vine & his life/Sp flow so freely through us that things happen here that can be explained only by work of Gardener, e.g., non-Xians being attracted to gos, nominal Xians being converted, diverse peo unified bc of J, radical generosity for the needs of others. In short, our theo vis coming to pass. Ill of Danny F: "never seen a ch like that." Neither have I. At least, not yet.