

Luke's Special Parables: The Ultimate Mercy

Luke 13:6-9

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Now that we have been into parables for a while, I thought I might add one that is a little more difficult to disentangle. Remember, too, from our introduction on parables that the disciples probably understood the meaning of the parables in a different way from the crowd or the opponents. The text we read from Luke is sometimes easily confused with the same-sounding story from Matthew (21:18-19) and Mark (11:12-24). All three are usually grouped under a heading something like "The Cursing of the Fig Tree." Other versions of the Bible do not even have a heading for Luke's fig tree parable but includes it in the longer passage from Luke 13:1-9 using something like a "call to repentance." There are a couple of things you need to know when you are reading these. First, the Matthew and Mark story appears in about the same time frame in Jesus's ministry as Luke's. However, Matthew and Mark tell a different kind of story. Matthew talks about Jesus getting up in the morning and was hungry. While he was walking around (this is where Mark adds that it was in Bethany) he saw a fig tree off in the distance without and fruit. Mark adds that there should have been figs because it was the season for the ripe figs. Matthew says that he cursed the tree and it withered immediately. Mark says the curse was not the death of the tree, but that Jesus just implied that no one would ever eat from figs from the tree again. In neither Matthew or Mark do we get the sense that this is a parable unless we think of it as an object lesson.

Secondly, the Matthew places his recollection after Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the temple. He indicates that the lesson of the fig tree is to his disciples who were the audience. Mark, on the other hand, directs it to his disciples and places the lesson on the withered tree is both before and after the cleansing of the temple. It appears that the two stories happened on two different days, though it is difficult to tell.

Luke's story of a fig tree as a parable is different in several ways. First, Luke places the story of the parable of the fig tree much later in his gospel, but unlike Matthew and Mark, he assigns it a place six chapters before his own abbreviated two-verse account of the cleansing of the temple. (19:45-46) So there are some apparent discrepancies. Matthew and Mark tell stories that happened. Luke tells a story that is clearly a parable. Matthew and Mark say the event happened one (or two mornings). Luke's parable says that in the context of a vineyard the vinedresser had come by the tree three years looking for fruit. Of

course, we automatically think of Jesus as the vinedresser and the three years the length of his ministry, but that is not specifically indicated in the text.

Matthew and Mark use the context of Jesus's final entry into Jerusalem. Luke sets the parable in a cluster of stories that he used to reflect the climaxing tension in various segments of society over his teachings.

He is approaching Jerusalem for the last time. The return of the joyous seventy sparks a prayer from Jesus that we rarely ever hear. (10:21-24). Luke earlier notes that a Samaritan village had refused to receive him. Soon after he lays into Pharisees and Lawyers, and he speaks out against hypocrisy. He has some emotionally charged words with his disciples and his coming again, though he had not left yet. By the end of Luke 12 (49ff.) he has some predictions that must have seemed insane. He called for unconditional followers to go with him to the very end, even it meant giving up their families in the process. He pointed out physical signs that indicated that the disciples were likely to be dragged in before magistrates. It seems immediately he had Galileans show up who confused the disciples that he had to address asserting that if they did not repent, and indeed everyone, then everyone would have to endure God's judgement. It's here that Luke says, "Then he told this parable . . ." At least since the middle of chapter twelve, he was addressing everything to his disciples, and though it may not seem clear with the insertion of the Galilean narrative, we can agree that this parable is addressed to his disciples.

So, what do we make of Luke's special parable about the fig tree? Indeed, there are enough references in both the old and new testaments to give us a lot about figs and their cultivation. For example: "The first three years of a fig-tree's growth were allowed before its fruit became clean (Leviticus 19:23). Of all that we know about them from growing and harvesting figs in the middle east, there are three things that stand out in this parable. Remember, that parables draw from the common knowledge of the audience. First, from this text we learn that unless the grown is cultivated the fig tree will not produce fruit. Second, in Proverbs (27:18) we learn that old trees quickly degenerate and fail when neglected. Third, the tree was often mentioned with the vine, and culturally speaking, "to sit under one's vine was the symbol for prosperity and security. There are early figs and late figs, appearing first in June but later in August. (Isa. 28:4).¹

For me, I find the context to be the most revealing thing about the parable. I've told you what went on before this, and all in a very short time. But afterward is important, too. Luke next tells the story of a handicapped woman, possessed by a spirit, who could not walk for eighteen years. It was on the Sabbath and the Lord healed her, raising another ruckus with the Pharisees. Then Luke says that the

¹ *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, (1970), 298.

kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, but not a fig tree. And, interesting enough Luke adds Jesus's parable about how the kingdom of God is like yeast found in a recipe. At last, he stands over Jerusalem and offers his famous lament, before he undertakes more healing and teaching.

Secondly, stories about unfruitful trees appear frequently in New Eastern wisdom literature. You might want to look up the story of Nathan who in one version speaks of a palm tree where the fruit of the tree fell into the river and the lord of the tree cut it down. But, here in Luke, different from Matthew and Mark, there is no immediate cursing of the tree. But there is a new insight into the what disciples might glean from the events in which they were caught up. What we see in the lesson depends on the audience. This is not about judgement, but about mercy. It is about the ultimate mercy. The lesson teaches the disciples that though the lord of the vineyard could have the tree cut down, the vinedresser intercedes and pleads for mercy for the unfruitful tree. But, consider, too, that there is urgency for the disciples to concretize their decision to follow Jesus. From Jesus's point of view judgement was soon coming. As one writer put it, "God would give even an unfruitful tree another chance."²

Another writer reflecting on the text said thoughtfully, "the parable of the fig tree invites us to consider the gift of another year of life as an act of God's mercy."³ He points out that the beginning of the gospels has the story of John the Baptist proclaiming that there is a kingdom ax about to strike. Judgement is all but upon the nation of Israel. But, here in this parable, as Jesus's three years come to a close, Jesus is still telling people who gather around him that it's not just that time still remains for choosing the way of the new kingdom, but that as a vinedresser has intervened to add more time, so has there been divine intervention of each of them. The writer concludes that Luke's message about how the gospel is about the "year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:19) materializes in that year being one of "forgiveness, restoration, and second chances."⁴

That's the meaning for a 21st century application for present day disciples. Each of us still has the time and the knowledge needed to decide about what our commitment to Jesus Christ is going to be. Will there be judgement someday? The Bible makes it clear that there will be. Yet, each of us today can see the urgency of the gospel for our lives, and that we have little choice but to faithfully act on the exigency of commitment in God's kingdom here on earth as we expect it to be in heaven. But we conclude from the passage, the parable speaks to the intentionality of God to always act from ultimate mercy rather than judgement.

² *NIBC*, 271.

³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁴ *Ibid.*