

Sermon

Luke 13:6-9

Another Year of Grace

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing 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.'"

Another year has almost gone and we are on the brink of 2024! What kind of a year has 2023 been for you? Where would you place it on a scale of 1 – 10?

Maybe you would give 2023 an 8 or 9 out of 10 – in other words, it was a really good year.

It was a good year because you had:
success in your business,
a good year at work or at school,
good family relationships,
new friendships?

2023 was a year that included a lot of exciting things, new challenges, tasks completed, a great holiday.

Or maybe you rate this past year 8 out of ten compared to the previous year which was a horrible year.

Or maybe you would give 2023 a 5. It was just another year, pretty much the same as any other year? Nothing very exciting happened, in fact, it was kind of dull and dreary. Just getting up, going to work, coming home, going to bed and then doing the same thing the next day and the next and the next.

Maybe 2023 deserves only 2 out of 10. That's because it was a really dreadful year. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. The year included tragedy, sickness, loss of friends, marriage problems, the kids were just impossible, even a death in your family. How would you rate this year?

Think back and check what kind of a person you were during 2023. Are there some regrets? If you were able to have some part of the year over again, how would you have behaved differently? Would you have shown more understanding, cared more, been

more patient, less critical, been more supportive and helpful? As I reflect on the year that has past there are certainly things that I wish I would have done differently.

How about your relationship with God? Did that flourish and grow during 2023 or did it just hover in much the same place as it did the previous year or perhaps even went backwards as you prayed less, heard less from God through his Word, worshipped less. Maybe God didn't have a big part to play in your life during this past year; somehow he just slipped into the background.

You could well ask the question: how much did my life reflect the fact that I am God's child –
did I speak as a child of God;
did I act with the love of God in my heart;
did I interact with others with the same love and forgiveness that Jesus has shown toward me?

As we stand on the threshold of another year, Jesus tells us a parable of the fig tree. It's brief but the point is clear.

Jesus says. **"A man had a fig tree and planted it in his vineyard"** (v. 6). (Apparently it was common for fruit trees to be planted among the vines). Three years later he's making his way up and down his vineyard, he is looking forward to the taste of a ripe fig but he sees that the fig tree still doesn't have any fruit. He calls to his gardener, 'Hey! Get over here. Why is this tree still here? It's taking up soil and moisture and space. Cut it down, *right now.*'

Jesus got it right.

Why should that tree remain standing?

Why should it keep taking up space, using up the goodness of the soil if it's serving no purpose?

What's the point of having a tree that should bear fruit but does nothing?

Maybe you've had a tree in your garden that was a big disappointment and you have laid into it with an axe and dug it out roots and all.

Jesus' words, **"Cut it down, right now, and stick a match to it"** cuts deeply. The owner has a right to be disappointed and angry at that useless tree. It's no wonder he wants it destroyed. But as we listen to Jesus story we know Jesus isn't just talking about a fig tree. He's talking about you and me. We are led to ask ourselves, "Am I bearing fruit? Am I sucking up the nutrients of the soil in which I've been planted and am I going to show some kind of fruit to match the years I've been standing in God's garden and all the opportunities I've been given?"

Jesus takes a breath and continues. **"Leave it alone for one more year"**, the gardener pleads, **"I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year fine! If not, then cut it down."**

And with that, Jesus ends his story of the fig tree leaving his listeners to ponder the generosity, the patience, the grace of the gardener. They are struck by the words of the gardener when he says **"Leave it alone"**. The word used by Jesus here also means "forgive". They know now that Jesus wasn't simply telling a story about a fig tree but he

was talking about God and the way he forgives us even though we don't deserve such generosity and kindness.



You see, God has given us some wonderful soil for growth. In Colossians chapter 2 we are told, "As therefore you received Christ Jesus, the Lord, walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, even as you were taught, abounding in it in thanksgiving" (verses 6 & 7). As God's people we build our lives on Jesus. Our very existence, our day-to-day living, our every breathing moment has its source in him. We occupy valuable space in the garden. The soil is rich and our roots are there and the owner of the garden is looking for fruit. God wants to see in us the kind of fruit that he would expect to see from someone who has been made new and holy through the blood of Jesus; from someone who has been given a new life by the living Jesus.

As 2023 draws to a close he sees all too well what has happened in the past – how our relationships haven't always been what they could have been.

He has seen the arguments,
the inability to be generous when it comes to forgiveness and reconciliation,
the lack of gratitude to your parents,
the disrespect for your children,
the disconnection between you and the church and what God offers through his church.

He's seen it all as it has unfolded during 2023 much to our embarrassment. And he's forgiven it all. And we've drawn on that forgiveness. We've heard his words every Sunday as he says to us, 'Your sins are forgiven!'

We've been assured of that each time we've come to the Lord's Supper.

We've drawn on those riches, and still there's someone we haven't forgiven.

Still there is that relationship that remains fractured,
still no words are spoken between you and the person with whom you have fallen out,
still the anger wells up whenever you think of that person or hear his/her name.

What magnificent love God shows us! He really must think we're something special.
What love that he takes me and adopts me and calls me his child. That love of God is so precious to us especially when we have cried out in despair and pain and need the reassurance that everything will be all right!

But how many times has someone cried out for some love and we've been so busy enjoying that love ourselves that we haven't heard the cry?

It's true that there have times when we've really felt down, really alone, we've spent restless nights in our beds and the morning has brought no relief. And someone has helped us! A telephone call, a letter, a word, an arm around our shoulders and we've been uplifted! Perhaps a sermon, a devotion, a hymn or song has reassured us and given us hope!

But how deaf we've been to the loneliness and confusion and despair all around us?

“Give the tree one more year”, the gardener in the vineyard said. The owner wanted to chop it down but the gardener isn’t going to give up. He’s going to dig around it, turn over the soil, add some fertiliser, show it some more TLC and give it another chance! Isn’t that just typical of the Spirit of God? The soil may be brown and hard-baked, but he’s going to send rain. There’s going to be a change. The gardener is determined and he’s going to see to it!

Listen to what Jesus tell us in John chapter 15:5,

“He who remains in me, and I in him, the same bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing”. The key is to be **connected** to Jesus. He is the one who can enable us to be what we ought to be. We need him to help our branches bear fruit. Without him, we will rate each year that passes below 5 on the 1 to 10 scale!

Everyday we are inclined to want to break the relationship that God has with us and to turn our back on the way he wants us to be as his children. We are like the fig tree that fails to produce good fruit. Thank God for the patience and grace of the gardener.

Jesus gives himself for us. He becomes the manure, the fertiliser for us as he is rejected, laughed at, crucified as a criminal. On the cross, nails, thorn-spikes and spear dig into him. He waters the ground with his own blood. He does everything. We do nothing. We simply trust in his grace. In Christ, we are made beautiful, fruitful gardens.

He digs around so that the love of God pours out of us and begins to work in us and we become lovely people, through Jesus! With his kind of fertilizer we begin to accept others as he was able to accept others ... and us.

The parable about the fig tree makes it quite clear that we have been unfruitful, unfaithful, yet in spite of our lack of fidelity, God is faithful.

Be sure of this: Jesus waits for us, spade in hand, wheelbarrow by his side, ready to bring us into 2024. That’s a promise. Armed with that promise, we can step forward into the New Year ready to let him do the work in us that only he can do. Thank him for his goodness in giving you, giving us, one more year of grace!