

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: November 10, 2013
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“GOT FRUIT?”
Luke 13:1-9

☑ I celebrated my forty-seventh birthday this past June, so it is official: I am middle-aged – *early* middle-aged, but middle-aged nonetheless.

At first I was in denial, as if not speaking or *thinking* “mid-life” would keep me from entering this phase. My family and friends made it easier to maintain the fiction, because you all are too nice to say: “Wow! You’re looking so... middle-aged.” (Thank you!)

Reality has sunk in now, and I can say it without cringing too much: “Hello, my name is Don, and I am a middle-aged man.”

Don’t worry! I have no impulse buy a sports car or get a tattoo or cruise the clubs. My transition is going well.

☑ {B Franklin; A Lakein; B Lee} Coming to terms with midlife requires coming to terms with *time*: the flow of time, the brevity of time, the value of time or, we could say, of *life* itself. Forget “**Time is money**”; “**Time = Life**,” “**for**” in this dimension “**time is what life is made up of.**”

I am only forty-seven. Old age is decades away.

☑ Still, I am beginning to catch faint glimpses of it on the horizon, the way the Colorado Rockies appear as a smudge from a distance of one hundred miles. At first the silhouette is insubstantial, and it’s hard to be sure: are those mountains or a cloud bank or an optical illusion? Ten

miles later you know are seeing Long’s Peak or Mount Evans or Pikes Peak.

Are we there yet? No. There are ninety miles to go. But the Front Range looms ever more solid, ever more massive.

I realize that some of us have got a lot of living to do before we hit forty-seven, and old age isn’t even on our radar yet. Others of us are in their 70s or 80s or 90s, and we can barely make out midlife in the rearview mirror.

I urge you not to tune out. No one is too young or too old to find truth, wisdom, guidance, sustenance, and life in the timeless Word of God.

☐ Let us turn to Luke 13:6-9. The Lord Jesus is telling the Parable of the Fig Tree:

A man had a fig tree growing 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.’”

Messiah’s audience knows and values fig trees.

{ISBE} Fig trees are a basic source of nutrition.

Young and old, rural and urban, rich and poor, Jew

and Gentile alike eat figs nearly every day, if not fresh than dried.

Fig trees are a commodity. Fortunes are made and lost on the large-scale fig trade. Small-time farmers supplement their incomes by selling fruit in local marketplaces.

{ISBE} Fig trees are a place of comfort. The foliage is exceptionally thick, and it “**surpasses other trees of its size in its cool and dense shade. In the**” searing heat of “**summer owners of [mature fig] trees [can] be seen everywhere [taking refuge] in their shadow.**”

○ Fig trees are a sign of peace. They grow slowly, and wartime invaders often take a slash-and-burn approach, destroying as many fig trees as possible. Hence this description in First Kings 4:25: “**During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel... lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and fig tree.**”

Fig trees are also a potent spiritual symbol.

○ {Dt 8:7-8} Fruitful fig trees symbolize *the Promised Land*. The LORD describes it as “**a good land – a land ... a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees.**”

○ {Jdg 9:10; Jer 24:1-10} Fig trees symbolize *God’s covenant people*. In Judges a potential king is compared to a fig tree, and in Jeremiah good figs represent Jews exiled in Babylon while bad figs are Jews who are allowed to remain in their own land.

○ {Ps 105:33; Jer 5:17} Demolished fig trees symbolize *punishment*. “**he struck down their vines and fig trees and shattered the trees of their country**”; “**They will devour your harvests and food, devour your sons and**

daughters; ...devour your vines and fig trees”; and so on.

○ And fig trees symbolize *the Messianic age* in its glorious fullness. Micah 4:3-4: “**They will beat their swords into plowshares / and their spears into pruning hooks. /Everyone will sit under their own vine / and under their own fig tree...**” And Zechariah 3:10: “**In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your...fig tree.**”

Fig trees loom large in the minds of first century Jews. So when Jesus tells this story no one rolls his or her eyes and thinks, ‘Not another boring illustration from the world of horticulture!’

No. They are listening with both ears.

☑ {Snodgrass} The message they hear is simple and alarming. Here it is, to paraphrase one of my professors: “If the privilege of being God’s people does not lead to [fruitfulness], it leads to judgment.”

Our “**conversion**” to Christ “**involves**” release from the guilt and habit of “**sin**” and the “**production of fruit, that is, life lived in obedience to the will of God.**”

■ {Lk 13:7} In our parable the property owner sees no fruit on the fig tree and instructs the caretaker, “**Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?**”

○ The voice of this imaginary character echoes that of John the Baptizer in Luke 3:8-9: “**Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.... The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**”

○ {Gal 5:22-23} Please, hear me: The Messiah is *not* teaching (as some do) that we save ourselves by good works and righteous character; he *is* teaching that people who are being saved produce fruit. Our good fruit of “**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**” is not and can never be a condition for *receiving* God’s grace; yet it is absolutely necessary as the *produce* of God’s grace within us.

■ And grace is a key piece of this parable. Verses 8-9: “**‘Sir,’ the [caretaker] 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.’**” Evidently the property owner agrees.

This is not the first time he has been gracious. He has “**been coming to look for fruit**” for the past three years without finding any and before now he has not considered the fig tree’s destruction. Today his grace postpones the penalty and creates the *possibility* that the tree might never be cut down.

Nevertheless, possibility is not certainty. Will the caretaker’s digging and fertilizing make enough of a difference? Will his hard work stimulate the tree to produce fruit?

It is an open question. The answer depends on the fruitfulness of this tree, and only time will tell. To be more precise, one year’s worth of time will tell.

○ {Ro 9:4-5} If Messiah gave this counsel to Israel, to whom belong “**the adoption... the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises... the patriarchs, and... the human**

ancestry of the Messiah,” then how much more does it apply to us!

○ {Ro 11:17-21} Scripture warns us Gentile Believers:

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches... You do not support the root, but the root supports you.... Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

■ Back to our text: in Luke 13:1-5 “**Some present... [tell] Jesus about the Galileans**” whom Pilate slaughtered as they worshiped. He answers:

“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 [and remember: true repentance causes us to bear fruit], you too will all 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 perish.”

Next, on the heels of this admonition, the Lord tells the Parable of the Fig Tree. The two teachings are knit together by the common theme of urgency.

I might be struck down by an enemy of the human or viral or bacterial sort. I might be crushed by a collapsing building, fatally injured in an auto collision, or swept away in a natural disaster.

I might have fifty more years. I might have one more hour. Time is precious. **“Time = Life,” “for”** in this world **“time is what life is made up of.”**

I know that time is fleeting. So do you.

I know that **“If the privilege of being God’s people does not lead to [fruitfulness], it leads to judgment.”** And now, you do too.

? The question is the same for each of us, whatever stage of life in which we find ourselves: *Am I bearing spiritual fruit that pleases God?*

Does this feel heavy? I make no apology! It does not get more serious than this.

Yet I am going to end on a bright note, with some very good news. Whether you are yielding no fruit whatsoever; or you are growing some that is small in quantity and poor in quality; or you are you are bearing a bumper crop of the finest fruit, but desire to produce more – the solution is simple.

○ {Jn 15:16, 1-2, 4-5} Our wonderful, merciful Jesus is saying to you and to me:

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.”

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.... Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.”