

Let This Be the Year of Substance Over Show

by Anton Bosch

This sermon in Luke 13 discusses the importance of repentance and bearing fruit in our lives. It addresses the misconception of disasters being God's judgment on specific cities or individuals, emphasizing the need for personal reflection and repentance. The parable of the fig tree highlights God's grace in giving us time to produce fruit but also warns of the consequences if we remain unfruitful. The message stresses the urgency of genuine repentance and a change of heart leading to a change in actions.

Scripture: Luke 13:1, Romans 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, Isaiah 5:1, Romans 2:6, Matthew 3:8, Galatians 5:22, Matthew 7:16, 1 Corinthians 10:6

Topics: "Repentance", "Bearing Fruit"

Description

This sermon in Luke 13 discusses the importance of repentance and bearing fruit in our lives. It addresses the misconception of disasters being God's judgment on specific cities or individuals, emphasizing the need for personal reflection and repentance. The parable of the fig tree highlights God's grace in giving us time to produce fruit but also warns of the consequences if we remain unfruitful. The message stresses the urgency of genuine repentance and a change of heart leading to a change in actions.

Transcript

We're in Luke chapter 13. We've finally made it through chapter 12 and we're in Luke 13 this morning. And I'm going to read verses 1 through 9. Luke chapter 13, reading verses 1 through 9. Luke 13 verse 1, They were present at that season, some who told him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

And Jesus answered and said to them, Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered so much? I tell you, no, but unless you repent and you will all likewise perish. Or those 18 on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all the other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. He also spoke this parable.

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, Look, for three years I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I find none. Cut it down.

Why does it use up the ground? But he answered and said to him, Sir, let it alone this year also until I dig around it and fertilize it, and if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down. So there's two sections we're going to deal with this morning.

The first one dealing with these two tragedies, and then the fig tree. The first two, the story of those that Pilate had mingled their blood with sacrifices and the killing or the death of those at the tower of Siloam, we have no history for that. There is nothing else in Scripture that tells us what happened.

There's a number of things in secular history and Josephus and others that can be connected to these two events, but generally they didn't really make the history books. So we don't really know what it is. But what we clearly know is that it was at that time, it was fresh in people's memory, and clearly in the first instance we have the date of that in the sense that it was during Pilate's reign in Jerusalem.

And so the question is a very important question, and you probably read through it and say, well, you know, this has very little relevance to us today. In fact it has a lot of relevance to us today. And so let's have a look at them, and then I'm going to draw the application once we've gone through these verses.

So they were present at that season, some who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. So clearly what Pilate had done is he had killed some Jews. He had either killed them at the altar when they were bringing their sacrifice or when they were on their way to the temple to bring their sacrifices.

And so in killing them, their blood was mixed with the blood of the animals that they had brought to sacrifice. That's all we know, because that's all the text tells us. And Jesus answered and said to them, do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered such things? So a very relevant question, and you'll see the importance of this question in a moment when we apply, because the two stories have exactly the same application.

And they have the same conclusion. And so again we're going to spare this, we'll save this verse until the end. I tell you, no, but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

The second question is, are those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them? Now again, all we know is the tower of Siloam is a corner of the city wall at the pool of Siloam, which we find in the New Testament. And the tower fell, and whether they were constructing it and there was scaffolding and the scaffolding broke, or what exactly happened, again we don't know. But the tower fell and these people died.

So you have two incidents where you have the same result but a different cause. The one is man-made, the other one I suppose you can say is natural, not that it's like thunder or lightning or a flood, but it was just a—the wall collapsed and killed these people. The one was on purpose, the other one was an accident.

And so he says, I tell you, no. In other words, they were not worse, so the question is, do you think they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? And the answer is no, unless you repent you will all likewise perish. So what does that mean to us today? I think it's very relevant to us, particularly in recent years.

You see, I think that most of us were around when Katrina hit New Orleans —sorry, just blank for a moment. When Katrina hit New Orleans, I happened to be in Nigeria at the time and I was—had CNN in

the hotel room and I was able to watch it from there. At that time, preachers had a lot to say about the wickedness of New Orleans, and we know it's a wicked city.

And so, this is God's judgment. You see, here's the thing. This has become part of Christian thinking, that when a disaster happens, it is God's judgment on the wickedness of that city.

And so when 9-11 happened, there were many who were saying this is God's judgment on New York City. When the big fires happened here in California, there are many who say this is God's judgment on the evil and the wickedness of the left coast. And so the list goes on.

Every major disaster is God's judgment on a particular city for its particular evil. Jesus' question is relevant and is important. And so if I can apply Jesus' question—so let's go back to his question—do you think they were worse sinners than the other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? So is New Orleans worse than Los Angeles? Is it worse than Chicago? No, it is not.

The answer is clearly no. These men who were killed by the tower, those that were killed by Pilate, were no worse than the rest of the citizens that lived at that time. Yes, New Orleans has some bad aspects to it, and I'm not going to get into that.

There is a very dark side about New Orleans. But there is a very dark side about L.A., the licentiousness and evil of New Orleans. How can you compare that to what happens in West L.A., or in other parts of L.A.? But obviously the next time we have a big earthquake, oh, it's God's judgment on L.A. You see, here's the problem.

It's assuming that God is judging these cities for their evil when natural things happen. Now, I don't believe in randomness or chance for the individual believer. All things work together for the good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose.

So nothing is random in our lives. But when it comes to the broader world, many things are just natural things that happen. If you don't build the levees big enough—well, to begin with, if you build on the flood plain, you're going to have problems.

If you don't build the levees big enough, you're going to have problems. If you don't service the pumps, you're going to have problems. These are natural things that happen.

Fires are natural things that happen. Earthquakes are natural things that happen. But you remember that Jesus also includes an example of a willful attack against the Jews, and so we can put 9-11 in that category.

So there are other things that happen that are caused by the evilness of man. But in a sense, they are random. They don't—they are not targeted in the sense that it's these particularly bad people that God is taking out.

Because if He does that, then God is unjust. Because there's a lot of other evil going on in this nation, and in every other nation of the world. There's a lot of wickedness going on in cities all across the world, and yet they are not judged.

So how come God is judging New Orleans, or He judges the people who live in the forests, but He doesn't judge those who live in West L.A.? But God is not unjust. So you can't put this on God's tab. It's not God's

fault.

God hasn't chosen these people. Does God use it? Can God use these things to cause people to wake up? Of course He can. And I remember—I was still living in South Africa, but I was traveling here, coming here less than a year after 9-11.

And I remember the churches were full, and every motor car had the American flag flying, and every house had the American flag flying, and people who hadn't gone to church for years were going to church suddenly. But it didn't last. But could God use that? Yes, of course He could.

Can He use natural disasters? Yes, He can. And as the old saying goes, and Henry will know the saying, that there are no atheists in the foxholes. The foxholes are the trenches in the First and Second World War.

Terrible places. Death and stench and mud and death. There are no atheists there.

There are no atheists when the fire approaches your house. Yes, God uses these things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. But let's be careful that the next time a tornado hits a city, that we say, it's God's judgment.

It's not God's judgment, because if that is God's judgment, then LA should have been, and San Francisco, and every other city in America should have been swallowed up into the earth long ago, because of the propensity of evil and of wickedness that pervades our cities. So I believe that this is an important statement. But in the process, we need to remember the bottom line.

And the bottom line is, don't worry about them. Worry about yourself. In other words, they were not more evil than others that didn't die in those two events.

But he says, unless you repent—in other words, this is not about those who died in the Tower of Siloam, or those who died in the massacre of Pilate. This is about you. And unless you repent, you will likewise perish.

And then he gives the parable of the vineyard and of the unfruitful tree. And the two things are obviously connected, because you'll see that the end of each of these first two stories ends with the idea of repent. And this parable ends with the same idea in the last verse.

So again, you see, here's one of the problems. We read the first two stories, and then we read the parable separately, and we say, well, they are two different things. But in fact, they are teaching exactly the same lesson, and that lesson is repentance.

So he spoke a parable. A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and he found none. So does this apply to Israel? And the answer is yes.

Israel is depicted many times in Scripture as a fig tree. But it is not limited to Israel. It is limited to anyone who is in a relationship with God—either Israel by virtue of the covenants, or believers by virtue of faith.

And so there's a fig tree, and it's planted in his vineyard or his orchard, because a vineyard—generally we associate that with wine, with vines, with grapes. But obviously there are other trees in this vineyard as well. And he said to the keeper of his vineyard, look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none.

Cut it down. Why does it use up the ground? So the picture is pretty clear. But he answered and said to him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it.

And so it's generally accepted that the two players here is the Lord Jesus and the Father. But in saying that, the two are not in opposition to one another. This is simply teaching us a lesson about God's grace.

But you can say that the Father is the owner of the vineyard. He is the owner of the world. He is the owner of the church.

And he is looking for fruit. And the Lord Jesus, being the one who ever lives to intercede for us, pleads our cause and says, Father, give them another year. Now the three years was more than sufficient for the tree to begin to bear.

Even if it had been newly planted, a fig tree takes about three years to begin to bear. But we don't know that it was newly planted. The owner simply says, I came here three times, three years in a row, and I didn't find any fruit.

And of course, the question we need to ask is, where do we fit into this picture? Is God looking for fruit in our lives? And the answer is clearly yes. He doesn't plant trees for ornamental purposes. You see, the difference between the people in Israel at that time and us is that we plant trees for ornamentation.

We plant trees because they look nice and they look pretty, or they give us privacy, or they screen the noise, or whatever it is. They only planted trees for two reasons. One, to have shade, but at the same time to have fruit.

And if a tree didn't bear fruit, particularly if it was in an orchard or in a vineyard, it needed to be chopped out because it was taking sustenance from the ground, which should have gone to other trees that would have produced fruit. These days we just fix things with technology. We just throw more fertilizer at it and it doesn't make any difference.

Those days, every little bit of nutrient that came out of the soil was important, and you couldn't afford to have a tree that was just wasting time. There was just wasting resources. And so, he comes to each one of us, and he's looking for fruit.

And I think that it's an important thing for us to ask the question, is he finding what he is looking for in my life? You see, we can easily look at this parable, we say, well, he's speaking about Israel. Yes, he's speaking about Israel. Was Israel delivering fruit? No, Israel was not producing any fruit.

In fact, what Israel was producing was thorns and briars, but it wasn't producing fruit. It wasn't blessing God with its national life. But it's not about Israel this morning.

It's about us as a church. It's about each one of us individually. Are we producing the fruit that God is looking for? And I'm not going to give a whole lesson on the fruit.

We know the Spirit, love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness, all of those things. But the fruit is also bringing others to Christ. The fruit may be something else that he's looking for in your life.

Obedience, faithfulness. Is he finding fruit in your life? And folks, the reality is that for the vast majority of Christians, not in this church only, but in every church, is that very few are producing fruit these days. And I guess it's probably the 80 percent, 20 percent principle.

That 80 percent of the fruit is being produced by 20 percent of the people. This is true. And so the question is, am I producing the fruit? And folks, when I went through this passage and I prepared my heart and my mind on this passage, I had to ask myself the same question.

And I'm still wrestling with that question for myself. Am I producing the fruit that he expects of me? And we can say, well, you know, I'm doing my job. I'm preaching every Sunday.

I'm preaching every Thursday. I'm counseling when I need to counsel. I'm studying.

I'm praying. I'm doing all of these things. But is that what he is looking for? He may be looking for something more.

He may be looking for something different. And so to say, well, you know, I'm in church on Sunday morning, aren't I? And you can look around and say, well, there's so-and-so who's not here, and so-and-so who's not here, so I'm good. But is that exactly what he is looking for? And so you need to ask that question.

Am I producing the fruit? It's a self-examination thing. You see, I can't pass out a test or take a blood sample and try and figure out if you—this is something which you alone know, and you alone must answer between you and the Lord. Am I producing what he is looking for in my life? And not only am I producing what I should be producing, but as much as I ought to be producing.

Because it's not just about whether there's some fruit, it's whether it's all that he's wanting. Whether I'm delivering the quality and the quantity of that he's looking for in my life. And I think that the passage teaches us two very important things about God and his desire for fruit from us.

The first is his grace, but the second is his judgment. And these things are not in contradiction. The two things are just different sides of the same coin.

Behold therefore the goodness and the severity of God. So God is gracious, and the godness says, let it alone this year or so. Give it another year until I dig around it and fertilize it.

So he's going to dig around it so that the water can penetrate, and he's going to fertilize it—obviously not with modern chemical fertilizers, but with manure or compost, or compost as it is here—and maybe next year. And every time I read this passage, I wonder what happened the next year. What happened the next year? Was there fruit? And if there was not fruit, how did this conversation go? Sir, give it another year.

However that conversation went, and whatever happened the next year? What I'm sure of is that the time came when the godness pleas were in vain, and the master of the owner said, enough. Cut it out. Now again, putting it in the context, remembering Israel, John the Baptist says that the ax is laid to the root of the tree.

In other words, God is ready to cut Israel out. And we know that that finally happens forty years after Jesus tells his parable, in AD 70, when Israel is destroyed. Both the city of Jerusalem, the nation, was scattered across the world.

And of course, these things were written and happened to them, 1 Corinthians 10 says, as an example to us. And my concern is that if you take an academic approach to this passage, you can easily look at it and say, well, this is Israel, and yes, this is exactly what happened, that God kept looking for fruit. The last time

was when Jesus was presented to them, and they delivered the fruit of anger and of murder, and killed him on that cross, and God says, I've had enough.

And he cuts Israel out. We can easily go there, and of course, that's right. But remember the first two stories.

It's not about those that Pilate killed. It's not about those on whom the tower fell. You need to produce repentance.

And that's why the two stories are connected to this parable, because the two stories set a principle for the interpretation of this parable. And so as much as they were concerned and debating about what about those that Pilate killed, what about those on whom the tower fell? And Jesus says, it's not about them, it's about you. And this parable, we do exactly the same thing.

We say, well, what about Israel? Israel is the fig tree, and God says, it's not about Israel, it's about you. And that's the problem. So it's easy for us to read these things and to not get the message.

The message is very, very simple. And I just wonder how many times the Lord Jesus has had to plead for each one of us, and say, Father, give them another year. Give them another year.

And how many times has this happened? How many years has it been that God has been looking for fruit on your life, and all he finds is leaves? Remember the other fig tree that Jesus saw, and he came to the fig tree, and he looked, and this wasn't a parable, this was an actual event. He comes to the fig tree, and he looks for figs, and there's no figs, but there's just leaves. You see, it's all show, but there's no substance.

And I'm afraid that many times we have the show, we have the leaves, we look like we have life, but in fact there is no fruit. So let it alone this year also. The grace of God, by his mercies, we have not been consumed.

Because of God's grace, he hasn't thrown us out long ago. Because of his grace, he has kept us, and he keeps calling us, and he keeps coming back and saying, where's my fruit? Where's my fruit? Where's my fruit? You see, because the fruit is his entitlement. He's entitled to the fruit, because he planted the tree.

But if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that, you can cut it down. I don't know how to express the seriousness of this passage, because the problem is that we say, well, you know, he surely won't.

He's not going to reject me. He's not going to cut me out. He'll give me another year.

Now, on Thursday nights, we've been speaking from 2 Peter chapter 3, and I'm going to go to one of the verses in 2 Peter 3, but if you remember those who are with us on Thursdays, the point of 2 Peter 3 is that people are saying the Lord is never going to come, because he hasn't come for 2,000 years. That's the argument they will use, and that's the argument they are using today. But I want you to see that we use, as Christians, exactly the same argument and say, well, you know, I've been fruitless for 10 years, 20 years, 30 years.

I have not produced very much or anything at all, but God has allowed me to continue. He will continue to tolerate my slothfulness, my barrenness. It doesn't work that way.

The fact that he hasn't come for 2,000 years doesn't mean he's not going to come. That's the point of 2 Peter. The fact that God has tolerated our unfaithfulness, that he has tolerated whatever goes on, our

lukewarmness, does not mean the time is not going to come when he's not going to spit us out of his mouth.

But you see, we presume on the grace of God, and we forget that there's another side to God. There's another aspect. And Romans 2 says exactly this, and I made reference to this, I think, on Thursday.

And again, I want you to see the parallels between Peter and Luke. But Romans 2.4, do you despise the riches of his goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering? Has God been bearing with us individually and as a church? Has God been good to us? Has God been longsuffering to us? Yes, he has. But the danger is that we can despise his goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering.

And we say, in what way do we despise it? In that we make it of no importance that God has always been longsuffering, he will continue to be longsuffering. And in that process, we're despising his goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing. Not knowing.

You remember in Peter, of this they are willfully ignorant. We spoke about that on Thursday, being willfully ignorant. When it says they're not knowing, it's not that they don't know, it's they are willfully not knowing.

They willfully forget that the goodness of God leads you to repentance. There's the same word. This is the fourth time we've found this word in these passages this morning.

Why has God tolerated our sinfulness? Why does God tolerate our lukewarmness? Because he wants us to come to repentance. Not because he accepts what we're doing. Not because there's an excuse for what we're doing or not doing.

But simply because he is tolerating us in order to bring us to repentance. But here's the problem, and I didn't put the next verse up, verse 5, but he says, in fact, what you're doing in delaying is you're simply racking up the account. You're treasuring up for yourself wrath against the day of wrath.

God's forbearance, longsuffering, has one purpose, and that is not to excuse or to cause us to get entrenched in our ways, but it is there to bring us to repentance. And then Peter, the Lord is not slack—2 Peter 3, verse 9—the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is long suffering towards us. You see exactly the same idea.

He is long suffering towards us. Why is he long suffering? Because he is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Same idea.

Give it another year. Maybe there'll be repentance in this year. So I want to go back to the last verse in Luke, sorry, Luke 13, verse 9. If it bears fruit well, but if not, after that you can cut it down.

And again, I'm going to challenge you this morning. Don't take the message lightly. Don't discard it.

Don't apply it to the person next to you, or the person who's not here this morning. Just as I have spent a lot of time this last week examining my own heart, my own fruit, will you take this next week and examine your fruit, and say, is the Master finding what he's wanting in my life? And if not, there's only one thing I need to do, and that is to repent. Now remember, as I close, that repenting does not just mean feeling sorry and saying, oh Lord, yeah, I messed up.

Repentance is a change of mind. The Greek word meaning a change of mind, which leads to a change of heart, which leads to a change of action. You can even have a change of heart and still not have a change

of action.

And so what the Lord is looking for is a genuine change of mind that will result in a change of action and a change of life. Father, we thank you for your goodness and your grace. We thank you, Lord, for 2,000 years that Jesus has tarried in coming and delayed the final judgment, because you're not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Father, we thank you for your tolerance and your grace upon us as a church and upon us individually, Lord, that even though instead of finding good fruit, you're finding bad fruit many times. Lord, I pray that you'd help each one of us to look at our own hearts and our own lives. And Lord, to be able to self-examine in an honest way.

Lord, it's so easy for us to examine ourselves and to say, I thank you, Lord, that I'm not like the guy next to me. But Lord, that we may do an assessment that is honest and true. And Lord, if there's need for change—and Lord, I don't think there's one of us, including myself, that there's no need for change.

Every one of us needs to change. Every one of us needs to make corrections. Every one of us needs to make adjustments.

Lord, every one of us has pruning that needs to happen so that there can be more fruit, because we're spending our time and our energy and our passions on producing leaves and branches instead of producing fruit. Help us, Lord, to be those that are well-pleasing to you, that when you come to our lives, you'd be blessed by the fruit that we are able to bless you with. So Lord, I pray that you'd help us.

Help us, Lord, not to be concerned, so concerned about those that Pilate killed, about Israel, about those that the tower fell on, about New Orleans, or anywhere else. But Lord, that we'd be concerned about our own lives, our own household, our own church. These are the things that we can change.

We can't change the rest of the city much. We can't change the rest of America. But Lord, we can change our own hearts and lives, and we can change our church.

And so Lord, I pray that you'd help us. Thank you for your grace, Lord, that you spared us these many years. And I pray, Lord, that you would be patient with us another year.

And Lord, that we may produce the fruit that you're desiring. I ask this in Jesus' name. Lord, I confess our helplessness, our absolute dependence on you, that without you we can do nothing.

And so we pray that you'd help us, Lord, in Jesus' name, I pray. I pray that you'd go with us now, keep us, protect us, and bring us together again safely in the week. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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