

# A Lost Opportunity

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The parable of the fig tree reminds us of the importance of responding to God's care and grace, and the consequences of refusing His opportunities for repentance and obedience.*

**Duration:** 42:59

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:8, Matthew 7:16-20, Luke 12:48, Luke 13:6-9, John 15:16, Acts 2:1-4, Ephesians 5:16

**Topics:** "Bearing Fruit"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on a parable about a barren fig tree and its implications for our lives. The parable emphasizes the importance of producing fruit and the consequences of not doing so. The vine dresser pleads for one more chance for the tree, showing compassion despite the tree's lack of productivity. The speaker applies this parable to our own lives, urging us to examine our faith, repentance, and dedication to God. He reminds us that God expects us to produce fruit and calls us to redeem the time and fulfill our purpose in life.

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## Transcript

I would like to turn with you this morning to a passage that I have found very challenging at the end of another year of grace, and I've no doubt that you will find it very challenging likewise. The passage has already been read for us, but I would like to turn to it and read it once again from Luke chapter 13, the parable that begins with verse 6 and concludes with verse 9. Our Lord is the speaker, as you will remember. He told this parable.

A man had a fig tree planted 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, then cut it down.

A last opportunity. The owner of this vineyard was evidently a very generous man, albeit business-like and efficient in his management of affairs. He was, however, prepared to put much time and considerable energy and, more than that, money into the cultivation of his vineyard, provided, of course, that the returns justified the outlay.

He wasn't prepared to waste his money on it, but he was prepared to pay for a full-time vine dresser and everything else that was necessary to give every opportunity to the trees in his vineyard. Ancient vineyards generally contained more than vines. Fig trees, as in this case.

And he was prepared to put everything into the business of having reasonable returns from the entire vineyard, whatever the nature of the trees within it. And, of course, he had every right to expect such returns as would justify his expenditure. The very point, the very meaning of a vineyard is that it should produce fruit.

You do not plant a vine for its beauty. Now, I don't want to enter into an argument with anybody as to what constitutes beauty. But I don't think anybody that I have met would say that they had planted a vine because of its beauty.

And probably not a fig tree either, but because of the fruit that both would yield. There's no meaning for a vine apart from the fruit it yields. Now, as far as this particular tree of our text was concerned, however, its owner was destined to be utterly and completely disappointed with it.

Despite the lavish care given to its culture, it produced nothing in return. According to all reasonable calculations, he should have had at least a kind of first fruit of the fruit it would ultimately bear, even the first season after it had been sown, after it had been planted. So, I'm given to understand.

And I've no doubt that as he went around at that season of the year when it was time for fruit, he must have had a little receptacle in his hand, waiting to gather just the first fruit, just two or three figs, that he had particularly expected from this tree that he had purchased and brought into his vineyard, just to have a foretaste of things to come. I've no doubt that when he got up to it, he must have lifted up the branches and looked underneath and glanced here and there and said to himself, My, I expected at least something. But there was nothing.

And then, generous man that he was, I guess, I'm only thinking, but I guess, he may well have said to himself, Well, perhaps I was expecting too much. It hasn't had time to settle in the soil. It isn't at home in the vineyard yet.

Oh, it's receiving the sunshine and the moisture, but perhaps I was expecting too much. Next year we'll have fruit. When the second season for fruit is around, I can almost see him now making for this one tree in his vineyard.

Sure, of course, that there must be fruit this year. It couldn't be otherwise. The soil was perfect.

Look at the other trees. There's fruit on them. So there must be, there must be nutrition in the soil.

And the conditions, the climatic conditions are excellent. And he remembered the pedigree of the tree, where he got it from. There can be no doubt about it, this second year, he's just sure there's going to be a crop.

But if he did thus anticipate, he was destined to sheer disappointment. Generous man that he was, he was destined to be disappointed. For on that second year he received no more than he did on the first.

There was absolutely nothing on it. As the third harvest season approached, this good man had his mind made up, I believe. This is my reading into the story, let me assure you of that.

But I believe that by the time the third harvest came around, he knew exactly what he was going to do. He knew what he was expecting, and he had determined what he was going to do if the tree did not live up to his expectations. So he comes to the tree, he makes sure, is there or is there not? When he'd looked from all directions and from under the branches and made quite sure there wasn't a single solitary specimen of fruit.

He turned to his vine dresser and he said, My dear man, the moment you have time I want you to cut this tree down. Why should we allow it to cumber the ground anymore? We're not getting anything from it. You see, by this time he had counted up the cost.

Of maintaining in his vineyard, a tree that took in everything gave out nothing. It took the space which another tree would have utilized to advantage and profit. It imbibed such sustenance as the soil gave it, took it all in, as well as the moisture and the warmth from the atmosphere.

It devoured the time of the vine dresser as much as the money of the owner of the vineyard. It was taking everything in and it gave nothing in return. Cut it down, he says.

We can't continue to have trees like this in our vineyard. A strange thing happened. Did you notice it? The vine dresser listened to his master commanding him to cut it down and I guess in his heart of hearts he agreed.

There's nothing else to do. But man in touch with the soil and with the trees as he was, he somehow felt sorry for the old tree. And he said, Give it one more chance, master.

Of course you're right in telling me to cut it down. I don't quarrel with the justice of it, the propriety of it. Looking at it from a business point of view, I can understand that.

I'm not arguing with you, sir. But listen. Give it one more year.

And in the meantime, I'll dig around the roots, he says. I'll give it all the attention I have. I'll bring all my knowledge, all my ability, all my expertise.

I'll bring everything to bear upon it. And then, he says, I'll manure it. I'll fertilize it.

And if it brings forth fruit after that, well, we'll all be happy, he says. But if not, and the parable ends abruptly, if not, then cut it down. With a sense of loss, the vine dresser says, I'll raise no further objection if after one year's consideration of this kind there is no fruit.

Then, down it must come. Now, I told you I had been terribly challenged by this parable. I'm not so sure that you're not challenged either.

This is a very sad parable. However you understand it, and it is laden with peculiar challenge for all of us. Whether you're a Christian this morning as you come to worship in the Lord's house, or indeed whether you're uncommitted to Christ, this word of God has something to say to you and to me, to all of us, men and women, wherever we come from.

Will you pick up courage with me and try and look this teaching in the eye? Will you come with me and honestly try to square and consider what the Son of God is saying here by means of this parable? Well, let's try it. What's the message? What's the point? What's the thrust? What was Jesus really saying in uttering it? Let's try to grasp and apply what I believe is a primary message and a secondary message.

Not in terms of importance, but in terms of sequence.

We're going to look first of all at its past message to those immediately addressed in the context. And then its ongoing message, its message to you and to me today and to men and women in every age. And we're going to do these in turn.

First of all, we're going to look at the first and original application of this parable to the men and women who heard it from the lips of our Lord in His own day as He walked on this very soil of planet Earth. Pardon me. Now, the context here leaves us in no doubt that the parable had its immediate and its primary reference.

You can see that. But we must look at this and take it seriously. The danger is when we understand that it applies to something in past history that we are content with leaving it there.

Now, that we dare not do. Nevertheless, we look first at its past application. The Jewish nation is evidently being here described under the image of a fig tree.

A fig tree planted in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. Now, the reason I am saying that without taking time to enlarge is that it is so evident in the Old Testament that Israel is described as the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. Sometimes a vineyard where the vine is cultivated and other times where fig trees are cultivated.

Both are applied to Israel. And I am not going to take time to prove that. Those of you who are Christians will have read your Old Testaments, I trust.

And you know that what I am saying is true. If not, spend Sunday afternoon looking it up. But it is true.

We do not need to justify such a statement. Therefore, when God called Abraham, He actually chose the nation that would spring out of him and God foresaw everything and everyone that would emerge from the stock of Abraham. It was as if God was planting Abraham like a twig in the soil of his grace, in his vineyard as it were.

God personally undertook the oversight of the emerging root showing his singular concern not only for Abraham himself that is a study all its own but with the children of Abraham, with the seed of Abraham. He chastised them as every father chastises children that he loves. Oh yes, he chastised them because he cared for them and he was concerned for the future.

You see, because God was meaning to produce something special he was careful and he couldn't allow everything to come into the lives of the people of Israel. If something came in that was wrong, he dealt with it. He chastised them.

And hence you have their later 400 years in Egypt and later on their 70 years in another captivity and you have many other such things. God chastised them but the chastisement was only an incident by the way because God was bringing forth fruit. He was preparing for fruit.

He would chastise but the chastisement was a means to an end. It was the pruning that would lead to the flowering and the fruit bearing of the twig and of the branches in due course. In order to exercise his care of the emerging nation and to fulfill his purposes God not only sent Moses and Aaron and Joshua his special servants but he also sent others, judges, kings, prophets and many others perhaps not exactly fitting into any of these categories but they were endowed by him with grace and with wisdom and with

courage and much else to fulfill his mission of caring for the trees in his vineyard particularly Israel.

Then in due course and this brings Christmas again into focus in due course the Lord of the vineyard appeared on the scene to collect fruit. My friends that's what happened you know when God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. It was the Lord of the universe come down and come into his vineyard very specially to collect fruit.

He was looking for fruit. For hundreds of years he's been attending to his vine, to his fig tree. He sent the best of his prophets and the best of his servants to give the best of their ability to bring forth the best that these people could produce and he at last comes.

It's the season for harvest you see. It's the season for figs. And he comes to collect the fruit and for three seasons, three years God in Jesus of Nazareth moved in and out among the nation looking for national fruit.

I say national fruit. They were individuals that provided some fruit but the nation as such apparently appeared as it is described in this very very challenging word. The first year he moved in and out found nothing national in no acceptance no faith, no repentance no obedience to his commands.

There was no fruit. Second year went by and the third year went by. Now I'm not going to attempt to find a counterpart to the vine dresser.

I believe that the main thrust of a parable is a single entity and perhaps they don't correspond absolutely but somehow or other I believe if I rightly understand the meaning of this parable that at that stage in the history of Israel the axe was raised to cut down the tree that had been thus cared for by the very God of Israel and God of creation over these many years and it brought forth no fruit nationally but somehow or other someone intervened someone interceded, someone cried, someone pleaded that she'd be given another year of opportunity and it is my understanding that at the day of Pentecost that extra year of opportunity began not a year of twelve months of course but a period, an era during which God would see that special attention was given to the nation the kind of which she's never had even with the prophets and the law giver and the great Moses and Joshua and you say what was this?

It was the apostles of the Lamb clothed with the mighty power of the Holy Spirit something that human eyes have never seen the like of it before save in Jesus Christ and he sent them out and he said go first to the house of Israel and witness to them and preach the gospel to them and call for repentance and bid them turn and obey and out they went have you noticed the emphasis in the book of Acts? have you noticed how the apostle Paul wherever he went went to the Jews first? and it was only when the Jews closed the door or sometimes slapped him in the face he turned to go elsewhere but you see they took this seriously they were to give special attention to the tree they were to look for fruit from national Israel at home in the land, outside the land wherever Paul went he went to the Jews first and in writing to the Romans he tells us that this was a fixed principle the Jews first but also to the Gentiles but what happened? oh my friends it's a sad story God's last year ran out God's last year of opportunity to Israel as it was then constituted ran out many individuals showed some sign but not the leaders of the nation not the people who represented national Israel per se and the last year of opportunity passed with no fruit forthcoming despite the imponderably precious privileges heaped upon the nation so what?

God moved into action then came the inevitable the axe of divine judgment fell God employed as his agent a very harsh razor-like axe of a man the Roman power led by Titus with almost bestial savagery that

pagan leader directed his army first into the land then into the city then into the temple now I'm not going to attempt to describe to you the kind of savagery that went on as the nation was severed I shall simply remind you that towards the end of that desolating period Titus' soldiers were fighting in blood knee deep in the city of Jerusalem you say what's all this about? is this history? this is history now this is history now this is fact this is not the dream of the preacher this is fact you can read this in your history books what had happened? well the parable tells us that the

last year had run out and God is not mocked God is not mocked and even though out of sheer grace he had chosen Israel for a purpose he came down in judgment now meaning to incorporate Israel the Israel who would be the true children of faith in due course in the body of the church the community of Gentile and Jew one new people one new man as Paul speaks of the person who believes in Christ Jesus history thus underscores and highlights the integrity and the validity of the biblical warnings and this is what makes it so serious you see some of us don't really believe that God's warnings hold oh I know that and we run absolutely in the face of them and in the teeth of them brothers and sisters God's word does not return to him void if that word is a word of grace it will fulfill his

intention if it is a word of warning it will fulfill his purpose long long ago Isaiah said that my word shall not return unto me empty or void it will accomplish and here you and I are living in the light of the historical the immediate the first fulfillment of this utterance of our Lord in the presence of some of the Jewish people probably and we have this as the back cloth to our consideration of its application to ourselves and that brings me to that the secondary and abiding relevance of the same parable to you and to me right here in Knox Toronto on Spadina here the last Sunday the last Lord's Day in this year of grace 1984 that fruitless fig tree may be a picture of you and of me I believe that it represents any man or any woman or any people or nation that ultimately refuses to

respond to the care of God and to his grace in Christ that person or that people who will allow God's last year of opportunity to pass by without bringing forth fruit meat for repentance indicative of obedience now let's look at it you say how does this apply to me how would you apply this to me what reason have we for believing that this applies to us here this morning well now let me just bring out some of the salient features here and I bid you ask the question you ask it yourself does this not fit me first of all the excellence of the soil in which it was planted the first and unmistakable feature of the tree envisaged in the parable I think is that it was planted in such soil as gave it the best possible opportunity to bear fruit now how about the soil in which you are living this may

not apply to all of us but I'm sure it will apply to the majority of us look at it nationally now perhaps you were privileged to be planted early in the soil of a God-fearing nation a nation where the word of God was known and where the grace of God was experienced and the gospel of God was proclaimed and the church of God was alive what a wonderful privilege and you were brought up you were born into that kind of atmosphere how conducive to faith what a privilege was yours or it may be that you were later transplanted into a nation such as that or you spent some of the formative years of your life amongst a people whose heritage was such that the living God was known and the righteousness of God and the will of God was embossed upon their laws and their legislature and their traditions

and so forth and you were brought up in an atmosphere like that you have to answer for that what a rich soil in which to be planted and in which to grow up but think of it more locally than that even when our national background may be otherwise many of us have, like this fig tree in the parable been reared in a domestic soil in a home environment that has been conducive to moral and spiritual development others

reared in your local setting, whatever it is in your city in your church in your home others brought through the same atmosphere and through the same experiences as you others have grown others have heard the call of God and are living in obedience to Him others have had dealings with the Most High God and they're touching reality from day to day and you haven't but others have

they have imbibed the essential ingredients of the soil just as you have, the same ingredients and their fruit is so vast and so prolific we praise God upon every remembrance of them why not you, why not me? this parable is a pointed reference to those who are divinely planted in such a rich environment and yet, and yet remain fruitless you know, I often wonder whether there can be someone here in Knox who's been here for many a long year and you've profited from the influence of one and another over many years and yet your heart remains close to the gospel of Jesus Christ you may be a good Presbyterian and you may even be kind to this congregation I don't know of anyone who is unkind nevertheless what about personal faith as God comes to seek it and repentance and obedience is He

collecting, is He gathering the fruit? what is there in your heart this morning? what have you brought for Him? the offerings on the plate, all right they're expressive of something, if they're acceptable to God of a spiritual condition despite the excellence of the soil this tree yielded no fruit over three successive seasons and God justly concluded that three successive seasons was adequate oh let me repeat it appears to be essential to the thrust of the parable that we should understand that this fig tree was an exception to the rule this is implicit in everything we're saying but I must add it again whatever the nature of the other trees in the vineyard they appear to have been fruitful according to their opportunity whether they were fig trees or whether it was the vine they seem to

have been bearing fruit but this tree, no, none how long have you lived in your present conducive circumstances without bringing forth fruit to God's glory? five years? ten years? twenty? thirty? how long? brothers and sisters we cannot go on like this if this parable is the word of the incarnate Son of God and has meaning and has relevance today we have to take this seriously there comes a shattering moment in this parable of our Lord when the owner of the vineyard is described as posing the question to his vinedresser why cumberst thou the ground? that's the King James Version all right, just let's pray quietly for this good man who's gone out he's reacting may the Lord be with him just pray in your hearts we'll go on there comes this shattering moment when the owner of the vineyard says

why should it be allowed to cumber the ground? and that's not a God who does not love that's a God of grace who will not allow his grace to be trampled upon in the end the word translated cumbereth could equally be translated rob or waste or exhaust the soil in fact it makes the soil ineffective and there could very well be a notion here not that this fruit, this tree did not simply bear fruit negatively but that it was contributing something deadly, poisonous to the soil I don't dogmatize there but it could well be there apparently are you prepared to address the question to yourself? it is a serious and a searching one has this been true of us? have we had a degenerating and negative influence upon our homes upon our spheres, even upon our church? what influence have we had? have we

simply not brought forth fruit or has our influence upon the place where we stand and the place where we say we worship has our influence been negative? the excellence of the soil, the absence of fruit and the third factor is the expenditure that was waste the owner of this vineyard spent time, energy and substance upon the tree in vain it was all ineffective and it was all fruitless now this brings me to the last question which I address to myself and I invite you to address it to yourself I would put it as bluntly as this is God's expenditure on me justified?

I think of the health he's given me I think of the home I think of the wife he's given me she's the best wife on earth and the children and the food and the protection and the privileges and of all privileges the immense privilege of proclaiming his word to you good people he's cared for me he's heard my prayers when I've had pains and aches and problems sometimes an ache in the heart sometimes an ache in the body and in his infinite mercies brought us through them all and here we are this morning now my question is this is God's expenditure upon me justified? and over and above everything that I have said and indicated there is the massive expenditure of the blood of his son to redeem me and the sending forth of his spirit to give me to the son to bring me out of the world and hand me

over to the son of his love as one of his people oh God of grace are you justified? am I not making nonsense of it all? what would you do with somebody like yourself if you were in God's place this morning? would you feel it's worth keeping this person in good health it's worth keeping this person where he is and what he is into 1985 because he's a fruitful branch she's a fruitful branch she brings forth fruit to my glory what would you do? my very last word is this awesome point here that there comes a last year when the owner of the vineyard says well yes alright we'll give it one other year and when that year's gone there is no other year of opportunity now that's the thing that challenges you say how do I know when I'm passing through God's last year well I really don't know I don't

know anybody who knows absolutely and who can tell you in so many words but I'll tell you some of the evidences of men and women who are passing through God's last opportunity listen to the parable says the vine dresser give it one more year and what will happen during that last year I'll dig around the roots of it and I'll fertilize it and I'll give it special care tell me has the Lord through any of his agents been digging around the roots of your life spiritually has the word of God been cutting you in a way it never has up until 1984 has it reached deeper I don't mean simply whether you know more what I mean is this has it got deeper has the knife of the word has the penetrating edge of the word has the sword of the word got so deep into you you knew that God was doing something now

man has he been digging around the roots and then alongside of that and this is precious just like the good vine dresser has he been fertilizing in other words has he been blessing you at the same time as he's been dealing drastically with you has he been mixing his ingredients has he been pouring some blessing upon you and from the word he has been speaking and from the saints he has been speaking and from providence he has been speaking and everything encouraging you to have more faith in him to be more penitent for your sins to be more obedient to him tell me have you felt encouraged during this last year now I would suggest to you that if the application of this parable stands that something like that may well characterize our last opportunities and we stand before the God of the

earth this morning and we remember the words of the Lord Jesus when he said unto whomsoever much is given of him shall be much required and to whom men have committed much of him they will ask for more is your faith up to date with God's goodness is your repentance up to date is your dedication up to date then he comes to you and I'm sure he has a word for you as well as for me this morning as we've come almost to the end of 1984 I bid you in the name of the Lord God almighty the God of grace see to it that you redeem the time by the time whatever price you have to pay to produce in your soul and in your life those things that God expects of us and for which he has kept us in life and blessed us in life and brought us to this very day let us pray Lord God our father in heaven enable us to

receive your word as your word and not as the words of men in general or of any man in particular we stand beneath the judgment of your word and we ask for special grace to apply this to ourselves we thank

you that you are a God who has loved us with an everlasting love we thank you for your favors for your manifold mercies oh how good is the God we adore blessed heavenly father it is into your arms that we come in the consciousness of our need and of our sin and of our waywardness receive us again cleanse us from those things in us which are impure and evil purge in us those things that relate to yourself our faith and our hope and our obedience our wills, our consciences, our emotions purge them and cleanse them that we may serve you with the whole of the inner man and with the whole of

the life in the body that you give us from day to day Lord hear our prayers in Jesus' name Amen

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