

Then 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.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.' " (Luke 13:6-9)

One More Year!

I read this week that the International Earth Rotation and Reference System Service will add one second to the year tonight at midnight. This has been done 24 times since 1972 to adjust for variations in the speed that the earth rotates. If you want to, you can even go online and watch the second being added. But how do you feel about 2008 getting one more second of life? If you're the kind of person who's focused on the old year, you might just resent it. After that endless election and the text messaging scandal, after the meltdown of the economy – housing prices dropping 18% on average and the Big Three groveling in Washington for financial aid, after watching the Lions set a new record for fan frustration, you might just wish this year would get out an hour or two early rather than a second late. But if you're the kind of person who looks forward to the new year, it might not bother you at all. You might enjoy the uniqueness of the event. Or you might be dreading what the new year will bring and you might wish to delay its coming for as long as possible.

Whichever way you feel, tonight it's worthwhile for us Christians to consider our lives of faith in the past year and where we're going in the year to come. God has provided us with **one more year**. One more year of life on this planet. One more year of serving him. One more year of struggle and success, of faith and hope. How have you used the last one? And how will you use the year to come?

Jesus tells us a parable that's fitting for a night like tonight. A man planted a fig tree in vineyard. In Jesus' time, vineyards were protected and cared for. Another parable speaks of walls around them and even a watchtower. Planting the fig tree in the vineyard showed the value this man placed on this tree. But he was frustrated. In three years, he had not found a single piece of fruit on it. That was striking because fig trees in Israel typically bore fruit three times during the year.

So the landowner told his worker, "**Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"** That seems perfectly reasonable. Israel is a dry country and fertile land is precious. This tree was robbing other trees and vines of nutrients that they could use to produce fruit. But if we were Jewish, living in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, these words would've hit us like a slap in the face. You see, Jewish people commonly held that fig trees were so precious that even if one produced only a little bit of fruit, God would strike a man dead if he cut it down. Now the Bible never says that, but people thought that way. And Jesus knew that. He chose his words very carefully because he wanted people to sit up and pay attention to what he was saying.

You know this parable isn't about fig trees. Jesus used something his people knew about and felt very strongly about to teach an urgent spiritual lesson: God is looking for fruits from us, his people. Producing spiritual fruits the natural result of faith. In fact, the Bible teaches that if we have no fruits of faith, then we really don't have any faith at all. And on New Year's Eve, it's appropriate for us to look back over this last year and ask, "Did God find them on me?"

Well, maybe we need to stop for a moment and ask what those fruits would be. Above all else, fruits of faith mean putting God first in our lives. I only put God first when I'm regularly here in his house to hear what he has to say. No matter what I do with the rest of my life, I cannot claim to be faithful to him if I don't put a priority on hearing his word. If I don't come to listen to the gospel, the rest of my good works are a sham, because the gospel of Jesus Christ – not the law, not "good thoughts," not practical advice for Christian living – is the one thing that brings forth fruits of faith. If I don't come to hear it, or if I substitute the pure gospel that I can receive here with the adulterated gospel of TV preachers or local mega-churches, I cannot claim that I am faithful.

But at the same time, hypocrisy is a lack of fruits as well. If I show up here and act pious, but then I go home and treat my spouse or my children like dirt, if I show up here and wear my Lutheranism on my sleeve,

but when I'm not here, all I think about is what I want, all I do is serve my own ego and my own sinful desires, I am not bringing forth fruits of faith.

God is not looking for us to move mountains. God does not expect us to become the next media darling or to have people know our names because we do such extraordinary things. God is looking of us to love him enough that we love the people around us. He calls us to treat our families as brothers and sisters in Christ, to treat our fellow members as people we care about, to treat our neighbors and strangers with kindness and respect, to treat those in need with compassion. Those are fruits of faith. Have we produced them this year?

My guess is that there's nobody here who falls into the category of the fig tree in the parable – so completely lacking in spiritual fruits that God would cut him down. But it's also my guess that as we listen to what spiritual fruits are, as we consider our lives in the light of God's word, most of us here tonight have to say that we haven't come close to being the kind of fruitful servants that God calls us to be. Too often we've thought only about ourselves. Too often, church was just too early in the morning, too far away, too boring and routine to get us here. Too often, the wants and needs of family and friends, of congregation members and strangers and the poor intruded into time we wanted to spend on something else. "I work so hard, I don't want to go into church for some meeting." "I just don't have the energy for this or that demand on my time."

Does that sound familiar? Would it make you uncomfortable if God himself came and inspected your life to see how fruitful you're being? Well guess what? He does that whether we like it or not. God knows better than we do how far short we fall of his standard of hearing and treasuring his word and of loving and serving each other. Not one of us comes close to the standard God sets. If God dealt with us as our failure in the faith demands, he'd have his spiritual ax out and he'd be cutting away at our trunks while we're sitting here tonight. We'd spend the new year roasting in the fires of hell.

But this parable doesn't end with the command to cut the tree down. It continues with a plea for mercy. The worker says, **"Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it."** Notice, God doesn't put the burden to change on us. He takes it on himself. This is Jesus pleading for us in heaven. And he pleads for more time to work with us and to bring us to produce fruits. Now, the parable is a story and you can't press the details. God the Father is not a stern judge who can't wait to throw us into hell while his Son alone loves us. The Father loves us just as much as the Son does. But the Bible speaks of Jesus pleading for us in heaven – of him praying for us there. And the Father in love shows us the mercy his Son requests.

What is God's mercy in this parable? You can sum it up in one word: the gospel. The gospel is the work of Christ to take away our sin. "Our sin" means our spiritual laziness and our lust for things different from the gospel. It means our failure to love God or the people around us. It even means our failure to produce fruits of faith. Jesus went to the cross for all of our sins, even for the sins that we commit after we come to faith. Jesus died and he paid for it all. And God wipes away the guilt even of all that sin.

That forgiveness is the fertilizer that Jesus applies to us. Now, the Greek word does mean "manure." I feel a little funny comparing the gospel to manure, but like all good fertilizer, it is the source of growth. God works through the message that we are forgiven. In real life, what happens when people in authority let rule breakers or even law breakers off the hook? Sometimes, they take advantage of the situation, right? Sometimes, when God says, "I forgive you," people respond by saying to themselves, "Well, I'm forgiven anyway, so I guess it doesn't matter if I go to church or not." That's the devil talking. But the special thing about the gospel is that God's power is in it. The gospel says we are forgiven. And it does something totally contrary to the nature of our hearts: it causes us to spring up and grow and produce fruits. The gospel makes us want to live a different life this year, a life more like the one Jesus called us to live. The gospel makes us want to be here, in a church filled with the truth, and to hear that message more. The gospel makes us want to be out there, humbly and daily sharing Jesus' love with the people closest to us and with the people we barely know.

That gospel gets applied in the church. That's how Jesus digs around our roots and pours the fertilizer on us. The gospel is the fertilizer and the power. But Jesus applies that fertilizer through Christians. We parents apply it to our children. We pastors and teachers apply it to you members. We members apply it to each other. That's God's plan. That's why we do want to find a church that's faithful to the word, not just a church that uses language that sounds like the Bible but really teaches something else. God loves us. So he sends that gospel to us, over and over again. Whatever else happens in the coming year, it will be a year in which Jesus wants to apply the gospel to us. Only if we stay away from here and from him can we keep his power from reaching us.

Don't miss the warning in the final words of this parable. The worker says, **"If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."** If you've never produced fruit, if your life as a Christian has been one of keeping God at a distance and only touching base with him when you have to, that can change. If the gospel changes you and you begin today to produce fruits, fine! The past is gone in the blood of Christ. But if you ignore God's urgent call to repent of your sin, to trust in Jesus as your Savior, and to put him first in your life, if you spend this year living for yourself and telling yourself you're a pretty good person, you are running the risk of God's rejection. You are hardening your heart. The day may come when God says, "Cut him down!"

None of us wants that to be us. In this new year, we can rejoice that God loves us enough to call us to examine our lives and our priorities. God loves us enough to say, "Bring forth fruits." And God loves us enough to give us the one tool that makes it happen: the gospel. Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead for you. God has already given you faith. God has provided you with a church that offers you that gospel over and over again. All because he loves you. Come and hear that gospel. Make this new year a year in which you bring forth fruits because you hear that message over and over again. Amen.