

# THE QUALITY OF MERCY IS STRAINED

Parable: The Barren Fig Tree

Sermon 9

Lk 13:6-9

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. ILLUSTRATION: PORTIA'S PLEA TO SHYLOCK

The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown;  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.

### B. PRINCIPLE

- GREAT KINGS WIELD AWESOME JUDGMENT WITH SCEPTERS OF BASE POWER
- BUT SOMETIMES THEY SHOULD EXERCISE HIGHER POWERS OF THE HEART
- WISE KINGS KNOW EXACTLY WHEN TO TEMPER JUSTICE WITH MERCY
- IT PUTS NO STRAIN ON THEIR GREATNESS—IT MAGNIFIES THEIR MIGHTINESS

### C. QUESTION—SHOULD JUSTICE *EVER* STRAIN THE QUALITY OF MERCY?

### D. BIBLICAL RESPONSE

1. JESUS SAID WE SHOULD FORGIVE ENDLESSLY—70 X 7
2. SO IS GOD'S MERCY UNLIMITED—UNENDING—'NOT STRAINED'?
3. JESUS WARNS—**NO**—THERE ARE LIMITS TO GOD'S MERCY

## II. SITUATION

1. JESUS WAS ON HIS WAY TO JERUSALEM
  - o Teaching crowds and disciples along the way

2. **LUKE 12-13**—THROUGH THIS PASSAGE

- He taught the crowd and his disciples many things—ending with focus on justice.

3. ‘SOME PRESENT’

- Asked Jesus about the **Galileans** killed at the altar
- Pilate mixed their blood with their sacrifice
- **Assumption**—they were punished for their guilt

4. JESUS’ RESPONSE

a. Two principles

- They were **no guiltier** than anyone else
- Everyone should **repent**

b. Jesus went further—re-applied those principles

- To **18 Galileans** killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them

5. CONCLUSIONS

- All **suffering** is not a punishment for sin
- Don’t be **judgmental**—thinking others are guiltier than you
- Don’t be **arrogant**—thinking you don’t need to repent
- Everyone is a sinner—and everyone should **repent**

6. JESUS USED THIS AS A TEACHING OPPORTUNITY

- To urge repentance—before it was too late
- To address the tension—between mercy and judgment

### III. BIBLICAL TEXT—Lk 13:6-9

**Lk 13:6-9**—*6 And He began telling this parable: “A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. 7 And he said to the vineyard-keeper, ‘Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’ 8 And he answered and said to him, ‘Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; 9 and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.’”*

### IV. EXPLANATION

#### A. BIBLICAL CONTEXT

1. OLD TESTAMENT PARALLEL

- **The Parable of the Vineyard**—**Is 5:1-7**
- God had planted and tended His vineyard—Israel

- It had produced only worthless fruit
- God would allow the vineyard to go to seed—lay it waste—and withhold water

## 2. NO NEW TESTAMENT PARALLEL

### B. MAIN MESSAGE OF PARABLE

- TIME IS RUNNING OUT—JUDGMENT IS COMING—REPENT AND BEAR FRUIT

### C. BACKGROUND

#### 1. AGRICULTURAL

- a. Fig trees and vineyards
  - Primary **staples** of nutrition and life
  - Key measures of economic **prosperity** and domestic **peace**
- b. Fig trees were invaluable
  1. Most **productive** tree
  2. Bore 3 crops per year
  3. Fruitful almost year-round
    - Bore fruit 10 of 12 months—not April and May
    - Retained fruit from previous season
- c. Fig trees were more **dependable** than vines
  1. Produced even when vines failed
  2. Why was there a fig tree in the grape vineyard?
    - They used fig trees—to support vines—as anchor points and trellises
- d. A new tree did not bear fruit for 3 years
  - So—this tree was at least 6 years old

#### 2. THEOLOGICAL

- a. **Old Testament** fig trees—symbolized
  1. **Prosperity**—good trees
    - If productive—their owners were considered **blessed**
    - To sit under them—symbolized the **messianic** age
  2. **Failure**—bad trees
    - Owners of unproductive fig trees were considered **cursed**
    - Symbolized **unfaithfulness**—personal or national
    - Their destruction symbolized **judgment**
  3. After repeated warnings—God’s judgment fell on Judah

**Jer 8:13**—*I will surely snatch them away, declares the Lord; there will be no grapes on the vine and no figs on the fig tree, and the leaf will wither; and what I have given them will pass away.*

- b. **New Testament** fig trees—symbolized
  - 1. Judgment
    - Jesus **cursed** the fig tree—to show judgment was immanent upon Israel—**Mk 11**
  - 2. Kingdom advent
    - Parable of the Fig—blooms symbolized **coming of kingdom**—**Mk 13**

#### **D. CHARACTERS IN THE PARABLE**

- 1. THE LANDOWNER IS GOD—expects His creation and everyone in it to produce
- 2. THE KEEPER IS JESUS—intercedes—tends the vineyard
- 3. THE FIG TREE
  - a. Originally—**Israel**—called to—accept Jesus as Messiah
  - b. Today—three possibilities
    - 1. The **Church**—called to—**repent** and **reform** itself
      - Of the 7 churches of Asia—only Smyrna and Philadelphia got clean sheets
      - All told—*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*
    - 2. The **lost**—called to—**repent** and **believe** and **follow Christ**
      - This may be their last chance to repent and be saved
    - 3. **Christ-followers**—called to—**repent** and **bear fruit**

#### **E. MAIN POINTS**

- 1. GOD HAS A RIGHT TO EXPECT FRUITFULNESS
  - o He created us—and designed us for fellowship—and to be fruitful
- 2. JUDGMENT IS CERTAIN AND NECESSARY
  - a. **Certainty**—every person will give an account—for what they do and don't do
  - b. **Necessity**—His grace requires both mercy **and** judgment
    - 1. Without **mercy**—there is no **salvation**
    - 2. Without **judgment**—grace is **meaningless**
    - 3. Without **mercy and judgment**—there is no **justice**
- 3. GOD IS NOT OBLIGATED TO SHOW MERCY
  - a. This is **His vineyard**—He created and owns it all—He may do with it as He wishes
  - b. **Nobody dictates** to the Owner how to handle His vineyard
  - c. Mercy is **God's gift**—He *chooses* to bestow it—based solely on His will and love

**Ex 33:19**—before God passed before Moses in the cleft—*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*

- d. God **owes nobody** anything—we must not presume upon His lovingkindness
- e. When He is merciful and forgives us—we should be humbly grateful

#### 4. GOD IS PATIENT—UP TO A POINT

##### a. His mercy is everlasting

- 1. Merciful in His **capacity**—divine **nature**—and **willingness** to respond

**Ps 136**—*O give thanks unto the God of heaven, for His mercy endures forever.*

- 2. In this way—the ‘quality of God’s mercy is not strained’—it is inexhaustible

##### 3. **Examples of human and godly patience**

- **Joseph waited 14 years in prison—but so did God**
- **Abraham waited 25 years for a son—but so did God**
- **Moses waited 40 years in the desert—but so did God**
- **Noah waited 120 for the rain—but so did God**

God waited thousands of years to inaugurate His kingdom

He has waited thousands more to consummate it

- b. But He has put a **deadline** on His calendar—when time to repent will run out

**Acts 17:30-31**—*Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to humanity that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness*

#### 5. WE ARE ON THE BRINK OF JUDGMENT

- a. There comes a time when God says ‘enough is enough’

- b. **John the Baptist said**—that day is upon us—time is quickly running out

**Mt 3:10**—*The axe is already at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

- c. **Jesus said**—it will come instantly

**Lk 17:24**—*For just like the lightning, when it flashes, out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky so will the son of Man be in His day.*

- d. But—wasn’t that **2000 years ago?**

- **2000 years—is like a moment ago!**
- **Compared to the age of the earth (4.54 billion years)**
- **Less than an inch—in a trip from Fort Worth to Dallas (33 miles)**

#### 6. GOD DOES RELENT—HE PUTS OFF DESTRUCTION

- a. Today He gives us yet another chance—but *only* today!

- b. Here is a **mystery**
    - 1. God is **unchanging**—in His character
      - He does not change His mind like humans do—**Nu 23:19**
    - 2. But He can *choose* to change His decisions—about what He will do
      - God changed what He *intended* to do—reversed His decisions
        - 1. To destroy Israel—when Moses interceded for them—**Ex 32:14**
        - 2. To destroy Nineveh—when the people repented—**Jonah 3:10**
        - 3. To kill Ahab and destroy his kingdom—when he repented—**I Kgs 21:29**
7. REPENTANCE IS THE ONLY REMEDY—TO AVERT JUDGMENT
- a. Genuine **conversion**—leads to **repentance**
  - b. **Proof** of genuine repentance—is **fruit-bearing**
  - c. Biblical evidence
    - 1. **John the Baptist**
      - Preached a baptism of repentance for remission of sin
      - Then told Pharisees and Sadducees—***produce fruit in keeping with repentance***
    - 2. **Jesus**
      - Preached—kingdom is at hand—repent/believe good news—*implied* fruit-bearing
      - Explicit in **Jn 15**—***herein is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit***
  - d. In *this* passage
    - Jesus **connects repentance with fruit-bearing**
    - He warns—***unless you repent, you will perish***—vv3, 5
    - Then He illustrates this point—with this parable

## V. APPLICATION

- 1. **BE USEFUL IN GOD’S KINGDOM**
  - o Ask what God created us to be and do
  - o Produce what he created each of us uniquely to do for His glory
  - o It doesn’t have to be flashy/obvious—just be effective
- 2. **DON’T JUST TAKE UP GROUND**
  - o Don’t just take up space—without yielding fruit
  - o It’s not about what we get out of it—but the privilege of giving
  - o Not enough to be ‘**doctors** of Christianity—“**do no harm**”—like **Hippocratic Oath**
  - o Ask—what can I do to return the blessings I consume—put back more than I take
- 3. **DO WHAT YOU CAN TO REALIZE YOUR POTENTIAL**

- o Not to *attempt* this is sinful—'missing the mark'
  - o What gifts and talents has he given us—do we put them to good use?
4. **WORK PATIENTLY TO PRODUCE FRUIT—BELIEVING WE CAN DO IT**
- o **Chinese bamboo farmer—waters seeds in barren ground 5 years**
  - o **Everyone mocks him—he grows discouraged—but faithfully tends seeds**
  - o **When shoots finally sprout—they grow 90 feet in 6 weeks!**
5. **SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE OF OTHERS**
- o The **fig tree** was used to **prop** up and **anchor** grapevines
  - o Let God use us in His vineyard to nurture and build up others
  - o Be an example and supporter—who helps others become productive
  - o **This is our 'Anchor' and 'Trellis' ministry**
6. **RELY ON JESUS—THE VINE-KEEPER**
- o Remember—we have a **second chance** only because of Jesus
  - o **Jesus believes in you**—put your faith in Him—and live up to His faith in you
  - o **Let Him nurture** and tend you—only He can help you bear fruit
  - o We can bear fruit only when we are connected to Him

*Jn 15:5—I am the vine, you are the branches, he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.*

## VI. INVITATION

### BENEATH THE CROSS OF JESUS

**Beneath the cross of Jesus  
I fain would take my stand,  
the shadow of a mighty Rock  
within a weary land;  
a home within the wilderness,  
a rest upon the way,  
from the burning of the noon-tide heat  
and the burden of the day.**

**Upon the cross of Jesus  
mine eye at times can see  
the very dying form of One  
who suffered there for me:  
and from my stricken heart with tears  
two wonders I confess,**

**the wonders of redeeming love  
and my unworthiness.**

**3 I take, O cross, thy shadow  
for my abiding place:**

**I ask no other sunshine than  
the sunshine of his face;  
content to let the world go by,  
to know no gain nor loss;  
my sinful self my only shame,  
my glory all the cross.**