

Luke 13:6-9

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 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, you too will all perish. Or those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, Do you think that they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 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. 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.
- [1 : 1 1] If not, then cut it down. On a Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, And a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, Woman, you are set free from your infirmity. Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, The synagogue ruler said to the people, There are six days for work, so come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath. The Lord answered him, You hypocrites, doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall And lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, the daughter of Abraham, Whom Satan has bound for 18 long years, Be set free on the Sabbath from what bound her?
- [2 : 1 6] When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, But the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. May God bless his word to our hearts. Amen. There are some things that always go together, According to the ancient promise that God gave to Noah, After the flood, he said, Sea time and harvest, cold and heat, summer, winter, And day and night will not cease, and they haven't. They always go together, and so they will until the end of time. Some things always go together. Some things should always go together, But sadly don't always. And two things that always ought to be linked, But don't always fall out like that, Are privilege and responsibility. Privilege and responsibility should always go together. Privilege without responsibility can lead to license. And responsibility without privilege can sometimes be a very hard and burdensome thing.

[3 : 35] Privilege and responsibility. Life is a privilege. Your life is a privilege. You didn't ask for it, But it was freely given to you, And you still enjoy it today.

It is a great privilege. Just to be a living human being. Jesus told a parable on the theme of privilege and responsibility That was read to us a few moments ago.

Here it is in Luke chapter 13. The parable of the fig tree. The barren fig tree. It is a parable about life. It is a story about privilege and responsibility.

The favor of God's long suffering to us, Each one of us, That we have life and we've been given time. It's a very appropriate thing to be thinking about At the beginning of a new year.

We take the opportunity, rightly so, To reassess situations. To look back over what the experiences we've come through.

[4 : 49] And then to, as far as we are able, To look into the future. And God has given us that opportunity, Once again, on the first Lord's Day of a new year, 2004.

He's given us time in his great mercy. And that is a priceless commodity, Time. Time. Which sadly, We are sometimes inclined to squander.

As if somehow it belongs to us, And we can do with it as we please. But the privilege, Of God's long suffering, And giving us more time, Another year, Is, Carries with it, A great responsibility.

And that is what this little parable is about. The background of this story, Of course, Is the discussion, That Jesus had with his disciples.

They come talking to him about events of the day. There's been a particular act of violence. And certain Galileans, Have been slaughtered, By, Pilate's soldiers.

[6 : 03] And what do you think of that? The disciples are saying, And in fact, To the Lord Jesus. Does it mean, Because this happened to them, That they were particularly bad sinners? And Jesus counters, Their discussion, By reminding of something else.

This time, Death by natural disaster. We're not, Unfamiliar with that. It's happened, In the last year, In particular, In the Philippines, For example. And many other, Such occasions.

And, And again, The Lord makes the point, Doesn't he? That we must not draw, The wrong conclusions, About these events. Somehow, Imagine that we, Because we have been spared, From them.

Violence has not ended, Into your life. Then you should be very grateful. If you've been spared, The consequences, Of some particularly, Awesome, Natural disaster. Then for that, We should be grateful.

But we must not, Presume on that, That somehow, It means, That because we haven't, Had to endure, Those experiences, Somehow we're a bit better, Than other people, That are those, Who have had to go through it.

[7 : 08] And this is the point, That Lord Jesus is making. He says, Repent, Lest you likewise perish. Don't think they were worse sinners, Than anybody else. Because that happened to them. You repent, Lest you perish also.

And that's a very serious, And a solemn warning, Isn't it? From the lips, Of the Lord Jesus. And then, He follows it up, With this parable, Of the fig tree. Man had a fig tree, Planted in his vineyard, And he went to look for fruit, On it.

And there was none. So, He said to the gardener, The man who looked after the vineyard, Three years I've been coming, To look for fruit on this tree, And I've not found any, Cut it down, It's, It's a waste of space.

Why should it use up the soil? But, The gardener pleads with him, Just give it one more year, Give it one more year, To see whether, It might produce fruit.

And I will take care of it, And I will, Give it special, Tender, Loving care, And maybe, It will this coming year, Produce fruit. If not, Then, Okay, Do away with it.

[8 : 17] Any gardener, Will understand, The very simple little story, That Jesus told there, Because you put time, And effort, Don't you into caring, For your garden, And you have a right, To expect, A certain degree, Of fruitfulness from it.

If it's, It's flowers are your thing, Then you expect them, To blossom for you, You fertilize them, You've cared for them, You've watered them, In dry seasons, And you're looking, For flowers to appear.

If it's fruit, That you're after, Or vegetables, Then, Exactly the same, Principles apply. But also, I think, Most gardeners, Will understand, The reluctance, Of the gardener here, To actually discard, This tree, Because, Sometimes, It's, You are reluctant, Aren't you, To, To do away with something, That's not producing, As it should.

You think, Well, I'll give it a bit longer. You'll understand, The gardener here. So, What have we got, In this very simple, Little story? Remember, We're looking, At the fact, That privilege, And responsibility, Go together.

Well, We've got a fruitless tree. A barren fig tree. It's a picture, Of a human life. The Bible, Does use that imagery, In Psalm 1, I'm sure you're very familiar, With this.

[9 : 40] Talks about the, The man, Who is a godly man, That, He is like a tree, Planted, By the streams of water, Which yields its fruit, In season, And whose leaf, Does not wither, And whatever he does, Is prosper, He prosper, So that's one side, Of the story, A godly man, Is a fruitful tree.

But the psalmist also, In Psalm 37, Puts the other side, Of the picture, In verse 35, Where he talks about, A wicked and a ruthless man, And he says, He flourishes like a green tree, In its native soil, But he soon passed away, And was no more, Though I look for him, He could not be found.

It's a picture, Of a human life, The life that God, Has given to you, The life, As I said, You didn't ask for, But which God, So graciously and kindly, Has bestowed upon you.

Why, Why, Then, Should we, Somehow, Be reluctant, To accept, That God, Has a right, To expect, Something from us, For the life, He gave to us.

That sadly, Is, A failing of human nature, So that, Our reaction, Very often is, This is my life, And because it's my life, I, I, I can do as I please with it, And the notion that somehow, We're answerable, Accountable to God, Who gave us that life, Is something that we don't live, With very easily, We resent it, And yet, Just plain, Common sense, Tells us, Doesn't it, That if God, Has given us this life, Then he has every right, To expect a return, On the life, That he has given to us, It is not our life, We are his creation, We are his handiwork, Just as this tree, Owes his existence, To the gardener, Who planted it, And nurtured it, And cared for it, So to, The life you have, Which sometimes, You might be inclined to think,

[11 : 51] Is my life, And I can do as I please with it, The truth is, That God gave you that life, He made you, You are his handiwork, You are a deliberate work of God, You're not just some accident, That happened, You're not some chance, Coming together, Of a few molecules, That produced a human life, You're not the project, Of millions of years, Of evolution, From jelly, Right up to a human being, You are a, Creation of God, You are direct, Handiwork of God, Each one of you, Here this morning, Is, Owes your existence, To the God, Who gave you life, Why then, Should he not, Expect from you, Some return, At very least, That you should acknowledge, That he gave you that life, And honor him, And respect him, And thank him, For the privilege, Of the life, He has given you, And, And it would appear, Wouldn't it,

That, This tree has got special, Treatment, Planted in the vineyard, It's a vineyard, It's not, Not actually designed, For fig trees, It's designed, To produce grapes, But, It's a, A favoured spot, And therefore, This fig tree, Has been planted there, And the owner, Of the vineyard, Expects from it, That it should produce fruit, But he's, Obviously, Taken some trouble, To ensure, That, It has, Favourable treatment, Just as, You and I, Can thank God, For this morning, I just, Sometimes, Think, When I, Look at news, On the television, Or read the headlines, In the newspaper, And think, You know, Why, Why I'm, Here, In the United Kingdom, When I could, Perhaps, Have been born in Syria, And be caught up, In that terrible conflict, Or when,

You see, What's taking place, In South Sudan, How is it, That I'm not in the middle, Of all that, I've got a special, Uh, Interest in, What's happening, In South Sudan, Because I had the privilege, Going to Kenya, And ministering to, Uh, About 30 or 40 young men, Who'd come across the border, From South Sudan, And wanted to learn, About the word of God, And, And that these tribes, The Dinka, And the Nira, That, They were both represented, In that congregation, And they, They, They worshipping God together, Uh, And they shared together, And now these two tribes, Are each other's throats, In South Sudan, But why, Why are you not there, In the middle of that, Or why, Um, Why were you not, Caught up in the terrible devastation, Earlier this year, In the Philippines, Earlier last year, In the Philippines, But no, Here you are, And, In the, In the mercy of God, You, You've, You've, You've got, Many privileges,

That, That, That, Many, Of our brothers and sisters, In other parts of the world, Envy, That, That's the kindness of God, And he's given you, Uh, Abundant facilities, You've had the benefit of education, Uh, So you can read, And you can study, And you can think, And you can learn, Uh, Uh, And we have, As, As, Uh, Christian people this morning, A freedom to come and worship together like this, Nobody's stopped you, Nobody's going to arrest you when you go out the door, Nobody is likely to throw a bomb in our midst, Not here anyway, Not at the moment, So God has been wonderfully kind to us, Favored treatment, Uh, And so, Why should not, God expect a fruitful life from you?

Uh, Having surrounded you with so many, Blessings, Why should he not expect some return? You can't, Criticize God for being, Unkind to you, Can you?

[16 : 12] Is it, Not, Therefore, Uh, Incumbent to, To seek, To please God, For all his, Graciousness towards us, But is your life a fruitless life?

Is it still your life? Is it the life you're leading for yourself? Or for your interests? And God, And God, If he's, Comes into your mind at all, Is very much at the bottom of the list of your priorities?

That's, That's the sad picture. A tree designed, Cared for, Designed to produce fruit for its owner, That has failed to do so.

A life that has enjoyed great privileges, But has failed to accept its responsibilities. Would that be your life?

Certainly has been mine, On many occasions. It is a, It's a, It's a challenge, Isn't it? At the beginning of a new year, Just to think back on, On, On all the kindness of God to, To bring you to this point.

[17 : 24] And then to ask, Well, Have I, Have I had a life which is fruitful in God's eyes?

But this is a fruitless tree. And so, The second thing in the story is a sentence which passed by the owner of the vineyard. He says to the man who took care of the vineyard, Three years now, I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree, And haven't found any.

Cut it down. It may look well, It may be producing its leaves, As trees do, But no fruit.

It is, It is not fulfilling the purpose of its creation. It's not doing what it was designed to do. And therefore, The sentence is passed, Remove it.

Let others take its place. We'll put something in its place. It's just, It's just using up the soil. It's using up the nutrients in the soil. Other things could be put there in its place, That perhaps would produce fruit in due course.

[18 : 35] Of course, Of course, The context, And it was much understood, Well understood, By those who heard the Lord Jesus speak in this sort of way. Was, Of course, Initially, He's, He's, He's, He's, He's mounting criticism against his own people, The Jewish, Those, To whom he came, Who did not receive him.

And he's talking about their replacement, By those who are not Jews, Not part of that favored nation, The Gentiles.

And that's how, This parable would have been understood, By many of his hearers, And that's why very often, The things that Jesus said, Were so bitterly resented, By those who heard them, Because it actually got under their skin.

But, But, But, But it's wider than that, Isn't it? Because, Here you are, Enjoying these, These wonderful privileges, That I've outlined very briefly for you.

And yet, If your life is not producing the fruit, For which it's designed, Then why should God continue with you any longer? Why should he?

[19 : 44] Let others have, The place, Of the fruitless tree. These are hard things, Aren't they?

For us, To come to terms with. But the truth is, You've only got to read through the pages of the Bible, The truth is, God does remove, Fruitless trees.

And sometimes, To devastating effect, God looked down, Upon the world of Noah's day. He, He, He saw that, Apart from Noah, And one or two others, There was no righteousness to be seen.

And so God determined, Enough is enough. And so he brought that, Great flood upon the whole world, And wiped away, A whole generation of humanity.

In the days, Of his people, That favoured people, Who he'd chosen, Out of all the nations, Of the earth, To be his people, To be his witnesses.

[20 : 52] And yet, Time and time, And time again, Had, Had played him false, And gone after, The idols of the heathen. God gets to a point, Where he says, Enough is enough.

And I'm going to allow your enemies, To fall upon you, And many of you, Will come to the end, Of your existence, And others will be taken off, As slaves, Into foreign lands.

God does, Sometimes, Pass the sentence, And carry out the sentence. And to these very people, Some 30 odd years later, The Roman armies, Come rampaging through, The land, And destroy the temple, And destroy Jerusalem, And a million or so, Were slaughtered, Of these Jews, And many, Many others, Taken off as slaves.

God does remove, Fruitless trees, It's a warning, That the Lord of the Jews, Church gives, Doesn't he, To churches, In Revelation, The Lord will remove, The candlestick, If you're not producing, What you're designed to produce, If you're not accepting, The responsibilities, That come with your privileges, The fearful thought is, That one day, God may, Take away, The fruitless tree, Cut it down, But, Even as the chilling, Sentence is passed, In the story, In the story, That Jesus told, There, There is, A glimmer of hope, Just wait, But, Sir, The man replied, Just give it, One more year, Just give it, 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,

Give it one more year, Here we are then, Beginning of a new year, One more year, That God has given you, Brought you through 2013, And now we stand at the beginning of 2014, One more year, In the case of the fruitless tree, An intercessor appears, Somebody who pleads on behalf, Of the tree, You'll understand the significance of this, I'm sure you will, A mediator, One who stands between, The creator God, And his humanity, One who is an advocate, Before the throne of God above, As we sang, I have a strong, A perfect plea, One who speaks, On our behalf, We must not let the parable, Say more than it does, Don't make the parable, Lead us to a false conclusion, That somehow, Because there is a debate,

[23 : 52] Between the owner of the vineyard, The owner of the tree, And the gardener, That somehow they're in conflict, With one another, There obviously was, An air of discussion, Between these two parties, But, Let's apply the parable, And somehow draw the conclusion, That God the creator, Is in conflict, With the mediator, Because that would be, To ground counter, To everything, That we learn, About the God of grace, The God who actually, Supplies the mediator, God's own son, God and his son, Are not in conflict here, I think, I think the gardener here, As he talks to the owner, Of the vineyard, And pleads for the tree, He knows, He knows, The owner's heart, He knows there's a soft spot,

If you like, For this tree, It's been there three years, After all, It's not produced anything, But somehow, The gardener, Seems to understand, That if he makes this plea, On behalf of the tree, To give it another year, There will be a response, That, The owner of the vineyard, Is reluctant, Ultimately, Though he said, What he's passed, The sentence, Cut it down, We're finished with it, He is reluctant, And he appeals to that, Just as, Just as God, The son, Knows his father's heart, Knows that he is a God, Who delights in mercy, So he pleads, On behalf of fruitless trees, Says, Give it one more year, And that is God's way, That is always God's way, He is a wonderfully patient, Long-suffering God, I've mentioned the flood, But they had 120 years, To repent, Before God brought that devastation,

Upon the 120 years, Who can accuse God, Of being hasty, In the case, Of his people, Who, Who went away, Into captivity, How many, Hundreds of years, They were given, Before, That, Happened to them, And here, As Jesus speaks, To these people, And, And points his finger, At, At the Jewish people, Who by and large, Have rejected him, He still gives them, Another 30, 35 years, Or so, Because God is, Very long-suffering, Just give it, One more, Suspend, The sentence, And, And, And, That, In effect, Is what God has done, For all of us here, This morning, He suspended, None of us, Has, Reached the standard, Which God has set, We've all,

Sinned, And come short, Of the glory of God, God, Who gave us a life, And expects from us, That it should be lived, For his glory, In which we've failed to do, Has every right, To remove that life, And could have done so, At any time, Up to this point, But has chosen, To suspend the sentence, In his great mercy, And in his grace, And has given, Given, One, More, Year, Because we're sinners, From the beginning, And we don't deserve, To live, And we've all been fruitless, But he's given us, Another year, And just see, What the gardener does, To promote this fruitful, Give this tree, A chance, I'll, I'll, I'll dig around it, And disturb the soil, Around it, To see whether that may have, An effect upon it, And I'll fertilize, I'll give it special, Loving care,

How, How, How kind God is, To give us another year, Another year where, Sometimes he needs to warn us, Sometimes, He needs to, Challenge us, In order to, Get us to re-evaluate, Our lives, Before him, Sometimes, In his great mercies, He showers us, With such blessings, To indicate to us, How much he loves us, And cares for us, People have prayed, For you, Over the course of the last year, How many, You'll never know, And, And, And, And, These many, Indications of his love, And grace, That he's showered you with, Over the past 12 months, And now you've got another year, And above all, The supreme demonstration,

[29 : 00] God has, Commended his love, Towards us, Proved it beyond, All doubt, Is indisputable, Nobody can question it, God, Commends his love, Towards us, In that while, We were yet sinners, Christ, Died for us, You are the objects, Of God's special favour, There's no question, About that, And, One or two of you, I know, But, Most of you, You're comparative strangers, To me, But I know, Even though, I don't know, The details of your life, I know that God, Has shown you special favour, I know that, Because you're here this morning, Just the fact that you're here, When out there, There are thousands of folk, It's never occurred to them, That the first Sunday, Of a new year, Should be spent, In the Lord's house, Worshipping God, Who gave them life, It hasn't occurred to them, So they're going about their pleasure, Or maybe their business,

Or whatever it is, But you're here, Is that, Just a, A chance, Set of coincidences, It is God's gracious hand, Upon your life, He's drawn you here, This morning, We need to be asking that question, When, The very fact that we are, A minority, In, The population of the country, Who, Have felt it necessary, Felt some pull, Some desire, To be doing something like this, On a Sunday morning, Really does need to be, Asking the question, Why, Why has God, Worked, In my life, In that way, Special care, I'll dig it around, I'll fertilize it, We'll see what happens, But it's not endless, Is it, It's not open ended, Only for so long,

Another year, One more year, Did this tree bear fruit? Well, We don't know, No, No idea, Where that actually, Did produce, Any fruit, It's, Been left for us, To think about, That's where the challenge, Comes, Doesn't it, So God has given you, Another year, So what will it produce, Is, But I want to encourage you, Because sometimes, The notion of fruitfulness, A life which is fruitful, And pleasing to God, Is quite an intimidating thought, Isn't it?

Because, What will, Be enough to please God? How can I be sure, That God will look upon me, With favor, And accept, The fruit, That I'm seeking to produce, For his glory, And it's interesting, Isn't it notice, In the story, That the owner, Of the vineyard, Goes looking for fruit, And there hasn't been any, Over the past three years, But the gardener, Says to him, Look I'll fertilize it, And I'll care for it, If it bears fruit next year, It doesn't say, How much fruit, It doesn't quantify, The amount of fruit, That it's got to produce, In order for it, To survive, Maybe just one fig, Would be enough, Maybe just one fig, Would be enough, To give the, Give the tree,

Further life, I think sometimes, Sometimes, We beat ourselves up, Over these sorts of things, There have been some, Incredibly fruitful lives, Over the centuries, In God's service, Just think of the apostle Paul, And the churches, That he, Planted, And, And the many souls, That must have been, One for the savior, Through his preaching, Of the gospel, And we set ourselves, Against somebody like that, Or some other great servant, Of God, And we, We feel, Our total inadequacies, And worthlessness, But then on the other hand, You take, You take the dying thief, What, What fruit could he produce, In the few hours, That he had left, In his life, And yet, Yet God is equally gracious, That strange story, That Jesus told, It is a strange story, Because it runs, Counter to all business sense, And indeed,

[33 : 48] To a sense, Of fair play, And equity, In one sense, When he talks about, The laborers in the vineyard, And, And, And some start, At the beginning of the day, And some start, And only work for one hour, And they all get paid, Exactly the same, And just imagine, What today's trade union, Officials would make of that, But, But the point is, It's not, The amount of fruit, And so, Those who only work one hour, Get exactly the same pay, As those who work all day, And that is, The graciousness of, God, And I'm thankful, In the story, It doesn't say, How much fruit, This tree has got to produce, It leaves it open, And I'm comforted by that, But, It's just, It's just the recognition, Isn't it, That the life I have, Is not my own, However much I like to think it is,

And God, And God who's given it to me, Can take it away, Just like that, If he chooses, But in the meantime, Does expect from me, That I should, At least acknowledge, He gave it to me, And that I should, I should seek to glorify him in it, And if, If it's, Some service for him, That goes unnoticed, By the world, Just one or two little figs perhaps, Not to be compared, With the incredible fruitfulness, Of some of the Lord's servants, Throughout the centuries, That's not the issue is it, So we can be encouraged, Can't we, But I have to warn you, Because it is a warning parable, And it was designed as a warning, And it was designed as a background, To the warnings he's already given, About, These, Catastrophic events, That are coming to the experience, Of some repent, Or you will likewise perish,

God's long suffering, Is not to be presumed upon, But that is such a mistake, So I've got, I've had, I've got so many years, Under my belt, And I've got away with it so far, Can easily fall into that way of thinking, You wouldn't put it quite like that, But, Can easily fall into that sort of mindset, Got away with it so far, To presume on that is utter folly, Because there's always, Always, A sense of urgency, In the gospel message, Now is the accepted time, Now is the day of salvation, And, And, Somehow, The idea that we've picked up, That, We can just sit back and wait, Is, Is not part, Of the gospel, At all, There is, There is, There is, A sense of urgency, About it,

Because, After the time of grace, There is, A final judgment, And that's clear in the story, If it bears fruit next year, Fine, If not, Cut it down, So there is, There is a time limit, There is an end point, There is, There is a stage, Beyond which you can go, No further, And it's there in the story, And it's true, In God's dealings with us, As his handiwork, You cannot, You cannot be sure, That you'll be here, This time next year, With another year, Ahead of you, But you have this year, You have this day, You have this first Sunday, Of 2014, And God's grace, Has been so, Wonderfully demonstrated, Even the very fact, That you're here, Is evidence of it, And you're hearing the gospel,

And you're hearing the Lord Jesus, Preaching, You're singing about him, And, And, And the command, And the urgency of the gospel, Is set before you, In this simple little story, Another year, But how many more, So, So the command is, To call now, For grace and mercy, To live the life, That you were created for, That you were designed for, Start now, Before it's too late, Call on the Lord Jesus Christ, For a new life, A life, A life that will be fruitful, Towards him, Not to be measured, By the amount of fruit, That it produces, But just measured, By the fact, That it's a life, Dependent on Christ, And seeking his grace, To live for him, And for his glory, Yet, One more year, But that's why, The story is just, So appropriate, For the first Sunday,

[38 : 57] Of a new year, One more year, How many more, Who can say, The challenge of the gospel, The challenge of the story, Is to secure the future, Now, Today, While it is today, A fruitless tree, Cannot be allowed, To go on, Forever, Can it?

At some point, It's going to have to, Suffer its fate, For its failure, It's true, Of the trees in, Your garden, How much more true is it, Of the life, That God has given you, And me, Let us, Take the opportunity, At the beginning, Of a new year, To give thanks to God, For another year, But to, Call upon the Saviour, And to trust him, And ask him for grace, To be, The people, That we were designed to be, Amen.