The Barren Fig Tree
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Setting

The text surrounding this parable tells us that Jesus was amongst a large crowd of people who had gathered around to hear him teach. Among other things he taught that day, this parable of the barren fig tree is told in such a way as to demonstrate the importance of repentance. In this crowd of people that surround Jesus, some began to speak to Him about the Galileans “whose blood Pilate has mixed with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1). Jesus questions them as to whether they believe these individuals are more sinful among the other Galileans or if those who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them were more guilty. He assures them that surely they are not and then proceeds to tell them the parable the barren fig tree. He takes this opportunity to explain to them the true meaning of repentance and the meaning by which you should do it.

Exegetical Analysis

The most important phrase or key word to understand in this parable and its surrounding text is the fig tree. “Fig trees were a common and important source of food for the Jews. Bad figs or a decaying fig tree was linked with evil deeds and spiritual decay. The unfruitful fig tree symbolized the outcome of Israel's unresponsiveness to the word of God. The prophets depicted the languishing fig tree as signifying the desolation and calamity of Israel due to her unfaithfulness to God” (Schwager). In this culture, it was the belief that if something tragic or unpleasant happened to someone it was associated with that person’s sinfulness and/of the sinfulness of their relatives. Bad things didn’t just happen to good people. So if you found yourself in the midst of a horrific event then you must have done something to upset God. This

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is why Jesus questions the people about their thoughts on whether those specific Galileans were more sinful or those who were killed by the fall of the tower were more guilty. Their mindset is that these people are sinful because of what happened to them. They do not understand that it is not what happens to you that matters but rather what you do with what happens to you.

It is also important to understand that in reference to the fig tree, it takes about three years to mature and then it would normally bear fruit annually after that. The owner has been checking on this tree for three years now and is disappointed each time when he finds that it remains barren. This would suggest that the tree is now at least six years old and might explain why the owner was so adamant about cutting it down for it was obviously a waste at this point and was now just taking up good soil.

A second key word to note in this parable is the word fertilize. The gardener claims he will fertilize the ground around this barren tree, giving it one last chance to grow and bear fruit. When we think of the word fertilizer today we don’t think of some lovely smelling, magical plant food; no, the word that often pops into our head is manure or dung. And that is exactly what the gardener was referring to in this story. He is confident that if he gives the tree one more chance and surrounds it with “dung” that it will produce the desired fruit that the owner has been anxiously waiting for.

**Message**

In this parable to the fig tree, the owner of the tree wants to cut the tree down for it has not produced any fruit though it has been there for years. The gardener encourages him however, to keep it for one more year and he will apply fertilizer to it and if it still does not grow, then they will cut it down. Jesus ties this parable to the situation around him by giving the message of repentance. His goal here is to explain to his audience that their former idea that
punishment and sin are related is inaccurate and inconsistent with the truths about God’s mercy and forgiveness. The last thing Jesus says before diving into the parable is “But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:5). The point is not that these people were sinful and therefore bad things happened to them; God never promised that your life would be free of tragedy and disappointment when you accept him into your life. The point is that you must repent of your sins in order to be forgiven and the time to do so is now. Just as the fig tree was given another chance to bear fruit, so are you given another chance to repent, but you must not wait. This parable also provides the audience with a sense of hope. The story does not give you closure as to whether the fig tree produced fruit after that last year. It leaves it open as to give you hope that no matter how barren you may be, there is still the possibility of becoming fruitful. As Scott so bluntly puts it, “We keep on manuring. What else is there to do?”

**Application**

This parable seems to tie into the unanswered question of “why do bad things happen to good people?” We are so quick to question and get upset at God when bad things happen to us as Christians, but on the other hand, what do we do when good things happen to us? Do we question God then? Of course not. I mean why should we right? We obviously deserved it, yet we never deserve the bad that creeps into our lives. Don’t fool yourself; we don’t deserve a darn thing. We have become such a corrupt people that we take God’s mercy for granted without even realizing it. We hold resentment against God when He supposedly “allows” bad to fulfill our lives, but don’t give Him an ounce of attention or praise when He fulfills our lives with blessings. We simply take it in and assume that we earned it all on our own, that it is some kind of reward for all the good that we have done. As I said before, don’t fool yourself, everything that God gives to us is a gift, none of it is deserved, no matter how godly of a person you may be.
And on the reverse side of that, don’t think that God is punishing you or has forgotten you if something bad happens to you. Too often when “crap” is dumped into our lives we view it as a disaster. The reality is though that sometimes the only way to be fruitful is through the disaster of our lives. I believe that is why sometimes God “allows” it; He wants us to pick up our own mess instead always relying on Him to do it for us. And if we never have messes to sort through and clean up, then how will we ever be able grow and become fruitful?

**Annotated Bibliography**


*Good treatment*

*Grade: A*