

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**New Year's Eve, December 31, 2010**

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Hymns: 110, 179, 331 1-7, 112, 558.

Lessons: Isaiah 5:1-7, 1 Peter 1:128-25, Luke 13:1-9.

Sermon Text: Luke 13:6-9.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Tonight we look back on a year in which the Lord has blessed us in our lives – personal, family, congregational, and national life. Even if humanly speaking we don't think so, we also count the things that didn't go the way we expected them to, yes, even the calamities, as hidden blessings. With Jacob we will admit *"I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups."* Genesis 32:10. It was God who had provided abundantly for him after he fled from his brother Esau, so that he returned with two large groups of family and servants. In the spirit of Jacob, we will admit that all God's blessings are undeserved because we have sinned and deserved only wrath and rejection.

Considering our sermon text, let's think of ourselves as fig trees, planted in a great garden. Such a fig tree is well cared for, owned by a wealthy man who can afford to pay a gardener to take care of his vineyard. But the fig tree in our sermon text, although it has been carefully cultivated, has not borne any fruit for the three years of its life. Fig trees, we are told, should bear fruit three times a year. But for three years no fruit has come from this tree.

Haven't we been well cared for by our God? Hasn't he provided everything we've needed? Hasn't he provided us richly and daily with everything that we need for our bodily welfare, such as food and drink, clothing and shoes, house and home, land and cattle, money and goods, a godly spouse, godly children, godly workers, godly and faithful leaders, good government, good weather, peace and order, health, a good name, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like? Hasn't he even provided a vineyard full of fellow confessing Christians and even provided regular and frequent opportunities to join with those fellow confessing Christians? If you are looking for something to do as a family, sit and start listing out loud all the blessings that you have received just in the last 12 months. That might even be a good activity for the trip home from church.

But in the parable, the owner of the vineyard and the tree is unhappy with the fact that no fruit has grown on the tree for three whole years. He tells the caretaker to get rid of it. Why should it use up the soil? But the caretaker pleads with his employer *"Sir, ... 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 cut it down."*

In this parable, Jesus names some specific time frames. He speaks of three years and one year. We would have great difficulty taking this literally. Which of you who can understand what I'm saying is only three years old? And so all of you who can understand what I'm saying would realize it is foolish to think that you have another whole year of God's grace guaranteed to you. So tonight, let's look at the message of this parable. There is one key word we must draw from it. And that is the word

**REPENT!**

- 1. We learn that the Lord is looking for good fruit.**

**2. The tree that does not bring forth fruit is to be cut down.**

**3. Lord, Grant us another day!**

Make no mistake. The Lord looks for fruit, good fruit. Our life will end some day – at any moment, we must realize, and so our time of grace will end some day – any day, any moment of any day. At that time there will be no second chance. Fruits of faith must come before that moment.

When he talks in our Gospel lesson about the people who were killed unexpectedly and even in horrible ways, Jesus asks, do you think all of these people were sinners above all others? You could think for a moment of all the calamities that have happened in the world in the last year. You could think of the disasters, the terrible things, the deaths that have happened even to those people whom you know. Were they sinners greater than anyone else? You would have to admit, certainly not in God's eyes, as we read in Romans 3:23: *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"* All those calamities and bad things, that have happened to others could as easily have happened to us. Perhaps they even have. Perhaps you have been struck in the past year, or received such blows, that it might be hard for you to think that God really loves you. But you must be assured that *"God so loved the world* – including you – *that he gave his one and only Son"* John 3:16. It is true that sin and suffering go together. It is true that sin is the cause of all suffering in the world. But we dare not point to specific sins and specific suffering and make an immediate connection. We dare not point to sin and suffering as a specific cause and effect situation. Oh yes, sometimes we can look at the wicked things, the foolish sinful things we have done in our lives and realize that as a result we suffered some physical calamity. We must live with the fruits of our sins. But God is looking tonight, in our text, for fruits of righteousness, rather than emphasizing the wages of sin, which is eternal death and damnation.

Although Jesus most likely was referring to the Jews as the fig tree planted in the vineyard, such a warning certainly applies to the Gentile church and for every human soul. The Jewish people as a whole did not just fail to bring forth fruits of righteousness; but through the Jews, the name of God was even blasphemed among the Gentiles, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans.

During the entire time of the Old Testament the Lord had vainly looked for fruit appropriate to the amount of labor and the cost which He had put into the vineyard of His Church. Israel had received a rich measure of grace, but had not reacted in kind. It was like the unfruitful vineyard of which the Lord complained in our Old Testament lesson tonight. In the sermon parable, the caretaker of the vineyard would seem to be Jesus Christ himself. The fourth year, for which the man who took care of the vineyard, Jesus, pleaded, was the time of mercy which had dawned with the ministry of John, had burst into full brightness with the preaching of Jesus, and would continue during the ministry of the apostles. Here the gardener wanted to dig around and fertilize the fig-tree with the evidences of His most tender love, of His holiest zeal, and finally, through His servants, by the preaching of His suffering and death, of His resurrection and sitting at the right hand of Power. But the extra time of grace went by, the Jewish people as a whole did not bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance; and so finally the judgment of God was carried out upon the disobedient people: Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jewish nation rejected.

Now we know from scripture that Jesus Christ did not have a different mind than the Father. But Jesus Christ represented his father here on earth, he lived a human life, and as a human he set aside his divine glory. He served the will of the Father, but he was also our great high priest, interceding with the Father even while he was on earth.

We dare not forget God's anger against sin. But we must remember the reality of the sacrifice of Christ which was the propitiation, the atoning sacrifice of God. Jesus' sacrifice was not merely an assurance of God's love toward sinners. We must also remember the high priestly intercession of Christ, even while he was here on earth. The gardener does not plead that the barren tree may stand for ever. He agrees that it should be gotten rid

of if it remains unfruitful. But he asks for it a time of grace. ***‘Leave it alone for one more year.’*** During this season he will take great care of this fig tree. He says ***“I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.”*** The picture he gives is digging the soil out from around the stem of the tree, and filling it up with manure so that it may receive special fertilization. With this we can see what has been called the ‘multiplication of the means of grace’ which God gives before his grace, his undeserved love and mercy are withdrawn forever. If we look at various places in Scripture, we can see some examples of this. One example could be Noah, a preacher of righteousness, who appeared before God destroyed mankind in the flood. Before the great catastrophes in Jewish history, some of their most important prophets appeared and warned them with their preaching. During his lifetime Jesus came and warned the Jews. It was not even 40 years after Jesus appeared on earth that Jerusalem was destroyed – by the Romans – just as Jesus had prophesied in Matthew 24 and 25.

Jesus’ ministry was a time of God’s grace for the Jews, like the additional year of grace pleaded for the tree. There was the digging around the tree, and of course this certainly irritates the soil and perhaps even irritates the tree. But the Jewish people stayed in their barrenness, and by and large they turned away from Jesus Christ despite his ministry and the extremely active ministry of the apostles and, we must assume, the mission work of all the 3000, who later grew to 5000 just in Jerusalem who were converted to Jesus Christ early in the time of the New Testament. (Acts 2 through 4) But these were just a tiny fraction of the number of Jews who lived in Israel at that time. Yet Jesus’ words show that there is an alternative to destruction. If the tree bears fruit, well! Great! It will not be destroyed! The door of repentance is left open to all. Everyone is warned that it is only they themselves who make their doom inevitable.

It is because of Christ’s interceding at the right hand of God as our great high Priest that every barren fig tree in the visible church is not cut down at once and cast into the fire. But notice that Jesus does not pray or beg that the tree shall never be cut down. God is truly long-suffering, patient, and rich in mercy. But just as his forbearance did reach an end with Israel of old, so we have the warning that his time of grace comes to an end in the case of every individual. Israel did not avail itself of the new day of grace for repentance. So the tree was cut down.

Everyone that fails to bear the fruits of repentance in good works will also be cut down in God’s right time, after having remained long enough in the soil of the church as a tree that is not only useless, but even detrimental. In essence such an unrepentant person in the visible Church of God has in many ways hindered the growth of the Church of God.

The parable told by Jesus about the fig tree brings out the truth that God gives people time to repent. God is very patient, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. ***“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”*** 2 Peter 3:9.

However the delay in judgment should not cause anyone to put off repentance, like the emperor Constantine the Great did, in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. He was not baptized until he was quite sure he was on his deathbed. He nearly died before he could be baptized! The time will finally come when the unfruitful tree is cut down. The opportunity for repentance does finally come to an end.

As we turn the calendar to a new year, we humbly and thankfully approach our God with repentance and thankfulness, pleading that he work in us fruits of faith, so that we may, in the words of Isaiah, ***“tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us--yes, the many good things he has done”*** Isaiah 63:7 for us, his Israel! May God work repentance and bring forth ***“fruits worthy of repentance”, “fruit in keeping with repentance.”*** Luke 3:8 each day of our lives! Amen.