

Luke 13: 1-10

How much work does it take to be fruitful or fruitless? Well, both ways take an effort... an effort to do nothing or an effort to do something. For Lent as we spend time praying and reflecting... where are your priorities? Are you feeling closer to God or more distant?

We have to bear fruit. We need to explore and try something. God can inspire us to do what it takes, but we are the ones that need to take action. Jesus tells us life is short. Why wait another year and stop asking for more time?

My grandmother Herman always used analogies of comparing cars to people when it came comparing their faith to their Christian actions. She once said some Christians that go to church are like parked cars. They get to church, they park themselves in a pew, get filled with God message only to go back home and park ourselves in front of the TV and do nothing about bringing others to church or being Godly in our actions.

When driving home from church you are in a car on the road that is prone to road rage or are you in a car willing to stop and show mercy?

She also said we think we must go to church to become a Christian, but that is just as easy as a human to become an automobile by sleeping in a garage. That went over my head at the time but now that I have been to seminary and pondered that statement, I think she was speaking about was the danger of presumed spiritual security in thinking just coming to church will get one into heaven.

Our parable today says that we're not called just to be here Christians. It is a clear warning against a fruitless existence in the light of God's grace given to us. Two years ago, I got a set of fairly new used Commentaries as a gift from a pastor friend. As I read through it for this week's sermon, I used the Luke commentary I was given and was

intrigued to find my friend underlined parts of the book and in the margin wrote the letters YBH.

So, I asked the pastor who gave me the commentaries what the YBH meant.

My friend replied that the underlined paragraphs were sections of the scripture that they basically agreed with. What the pastor underlined on those pages were good examples of what Christians should incorporate into our lives. However, the letters YBH were areas of faith I struggled with, YBH stood for "Yes, but how?" How do I preach this and have others apply it to their life? When it comes to real life, how?

Those three letters we could write on the margins of our souls: "I ought to know how to take better care of myself, Yes, but how?" "I know I ought to spend more time in scripture reading and prayer, Yes, but how?" I need to stop some pretty bad habits, Yes, but how?

"I know I ought to be more sensitive to others, more loving of my spouse, more understanding of the weaknesses of others, but how?" I need to have a filter what I say when I am speaking, "Yes, but how?" These are all good qualities and we know that, but how can we acquire them?

As Christian people we know the kind of life we ought to live, and most of us have the best of intentions to do so, but how? We are afraid because we know where the road paved with only good intentions leads us! When we leave church and make it home, it is home where (as Grandma said) we become nothing but parked cars. This morning we hear Jesus' parable of the fig tree, telling us to repent and bear good fruit. We know what the Christian life requires of us and yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we also know how far short we fall. So, the question that confronts us this morning is: Lord we know what it takes, but left to our own devices, we truly do fall into the "Yes, but how?" Zone.

It's a dilemma that has confronted God's people throughout the ages. Even the apostle Paul found himself trapped. In Romans 7 Paul writes: (And I read from the Message

translation) It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God's will so far as my new (redeemed Christian) nature is concerned.

But there is something else deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind, poor choices wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.

In my mind, I want to be God's willing servant, but instead I find myself enslaved to sin. So you see how it is; my new life (the redeemed life in Christ) tells me to do right, but the old nature that is still inside me (my sinful human self) loves to sin.

Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from this slavery to sin? Thank God! It has already been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free! "Repent," Jesus says. "Acknowledge your sinfulness." That's the first step in beginning to live the Christian life.

So, I agree with Paul, none of us is without fault. And yet, how difficult it is for us to admit that. Who goes into a job interview and declares, "I have to tell you. I have a habit of missing work, or criticizing my supervisors and others, and I enjoy listening to office gossip?"

And who goes on a date and confesses to the other person, "Listen. I have to tell you I tend to be difficult to live with, I pick my teeth in public and I love to be a real bore at times"?

The apostle John tells us the same thing very clearly when he writes, 1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

Whoever we are, whatever we do, we all share one thing in common and that is that we are sinful. Mark Twain, with his characteristic sense of humor, tells us how he why we

are imperfect, when he wrote, "We are imperfect because human beings were made at the end of the week, when God was tired."

Repent, Jesus says, for that's the first step in the Christian life. Repentance is not a weakness but strength. Confession is good for the soul -- yes, we know that -- but how? Most of us are willing to confess our sins as long as we don't have to change.

We think this because most of us never take seriously the concept of sin. I read recently an article about the difficulty a translator had in rendering the Bible into an African dialect.

It seemed that the particular language had no suitable term for "sin."

Apparently, the people who spoke that dialect had words for right and wrong, but not a word which referred to sin. The closest the translator could come up with was a word that meant "something bad to eat."

For a lot of people that's the extent of it. Sin is a matter of taste. So, what if "we are what we eat"? Taste is an individual matter and nobody has the right to tell another what to like or not like. And if sin is just a matter of taste, it certainly doesn't require the radical solution of repentance. It's easy for us to conclude that we aren't truly bad when we compare ourselves to others. There are plenty of people worse than us.

But the truth of our moral and spiritual condition becomes evident only when we compare ourselves to Jesus. In the light of his life, our lives look far from perfect! When we look at our lives in the light of Jesus' love, even our best, our righteousness is, as the Prophet Isaiah tells us, like "filthy rags to God."

Confession is good for the soul, we know that, and it is the first step in beginning to live the Christian life.

It is when we realize that without God we are incomplete. Sin is not a matter of taste. It is sampling the forbidden fruit. When we deny God, when we are slow to repent and asking

for forgiveness, when we think we have plenty of time to change our ways, Jesus say life is short and we may need to think again.

Remember, Jesus is not demanding anything that we cannot produce. He doesn't ask the fig tree to produce bananas. He doesn't expect the fig tree to grow tall as an oak or be fragrant as a cedar. He is only asking it to be what it is, to do what it ought: produce figs.

You and I have differing gifts. Some have wonderful singing voices. Some are artists, authors... others are good with numbers, and others still are good with people. Each of us has our own unique gifts. And the miracle that happens is that through repentance and forgiveness, those gifts are released for the good of God and others around us.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree calls us to take responsibility for ourselves, for God gives us the key. Repent, Jesus says.

Confess your sins and allow the power of God to live within you. Allow God to enable us to live as we ought. Let Jesus take possession of us and live in him. YBH...never cease praying and asking for forgiveness and guidance.

After WWII, Winston Churchill came to speak at a commencement ceremony at Oxford. After enduring a lengthy introduction, Churchill is reported to have risen from his seat, strode to the podium and stared fixedly at his audience of new graduates. "Never give up!" he pronounced solemnly. Churchill then turned, walked back to his chair and sat down.

As the stunned students momentarily sat in silence, Churchill, with perfect timing, once again rose from his chair, returned to the podium and again announced, "Never give up!" and returned to his seat. "Never give up!"

You can be sure that every graduate in that audience never forgot that speech and never forgot that he or she was to "never give up!" Has the church forgotten that it has received

the same message from the divine? God has promised never to give up on us.

All of the Scriptures Old and New Testaments together are a record of how God never, never, never, never gives up.

- Adam and Eve disobeyed the very First Rule. But God never gave up.
- Abraham wandered, and Sarah laughed. But God never gave up.
- Moses hid and shook with fear. But God never gave up.
- Israel fell into pieces under David and Solomon. But God never gave up.
- The Jewish people became exiles. But God never gave up.
- John the Baptist was beheaded. But God never gave up.
- Peter denied he even knew Jesus. But God never gave up.
- The disciples all ran away. But God never gave up.

How are we forgiven, why must we confess and pray without ceasing? How do we become the fruitful people God wants us to be? Remember God loves you and never gives up forgiving us when we sin....Yes, but How? Simple.... Pray In Jesus' name, and never give up.