EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE XIII. 6–9.

6 He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard: and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none.

7 Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?

8 And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung *it:*

9 And if it bear fruit, *well:* and if not, *then* after that thou shalt cut it down.

THE parable we have now read is peculiarly humbling and heart-searching. The Christian who can hear it, and not feel sorrow and shame as he looks at the state of Christendom, must be in a very unhealthy state of soul.

We learn, first, from this passage, that *where God gives spiritual privileges He expects proportionate returns.*

Our Lord teaches this lesson by comparing the Jewish Church of His day to a “fig tree planted in a vineyard.” This was exactly the position of Israel in the world. They were separated from other nations by the Mosaic laws and ordinances, no less than by the situation of their land. They were favoured with revelations of God, which were granted to no other people. Things were done for them which were never done for Egypt, or Nineveh, or Babylon, or Greece, or Rome. It was only just and right that they should bear fruit to God’s praise. It might reasonably be expected that there would be more faith, and penitence, and holiness, and godliness in Israel than among the heathen. This is what God looked for. The owner of the fig tree “came seeking fruit.”

But we must look beyond the Jewish Church if we mean to get the full benefit of the parable before us.—We must look to the Christian Churches. They have light, and truth, and doctrines, and precepts, of which the heathen never hear. How great is their responsibility! Is it not just and right that God should expect from them “fruit”?—We must look to our own hearts. We live in a land of Bibles, and liberty, and Gospel preaching. How vast are the advantages we enjoy compared to the Chinese and Hindoo! Never let us forget that God expects from us “fruit.”

These are solemn truths. Few things are so much forgotten by men as the close connection between privilege and responsibility. We are all ready enough to eat the fat and drink the sweet, and bask in the sunshine of our position both as Christians and Englishmen,—and even to spare a few pitying thoughts for the half naked savage who bows down to stocks and stones. But we are very slow to remember that we are accountable to God for all we enjoy; and that to whomsoever much is given, of them much will be required. Let us awake to a sense of these things. We are the most favoured nation upon earth. We are in the truest sense “a fig tree planted in a vineyard.” Let us not forget that the great Master looks for “fruit.”

We learn, secondly, from this passage, that *it is* a *most dangerous thing to be unfruitful under great religious privileges.*

The manner in which our Lord conveys this lesson to us is deeply impressive. He shows us the owner of the barren fig tree complaining that it bore no fruit: “These three years I come seeking fruit and find none.”—He describes him as even ordering the destruction of the tree as a useless cumberer of the ground: “Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?” He brings in the dresser of the vineyard pleading for the fig tree, that it may be spared a little longer: “Lord, let it alone this year also.” And He concludes the parable by putting these awful words into the vinedresser’s mouth: “If it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.”

There is a plain warning here to all professing Churches of Christ. If their ministers do not teach sound doctrine, and their members do not live holy lives, they are in im­minent peril of destruction. God is every year observing them, and taking account of all their ways. They may abound in ceremonial religion. They may be covered with the leaves of forms, and services, and ordinances. But if they are destitute of the fruits of the Spirit, they are reckoned useless cumberers of the ground. Except they repent, they will be cut down. It was so with the Jewish Church forty years after our Lord’s ascen­sion. It has been so since with the African Churches. It will be so yet with many others, it may be feared, before the end comes. The axe is lying near the root of many an unfruitful Church. The sentence will yet go forth, “Cut it down.”

There is a plainer warning still in the passage for all unconverted Christians. There are many in every congregation who hear the Gospel, who are literally hanging over the brink of the pit. They have lived for years in the best part of God’s vineyard, and yet borne no fruit. They have heard the Gospel preached faith­fully for hundreds of Sundays, and yet have never embraced it, and taken up the cross, and followed Christ. They do not perhaps run into open sin. But they do nothing for God’s glory. There is nothing positive about their religion. Of each of these the Lord of the vine­yard might say with truth, “I come these many years seeking fruit on this tree, and find none. Cut it down. It cumbereth the ground.” There are myriads of respect­able professing Christians in this plight. They have not the least idea how near they are to destruction. Never let us forget that to be content with sitting in the congregation and hearing sermons, while we bear no fruit in our lives, is conduct which is most offensive to God. It provokes Him to cut us off suddenly, and that without remedy.

We learn, lastly, from this parable, *what an infinite debt we all owe to God’s mercy and Christ’s intercession.* It seems impossible to draw any other lesson from the earnest pleading of the dresser of the vineyard: “Lord, let it alone this year also.” Surely we see here, as in a glass, the loving-kindness of God, and the mediation of Christ.

Mercy has been truly called the darling attribute of God. Power, justice, purity, holiness, wisdom, unchangeableness, are all parts of God’s character, and have all been manifested to the world in a thousand ways, both in His works and in His word. But if there is one part of His perfections which He is pleased to exhibit to man more clearly than another, beyond doubt that part is mercy. He is a God that “delighteth in mercy.” (Micah vii. 18.)

Mercy founded on the mediation of a coming Saviour, was the cause why Adam and Eve were not cast down to hell in the day that they fell. Mercy has been the cause why God has borne so long with this sin-laden world, and not come down to judgment. Mercy is even now the cause why unconverted sinners are so long spared, and not cut off in their sins. We have probably not the least conception how much we all owe to God’s long­suffering. The last day will prove that all mankind were debtors to God’s mercy, and Christ’s mediation. Even those who are finally lost will discover to their shame, that it was “of the Lord’s mercies they were not consumed” long before they died. As for those who are saved, covenant-mercy will be all their plea.

And now, are we fruitful or unfruitful? This, after all, is the question that concerns us most. What does God see in us year after year? Let us take heed so to live that He may see in us fruit.

NOTES. LUKE XIII. 6–9.

6.*—*[*A* *certain man had a fig tree, &c.*]There can be no doubt that our Lord’s primary object in this parable was to show the danger of the Jewish Church and nation, at the time when He spoke. It is worthy of remark, that “the barren fig tree” to which our Lord said, No man eat fruit of thee for ever (Mark xi. 13), was meant to be an emblem of the Jewish Church. But the primary application of this parable must not shut out the secondary one. It was meant for individuals, as well as for the Jewish Church.

*7.—*[*These three years.*]The meaning of these “three years,” has called forth much ingenious conjecture from commentators. Gregory thinks that the three years signify the times of Israel before the law, in the law, and after the law.—Ambrose thinks that they signify the times of natural law, of written law, and of evangelical law.—Theophylact applies them to the times of children, of youth, and of old age.—Stella explains them to mean the times before the Babylonian captivity, the times after the return from Babylon, and the times of our Lord’s own first advent.—Others apply them to the three years of our Lord’s earthly ministry.—If any of these senses is true, the last appears most likely. It may, however, be seriously questioned whether our Lord had any of these meanings in His mind when He spoke this parable, and whether we ought not to regard the “three years” as simply an accessory circumstance of the story, the interpretation of which must not be carried too far.

[*Cumbereth.*]The Greek word so translated is only ren­dered thus in this passage. “It is generally translated, make void,”—“make of none effect,”—“destroy,”—“bring to nothing,”—“abolish.”

The expression is probably intended to teach the deep lesson, that unfruitful members of God’s Church are not merely injuring themselves and perilling their own souls. They are an injury to the Church generally, and do public harm. The common idea that an unconverted person “does no harm,”—is “no man’s enemy but his own,”—and the like, is a miserable man-made delusion, based on no warrant of Scripture. To be unfruitful is to be a cumberer of the ground. We are always doing either good or harm.

8.—[*Lord*, *let it alone,*] Who is meant by the dresser of the vineyard, who thus intercedes, is a question on which wide and strange differences of opinion prevail. Augustine says that it signifies “every saint,” because all intercede.—Ambrose and Stella say that it signifies the “apostles.” Jerome says that it signifies “Michael and Gabriel,” the archangels, who had the special charge of the Jewish synagogue.—Alford thinks that it signifies the Holy Spirit.—All these interpretations appear to me incorrect. The most probable view is that of Euthymius and Theophylact, who consider the interceding vineyard dresser to be an emblem of Christ Himself. Matthew Henry says truly, “that had it not been for Christ’s intercession, the whole world had been cut down.”

[*Dig about it and dung it.*]This part of the parable signifies the extraordinary means which were used with the Jewish Church at the latter period of its existence, in order to awaken it to repentance.

*9.—*[*After that thou shalt cut it down.*]It is very probable that all unconverted members of Christ’s Church will be found at the last day to have had their special “time of visitation,” and to have been “digged about” by special providences, at some period of their lives. Hence their final condemnation will be proved most just.

The final cutting down of the tree of the Jewish Church, was, undoubtedly, most justly brought on the Jews by their obstinate neglect of all the messages which God sent them in the fifty years immediately preceding the destruction of Jeru­salem by the ministry of John the Baptist, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Apostles. If ever there was a fig tree which was long spared, and patiently digged about, and had every means used to make it fruitful, that tree was the Jewish Church.