

“*Why should (this fig tree) use up the ground? Cut it down!*” These words came to fulfillment in the year 70 when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, dispersing the nation of Israel for good. Yet Jesus’ parable here is not simply a history lesson. If we are wise, we will apply it to ourselves. Let’s do that now.

You and I are the fig tree. God Himself planted us in His vineyard. And so, He has the right to expect us to produce fruits. And why wouldn’t we? We have a gracious God who provides for us all that we need to support this body and life. We have our Lord Jesus Christ whose blood was shed on the cross for us to cover all our sins and iniquities. We have the Holy Spirit who brought us to Jesus in our baptism, and who keeps us in Christ and with Christ through the hearing of the Gospel. We have a home in heaven which is ours, purchased and given to us freely through Christ Jesus. How could anyone of us, therefore, be an ungrateful fig tree? How is it even possible that any of us would not produce fruits year in and year out?

Now Jesus’ apostle gives us a list of such fruits in Galatians 5. Fruits He expects in us. “*Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*” Every Christian should produce these fruits of the Spirit.

But the apostle also lists fruits of the flesh. Poisonous fruits which are really not fruits at all. “*Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry...enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger...dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness...and things like these.*” How many people can you think of, just off the top of your head, who fall somewhere into this second list? No, I am not encouraging you to be judgmental. I’m asking you to be the vinedresser in the parable.

The man who owns the vineyard points out a fig tree that is not producing. A tree which may exhibit behavior more in keeping with the second list in Galatians 5. “*Cut it down!*” are his instructions. But the vinedresser pleads for this fig tree. He intercedes for it. He says, “*Sir, let it alone...until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.*”

Do you think maybe that the mother of the thief on the cross was interceding for her son in this way? That man was a worthless fig tree. He was just using up the ground. The only fruits he produced were poisonous. His whole life was summed up by the second list.

But someone was interceding for him. His mother, or father, perhaps. A brother or sister. And also Jesus, who prayed for him from the cross, “*Father, forgive...*” And you know what happened. At the eleventh hour that thief repented. He was brought to Jesus in faith, and today he is in heaven.

You and I know people who are just using up the ground. The fruits of repentance are not seen in their day-to-day life. It’s like they couldn’t care less about Jesus and His Church; about living a Christian life; about producing the fruits that Jesus expects of them. Such ones as these may be in your circle of friends. They may be within your own family, and in our church family.

The word of judgment against such barren fig trees is clear and is coming: “*Cut it down!*” But let that word never come from us. As if we, ourselves, have never been such barren fig trees. As if we have never, in our life, just been using up the ground. And when that awful word, “*Cut it down!*” could have been used against us, was there not someone interceding for us? Someone who pleaded with God to withhold His judgment against us until the manure could do its work?

That manure is Jesus. It’s the Gospel in Word and in Sacrament. Every farmer knows the value of manure. We may not enjoy following manure spreaders on the road, but that which is spread is essential for growth. We all know, without getting graphic here, what manure is and from where it comes. It’s discarded. Something we want to be rid of. This is how Jesus was treated. The rulers wanted to be rid of Him. They held their noses when they were around Him. And truly, He was a stench as He hung on the cross, for all our sins were laid on Him.

But this manure is what causes the fig tree to produce fruit. Call me the manure spreader if you want. But such also are you as you vinedressers intercede for the barren fig trees around you, and then bring them here where the manure of the Gospel does its work.

Friends, God has declared your sins forgiven. And that same word of forgiveness is for every fig tree that is not bearing fruit. They need Jesus just as we need Him. We do not want any of them to be cut down. Nor does God, for His way is to show mercy. And so, let us, whose sins are forgiven, and who believe this, be interceders, pleading for those fig trees whose fruits are lacking. And then spread the manure on them, the sweet manure of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.