

Sometimes it's good to reflect a bit on what went well and what we might want to change in the new year. I've got something along those lines. On December 23rd I flew to Kentucky to celebrate Christmas with our daughter and her family. Lynn flew out before me on the 21st. Of course, I had to pack a few gifts along with my other stuff. It wasn't easy because I wanted to get everything in my carry-on luggage. So I had to consolidate by putting extraneous things in Christmas boxes, and stuffing it all in my carry-on with my clothes. Then off I went. That night, after arriving in Kentucky, I unpacked my luggage and wrapped the gifts.

The problem was, I kinda forgot about all the extraneous things I'd thrown in the gift boxes. When Lynn, my wife, opened her beautifully wrapped gift on Christmas morning, she found a bunch of weird stuff inside, like crazy glue and prescriptions from Walgreens, along with the gift. Needless to say, it wasn't my finest moment!

I want you to think about another scenario. What if you woke up Christmas morning and under the tree were piles of beautifully wrapped presents. What if you unwrapped all those gifts and, one by one, you found them completely empty? Can you imagine the disappointment? You might even feel a little bit angry and like someone was trying to play with your head!

If you can imagine what that might feel like, you can relate to what Jesus was feeling as he entered Jerusalem for the final time. It would be the last week of his earthly life. This is where we're picking up in the Gospel of Matthew — chapter 21. Jesus had just ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey. We call it The Triumphal Entry — King Jesus riding into his city amidst the cheers of the crowd. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

But the applause stopped when Jesus marched into the Temple and began turning over tables and driving the money changers out. He said, "This was meant to be a place of prayer, but you've turned it into a den of thieves!" The blind, and the lame came to him, and he healed them. Of course, all of this was very upsetting to the religious leaders. I mean what right did this uneducated carpenter from Nazareth have to come to their city and act like he owned the place? In fact, King David forbade the blind and the lame from entering Jerusalem, and now this so-called Son of David welcomes them (2 Samuel 5:6-10).

Then Jesus just walked off. Matthew says, "*he left them and went out of the city to Bethany where he spent the night*" (v. 27). It sounds like he's done with them all, but the next morning he marched right back into Jerusalem.

The Fig Tree

Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it

except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered. When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked. Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." vv. 18-22

Wherever Jesus spent the night in Bethany, it appears they didn't serve him breakfast because as he walked back to Jerusalem, he was hungry. He spots a fig tree by the road well-endowed with leaves. He approaches it, expecting to find fruit to eat, but there's no fruit. This was unusual. We know this took place during Passover, which is in the Spring. In this season fig trees would put forth buds which were called "early figs." They never ripen completely, but they're still eaten. The way you knew there were early figs on the tree was there'd be lots of leaves. But this tree was deceptive. It's a case of false advertising — with all the leaves there should be fruit, but there's none. It's like a beautifully wrapped box — you unwrap it and expect to find a wonderful gift, but it's empty! So, he pronounces a curse on the tree and right away it withers up.

Some have wondered, is Jesus having a little temper tantrum? Has his empty stomach made him irritable? I believe not. The issue here isn't Jesus' hunger, but rather his disdain for what he sees going on around him in the Temple, and particularly with the religious leaders. In the Old Testament, Israel was often likened to a fig tree or a vine (Jeremiah 8:13; Micah 7:1). Jesus was using this fig tree as an object lesson. There were a lot of leaves, but no fruit. Spiritually, Israel was barren. From a distance, the Temple was very impressive, lots of religious activity, but on closer examination it was fruitless. It was a beautifully wrapped but hollow box. Jesus entered Jerusalem and expected to see prayer and worship offered up to God. He looked for the fruits of righteousness — humility, kindness, mercy, and justice. Instead, he saw selfishness, hypocrisy, greed, and injustice. Jesus did not put up with that. Just as he pronounced judgment on the fig tree, so he passed judgement on Israel and its leaders for their lack of fruit.

We need to be aware of this today. It's possible for God's people to make a great show of religion, lots of religious activity, lots of religious talk, lots of leaves, but no real fruit. The sad thing is that all the activity and all the talk can actually blind us to the reality that the box may be impressive on the outside, but it's empty.

We should ask ourselves, what really matters to God? One of the things that matter is prayer and faith. Jesus mentions this in response to the disciples' question: "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" Then Jesus talked about the power of believing prayer.

He said you can move mountains if you have faith. If you believe, you'll receive whatever you ask for. This isn't a formula for us to name it and claim it in prayer. Praying in faith involves discerning what God wants. And notice when talking about moving mountains Jesus said, "This mountain..." Not just any old mountain, but this mountain. He's likely talking about Mt. Zion where the Temple stood. That very Temple would soon wither and be removed. God would judge it and what it represented because it was so corrupt that instead of helping people come to God it was an obstacle.

You see, another thing that matters to God is compassion and mercy. The Temple was meant to be a house of prayer for all people: not just Jews but Gentiles; not just the healthy, but the blind and the lame; not just insiders, but outsiders. We should ask ourselves, is all our religious activity making it harder or easier for the poor, the broken, and the spiritually hungry to find help and hope? There are churches that send subtle messages to outsiders that if you don't talk like they talk, vote like they vote, pray like they pray, and dress like they dress, you aren't really welcome there. God forbid this happens here!

What Authority? What Authority!

This incident at the fig tree is followed by another incident that confirms everything Jesus just did. Jesus entered the Temple courts and began to teach. But he was soon interrupted by an official delegation of religious leaders.

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" v. 23

To them, this question makes perfect sense. I mean the day before he had walked into their holy place and started rearranging the furniture. Then the next day he's back, teaching in their Temple. But he's not a scribe, a Pharisee, or a Sadducee. He's not even a priest or an elder. He's a nobody from Nazareth. And he comes in here like he's the Sheriff! By what authority is he doing these things?

By the way, the issue of Jesus' authority is a big one in Matthew. In Matthew seven it states, *"the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority"* (7:28-29). In chapter eight, a centurion compared Jesus' authority to his own as a military commander (8:8-9). In chapter nine, Jesus claimed to have the authority to forgive sin (9:6). Finally, in chapter 28, after being raised from the dead, Jesus said, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"* (28:18).

No wonder these religious leaders want to know once and for all where his authority comes from. But their tone was more accusatory than inquisitive. Their hope was he'd say something to indict himself. Maybe he'd claim to be the Messiah. After all, the Messiah had authority over the Temple. If he claimed to be him, they'd accuse him of blasphemy.

Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then

why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. vv. 24-27

This is brilliant. Jesus responds to their question with a question of his own about John. He's not evading the question, because John's authority was related to Jesus' authority. You see, John testified about Jesus, that he was the Messiah. We know John baptized Jesus, and at that baptism God declared, "This is my Son..." which means he's the Messiah. So, if they said John's baptism was from God, then they'd have to believe what John said about Jesus, and they couldn't possibly do that. But there's another problem: if they said John's baptism was merely of man, they knew people would rebel because John was hugely popular with the people. These men weren't stupid. They understood practical politics. So, they did the politically correct thing and claimed ignorance. Jesus said, "Since you won't answer my question, I won't answer yours."

Again, these leaders, these representatives of Israel, demonstrate what Jesus just enacted through the fig tree. Lots of religious activity, but no real fruit. They care more about politics than the truth.

The Parable of Two Sons

Then, as he often did, Jesus went on and told two stories meant to shed light on what was going on. And as you'll see, the theme continues. It's not about profession; it's about practice. It's not about what you say, but about the fruit you bear. Two stories, a one-two punch, both featuring a vineyard to represent Israel.

The first story is about two sons.

"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. vv 28-32

Clearly, the father in this story represents God the Father. The first son is the "I-won't-but-then-I-will" son. In that culture, it was scandalous for a son to say no to his father like this. But, of course, we all know boys like this. Maybe they put up a good fight, but in the end, they do what they're told. Or maybe they spend their whole childhood and teenage years in rebellion, but somehow, they turn out to be solid human beings. Have you ever gone to a high school reunion and were shocked at how someone you remembered as a total deviant actually turned out to be an upstanding citizen? That's why I don't go to those things anymore — "Wait, you're a pastor?!"

But it's clear what Jesus means. This first son represents all the tax collectors and prostitutes and the like who are entering the Kingdom of heaven, and who, by the way, were hanging out with Jesus. They listened to John; they repented, they bore fruit in the vineyard, and Jesus said, "They'll enter the Kingdom ahead of you."

The second son is different. He's the "I-will-but-then-I-won't" son. He's the good boy, the easy-to-raise-boy, who stays home and agrees to do all his father tells him to do. But, somehow, when it comes down to it, he never goes to work in the vineyard nor sees any fruit. Of course, the second son symbolizes the religious leaders who went out to hear John but, in the end, refused to heed his message of repentance. Again, these are the guys who appear to say yes to God by their outward religion, but ultimately rejected God and the One he sent. Lots of religious activity, lots of God-talk, but where's the fruit?

It's interesting how Jesus said that even after the religious leaders saw the tax collectors and prostitutes repent, they refused to believe. When the second son saw the response of the first son, he should have repented, just as the religious leaders should have repented when they saw how sinners were transformed. I like what Tim Keller wrote, "When a Christian sees prostitutes, alcoholics, prisoners, drug addicts, unwed mothers, the homeless, refugees, he knows he's looking in a mirror. Perhaps the Christian spent all his life as a respectable middle-class person. No matter. He thinks, 'Spiritually I was just like these people, though physically and socially I never was where they are now. Spiritually speaking, I was an outcast.'"

You see, in all of this, Jesus says what really counts isn't what you promise to do, but what you actually do. It's not about religion; it's about bearing fruit. It's not about the box or the wrapping; it's about what's inside. And all of that begins with repentance; a change of mind.

Think about this as it relates to entering a new year. I like to think about changes I need to make in the new year. But we can be so much like the "I-will-but-then-I-won't" son. So, we throw the whole thing out. You know, "My resolution is to make no resolutions." We laugh at that, but it speaks to the fact we're tired of failing to keep our resolutions. But one reason for that is we tend to make resolutions without repentance. We never get down to the core issues in our heart. We never get down to what's really in the box.

For example, Samuel Johnson was a literary giant of the 1700s. He wrote a definitive dictionary of the English language. But he struggled with the simple discipline of getting up early each morning. His journals record his struggles and his resolutions to rise at a decent hour.

- One of his first entries was in 1738, "Oh Lord, enable me to redeem the time which I've spent in sloth."
- Twenty-three years later, still sleeping late, he writes, "I've resolved until I've resolved that I'm afraid to resolve again."
- But in 1764, he does resolve again to rise "not later than 6 if I can."
- But obviously that failed because the very next year he wrote, "I purpose to rise at 8 because though I shall not rise early it will be much earlier than I now rise, for I often lie until 2."

- Still sleeping late in 1775, after 37 years of resolutions, he writes: "When I look back upon resolution of improvement and amendments which have, year after year, been made and broken, why do I yet try to resolve again?"

- But he again resolves to rise at 8, still unsuccessfully.

We've all been there. But part of the problem is we never get to the root. The Puritan Jonathan Edwards once made this resolution, "Whenever I do any conspicuously evil action, to trace it back, till I come to the original cause; and then both carefully endeavor to do so no more, and to fight and pray with all my might against the original of it." That's resolution with repentance. He wants to get to the root. And notice how he said, "pray." That's important because without God's help we can't really change. Usually, when we resolve, we rely on our own strength. But when we repent, we humble ourselves before God, confessing our inadequacy and need for his power. With that, God will reach down to change us.

The Parable of Wicked Vine-growers

This leads to a second parable, which again is set in a vineyard. This parable is far more pointed and sharp.

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. 'The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. 'But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. vv. 33-39

This is a story about a landowner who went to great lengths to plant a vineyard and ensure its productivity. He knew it would take time. It usually took four years before any fruit could be harvested on a new vineyard. So, he put some tenants in charge and moves on to other projects. By the way, there were often disputes between absentee landowners and their tenant farmers, which is what happened here. The absentee landowner had to maintain his ownership by receiving rent at stated times or else the tenants could actually assume ownership.

But we all know Jesus is talking about more than ancient land disputes. This story is about God. The sending of these servants, pictures God's patient pursuit of his people, Israel, despite their rebellion. The violence done to the servants portrays how Israel's leaders treated God's prophets - Elijah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, all the way to John the Baptist, who was beheaded. In the same way, these tenants mistreat the servants sent by the landowner. They beat one, kill another, and the third was stoned. Many others were sent as well, and they're treated the same way.

All of this was done for one reason: they wanted the vineyard for themselves. They didn't want to answer to a higher authority. They didn't want someone butting in on their life, telling them

how to live. Again, we know this is all about God and how he's acted towards his people. Think about the patience of God to keep sending prophets into that hornets' nest. Then the day came when God sent more than just prophets. Maybe he thought, "They won't listen to my servants, perhaps they'll listen to my son. They have to respect my son. He has my authority. When they see his face, they'll see mine."

At this point, I'd like to give the man some advice: "If you really love him, don't send your son into that. Don't be foolish." He should have taken my advice. When they saw his son, they thought it was their lucky day: "Perhaps the owner died. The son is the heir to the vineyard. If we erase him, it's all ours." And so, they did. They took him, threw him out of the vineyard and murdered him.

Martin Luther said, "If I were God and the world treated me as it treated him, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces." But look what God did instead. He sent his Son, Jesus, to people he knew wanted to erase him out of their lives. Have you ever considered how irrational the love of God is? We want to say, "Don't do it, they killed the prophets; they'll kill him." But he did it anyway. What would compel you to send your only son into a war you knew he'd die in?

Are there limits to his patience? How long will God let this go on? Jesus asked then asked that fateful question.

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" v. 40

We might be tempted to think this was a tired and anemic old man with no fight left in him. We look at our world today, and we see people refusing to submit to God, insisting on running their own lives, spurning his Son, in some cases, they kill his messengers and nothing happens. It goes on and on, and we wonder, "Where's the owner of the vineyard? Where's God? Why does he allow it to go on and on? When will he do something?" Jesus lets his critics answer that question for him.

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." v. 41

It's common sense the time would come when the owner of that vineyard has had enough, and give his vineyard to someone else. But who would he give it to?

The answer comes in the next few verses.

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes"? "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be

broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." vv. 42-44

Jesus quoted from Psalm 118 and changed images from a vineyard to a building. The vine-growers were now builders. These builders were picking choice stones to build a Temple. Each one was carefully inspected. One was deemed useless and tossed into the rubble. But, later, when a choice stone was required to hold the whole building together, somehow that rejected stone was picked up from the rubble and was made into the chief cornerstone!

It's no mistake the word used here for "stone" (*eben*) is almost identical to the one used for "son" (*ben*). Jesus Christ, God's Son, is the stone rejected by the builders and cast into the rubble. It would seem they'd seen the end of him. But, the surprise of history is he was raised up from the rubble of death, and he lived to become the chief cornerstone of a spiritual building made up of all who claim him as Lord, whether Jew and Gentile.

So now, who gets the vineyard? Who gets to be part of the Kingdom that God is bringing into reality? Look again at what he says in v. 43 — "*it will be given to a people who will produce its fruit.*" But everything depends on what you do with that stone. Do you make him the cornerstone of your life or do you reject him? Do you fall on that stone, or worse yet let it fall on you? You see, this stone either saves or crushes. It's either the cornerstone upon which you build your life or the stone that's thrown out and later crushes all who oppose it.

But once again we see, it's all about fruit. We started with a fruitless fig tree, and ended with a vineyard that was hijacked by tenants but eventually was handed over to those who produced fruit.

Yes, this is a sobering section of Scripture. There are just a couple of very important questions I'll leave you with.

First, Where's the fruit? I'm not talking about religious activity. I'm talking about heartfelt worship. I'm talking about the fruits of righteousness — humility, kindness, mercy, and justice. Is your life more about the box and the wrapping rather than what's inside?

Second, and this is much more basic, what will you do with the Son? The stone is the Son. In the end, He'll either save you or crush you. Make no mistake; this is talking about where you spend eternity. Eternity hangs in the balance on this issue. What will you do with the Son?