

# Jesus Stories III: The One About The Useless Tree

Reconnect – August 9, 2009

**Text:** Luke 13:1-9; Colossians 1:9-10

**Key Thought:** God expects evidence of his presence and work in our lives to the extent of our relationship with Him.

About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. “Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than other people from Galilee?” he asked. “Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will also perish unless you turn from your evil ways and turn to God. And what about the eighteen people who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will also perish.” Then Jesus told this story: “A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s taking up space we can use for something else.’ The gardener answered, ‘Give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year, fine. If not, you can cut it down.’” (Luke 13:1-9, NLT)

## Pre-Intro: “It’s The End Of The World As We Know It” – Great Big Sea [video]

### Intro: “The end is near” guy

- Story of the guy I saw outside Salem this week, in the pickup truck
  - “your doom is at hand”, along with a picture of Jesus
  - “unique spirituality” they told me inside
  - Probably not the most fun person you’ve ever met
- The guy in THIS picture, smiling for the camera, seems to not realize what’s on his sign
- This idea, of a person wearing a sandwich board, has become a stock image in our culture – TV shows that want to show a crowd of confused people will always have one of them – and somehow, because they are eminently mockable, along with the “John 3:16” sign guy, that lets us dismiss the message

### Was Jesus an “end is near” guy?

- That message of “repent or perish” certainly doesn’t seem to line up with our image of Jesus – or at least, the way many in our world see Jesus today – a loving teacher, good with the kids, helpful around the house, wise sage, life coach
- And yet, this message of “repent or perish” is one that Jesus raises more than once – in fact, it’s a theme of his preaching, including the very first reported instances that he spoke to the crowds: in Matthew’s biography of Jesus, his message is summarized as this: “From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17)
- That doesn’t sound very tolerant or understanding or loving or gentle or meek or mild – it might make you think twice about having him over for dinner, because somewhere between the main course and the dessert, things might get awkward – “OK, kids, why don’t you go play and mommy and daddy will sit and talk to Jesus” – and isn’t that idea of “repenting” so outdated anyway? What did He mean by that?
- If we want to know a little bit more about what Jesus had to say on this subject, we have a story that he told, and the conversation leading up to it (context is everything) – and we find it in the section that was already read this morning – let’s take a closer look

## **A Closer Look: (read text: Luke 13:1-9)**

**About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. “Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than other people from Galilee?” he asked. “Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will also perish unless you turn from your evil ways and turn to God.**

- Jesus is talking, walking, whatever – we’re not sure – and someone or a group of people make a point of telling him something that has happened to people from his hometown area – Galilee
- It’s an area that at this time is known for its “rowdies” – political unrest, turmoil
- And we don’t know any other details of what happened other than what we read here – Pilate, the Roman overseer assigned to the region, had executed some Galileans as they were in the Temple, participating in the worship process – in essence, he had sacrificed them as they were sacrificing to God – violating the sanctity of the Temple
- (you might recognize that name, Pilate – he would ultimately be the one who would sign Jesus’ own death warrant and have him executed – Pilate was a political animal who knew that he had been stuck with a very volatile part of the Roman Empire, and that if he screwed up, his own neck was on the line – but he messed up a lot – cunning, vicious and cruel – whatever he had to be to keep power)
- There’s all kinds of places the conversation can go at this point, and perhaps those who have made a point of telling Jesus this news want to go there
  - Politics: “Jesus, let’s talk about how bad the Romans are – it sure would be great if we could get rid of them, eh?”
  - Philosophy: “Jesus, why do bad things happen to good people, anyway? I mean, they were at church!”
  - Theology: “Jesus, what sins had THEY committed against God? I mean, He must have been really mad at them, to let them be executed in the middle of trying to make it right with Him!”
- But whatever way they’re trying to point Jesus in, or “get a juicy quote from him”, he doesn’t go that way – instead, he gives a completely different answer: “You think that was bad? You think THEY must have been bad people? Actually, EVERYONE is equally bad – and the same sort of thing will happen to you unless you turn from your evil ways and turn to God!
- That’ll create a bit of an awkward moment in a conversation – but Jesus continues to make the same point to the group of people around Him:

**And what about the eighteen people who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will also perish.”**

- We know from other sections of the Bible that there was a section of the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem called Siloam, or “sent”, and that in Jesus’ day, it was a pool of water – almost like a hospital/spa, where sick people would go in an effort to be cured
- It seems that there must have been a watchtower or some kind of fortification along the city walls (same kind of thing you see in Old Quebec, for example – walls around the city) that had collapsed, in another seemingly random tragedy – big news at the time, but otherwise, now lost in history
- Again, Jesus asks, “Were they the worst people around the city that day? (The answer being, “no, of course not”) – they were just regular people, going about their daily lives, working, or eating, or sleeping, never imagining that they were about to face their last moment – but again, the same idea, unless you “repent” (meaning, turn from what you’re currently into – that word repent means “to turn away” or “to leave something behind”), you will also perish
- In essence, Jesus has taken a question about tragedy and God’s fairness or lack of fairness (because it seems that either a) God is randomly taking people out, or b) they must have had it coming to them) and has turned it around to his hearers and tells them that they should be more concerned with themselves and their own behaviour – that they need to “turn from their own evil ways or perish themselves” in some other way, just like these people did
- But he’s not satisfied to leave it there, so he goes on to tell a story – and you need something in your hand to really experience this part of what he’s saying
- *[give out the fig newtons at this point]*

**Then Jesus told this story: “A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s taking up space we can use for something else.’**

- Fig trees aren’t something we really have a whole lot of in Canada – the closest thing is these Fig Newtons – remember, “a cookie is just a cookie, but Newtons are fruit and cake”
- But in that culture, from ancient times even to today, fig trees are known for having large, great-tasting fruit, and being really good for shade at the same time – and in a dry, hot, dusty culture, that’s a great mix to have on your property
- But there’s just one catch: fig trees are very difficult to cultivate – once they’re up and running, you’re set – there’s a great payoff, because they’re perfect for that culture – they actually give BETTER fruit in hot, dry conditions – but it’s getting it there that’s the tricky part
- The Bible talks again and again about fig trees – any time it wants to paint a picture of settledness, of prosperity, of life being what it should be, it talks about everyone having their own home and fig tree – sort of like “a chicken in every pot” or “a home in the burbs” or putting up a hammock in the backyard and thinking “aaahhhhh – now I’m set”

- I mean, you get fruit without having to work for it, you just reach up and pick it, and at the same time, you've got the shade that it provides – so you sit under your tree and eat your fruit – what could be better?
- And at some point along the way, it even becomes a metaphor for God's people – that they are God's treasure, the fig tree in his vineyard, or garden, the centrepiece of what He's doing in the world
- So this landowner, this man, has planted a fig tree in his vineyard, in his garden, and it's going to be the centrepiece – the pride and joy
- The religious tradition taught that any fruit tree was no good for the first three years after it was planted – you couldn't get fruit, you had to just cultivate it – with a mind to ensuring that fruit trees were allowed to mature, were properly grown and pruned and so on
- When the man says to his gardener that it's been three years, it's probably been three years AFTER the three year mandatory waiting period – so he's actually been waiting six years for this investment to “bear fruit” – for him to finally feel like he's “made it”
- And after six years, he's had it – enough with this crazy tree – it's just taking up space, there's no fruit, it's not doing what it's supposed to do: **“shade is not enough”**
- There's no figs! And a fruitless tree is a useless tree – “shade is not enough”
- So cut it down – replace it with something else that will flourish, that will produce something more than shade in its place – something else can be the centre of the garden – what else have you got?

**The gardener answered, ‘Give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year, fine. If not, you can cut it down.’”**

- And the gardener comes back with this *[Cliff Clavin style]* “Aaah, well sir, you have to realize that the, uh, proper conditions for growing your large fruit trees might take some time, and uh... why don't you give me one more year?”
- Give me one more chance!
- “tick-tock” – the clock is ticking on this tree, because “shade is not enough” – it's going to turn into a nice set of end tables unless something changes, and soon! It will be seven years in another year
- The gardener says that he will give it special attention – dig it out some, put more fertilizer around the roots, prune the leaves back – and maybe then fruit will come – but if not, it's IKEA city!

### **So who is who, anyway?**

- One of the questions that people have wondered about in this story over the last 2000 years is “who is who?” Is Jesus the gardener, and God the owner of the vineyard? And is the tree Israel, or God's people?
- Is God eager to rip everything out and start over? Impatient? Frustrated that he has fig tree issues? A little too ready with the chainsaw?
- And is Jesus the “one more chance guy”? Arguing with God? Caught in the middle and conflicted?

- Nope – all that is beside the point – just fogging the issue, which is this, and it's not just something we encounter in the pages of the Bible:
- “If you don't live up to expectations or perform as expected, then eventually, you'll lose your place”
- That might sound harsh, especially if you've been in church a long time – because we hear a lot about how we don't need to try to earn God's love, and how He loves us even when we fail – and that's true, every bit of it – we can't make God love us more, just like your kids can't make you love them more or less – you just DO – that's natural
- Fruit trees produce fruit – that's natural – and while you need to take care of the tree, you can't force that process of fruit-bearing – but if a fruit tree doesn't give fruit, then there's a problem – it's UNnatural - and one way or another, it's a root issue that needs fixing – it's nothing to do with what you can see (well, unless it's cracked in half or something) but has everything to do with what's happening “beneath the surface”
- And if WE are not changing, if we are not doing what we were meant to do, then there's a problem at the root somewhere, and that needs to be addressed

### **Turn, turn, turn – and join the garden**

- “repent or perish” – turn from what you're doing, and start to produce fruit – in other words, start to do good in your own life, start to help others, start to make an investment in people's lives, start to reorder your priorities – or ultimately, perish
- Whether it would be tomorrow, or next week, or 50 years from now, in your bed, surrounded by generations of your family – because, as William Wallace said, “Every man dies, but not every man truly lives” – and if it was in Braveheart, it must be true
- What I find most interesting about this story and the runup to it, is that Jesus is speaking about different groups of people – or TO different groups of people, in the sense that this section of the Bible – his words – find us wherever we're at
- For some, his message is that God loves you and wants to know you – and your responsibility, your part in all of this, is to turn away from what you have chosen in the past and now turn to God instead
- The “perish” in all this is not just talking about destinations – like pop culture defines as either the place with the clouds and the harps and the angel wings, or the other place with the pitchforks and the red suits and the heat turned up
- This part is important: it IS talking about that – I firmly believe it – life ultimately with God, in a heaven of His making, or life ultimately without God, in a hell of our own making – but what we do here is the practice, that indicates our choosing
- But it's also talking about more: think about how life without God in it is inherently destructive – because what do you fill that spot in your life with? Friends? Family? Walks in the woods? Toys? Hobbies? Pursuit of power? Vices? Addictions? Cravings?
- And what kind of legacy are you leaving? What kind of “fruit” are you currently bearing? What's the result of your life, of your lifestyle? If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be? **Because shade is not enough**

- We dream that something of us will live on in our kids – but the greatest gift we can give them is not only to love them, but to love God and ideally, love their mom or dad too
- For some people, Jesus is saying “Give God a try, and see how much better life is in his garden, in his care” – and that’s the first part of the section we’ve looked at today
- “Unless you turn away from what you’re in, and turn to God, you will perish” – and if that message is for you today, and you want to make a change, by all means, talk to me or to the person you know best here at Reconnect, because reaching out to God is not complicated – it starts with talking honestly and openly with Him, and continues with giving Him the remote

### Turn, turn, turn – and start showing fruit

- And for others of us, it’s a very different message – it’s a message to God’s people, those who are already “in the garden” – planted, watered, cared for every day
- And that is, “where’s the fruit?”
- Do you remember the Wendy’s commercials in the 80’s? The little old ladies going in, or driving through burger restaurants, and the one little old lady yelling, “Where’s the beef?”
- Same idea – because there is an expectation, that with claiming to live in God’s garden, and going through all the right motions, that there will be fruit
- We always get a little anxious here as Christians, when we hear this – if you’ve been in church for any length of time – is this where the guilt trip comes in? Is this where they tell us to try harder? Give more money in the offering? Volunteer my time more? With the kids in the nursery?
- And what about grace? We can’t make God love us any more, right? He loves us anyway, in spite of our flaws, right? So am I not OK just being a shade tree?
- Jesus isn’t afraid here to say “no” – because he’s very practical – and God is not looking for shade trees – religious people who go through the right motions, who know all the language and the song lyrics and when to stand and sit – in fact, those are the kinds of people that God likes LEAST
- Jesus tells the second part of this section, the story, to religious people – to good, churchgoing folk who know how to dress up right and do church and go out for chicken after – religious people, in a religious society – a people and a society that are actively engaged in “missing the point”
- They were meant to showcase what a life lived with God in the centre could look like – but it has turned into a form, a show, a circus of rule-keeping and appearance-making and self-centeredness and control of others
- The tree is big and leafy – and people remark on how much shade (that’s protection from the “sun”) there is – but there’s no fruit, no results, nothing more to show for all the fertilizer and water and soil and space that it takes up in the garden – nothing to indicate why it was placed there, because **shade is not enough**
- Religion is not enough – whether you surround yourself with religion, or have just a little bit of religion, or maybe you have completely intentionally excluded religion from your life – it’s not about that – religion without a loving God in the centre is dry as dust – there’s no fruit there – spend some time with religious people without God at work and you’ll understand they have more in common with vampires than they do with fruit trees

- And that can't be allowed to continue, because God loves this world too much – there is too much on the line to tolerate trees without fruit, because shade trees get in the way in a garden – they kill anything around them that's trying to grow, because they don't let the light through – they monopolize the resources and suck the life from everything else – God demands the sort of fruit that we are able to give at the time, even as he loves all of us – even the religious ones

### **Fruit in proper time**

- Don't miss that idea of the right fruit at the right time – God doesn't have the same expectations of each of us – because he knows we're different – but He does expect SOMETHING of each of us – each of us can serve other people, love other people in some way, have something to give, and bear some kind of fruit for him
- How do you “bear fruit”? Give yourself to others – open up your life – do something for someone else, but more than that, share your life with someone else in relationship – ideally, someone that can't do anything really for you – because of course, our inherent selfishness loves to take over, doesn't it? And turn everything into a back scratching exercise, a *quid pro quo*?
- For some of us, it's that first step – to turn away from how we are destroying ourselves, from how we are excluding God from our lives – and let God into the centre of our lives, or at least move towards the centre of our lives
- For others of us, it's to take another step – to learn more about Him, with a view to doing more for Him, to helping people, to spreading the message of His love, to changing what we do or how we do it

### **Key thought:**

**God expects evidence of his presence and work in our lives, to the extent of our relationship with Him.**

“We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honour and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.” (Colossians 1:9-10, NLT)

### **Conclusion: expiration/best before dates**

- One of the advances in food production and nutrition over the last 50 or 60 years has been the little dates that are on so much of our food – the expiration date, or as they say so much more often now, “the best before date”
- EVERYTHING has these dates on them now – from bread and milk even to chocolate bars and Pepsi!
- We pulled some wieners out of the freezer the other day, and the best before date was 2006 – which sort of made us pause – but then we figured that we were just going to feed them to the kids, so it was okay...!

- What’s funny about best before dates is that we either have no need for them, or we try to find a way around them – there’s no middle ground
- If you like the food, you’re going to eat it, unless you bought scads of it because it was on sale or something – so things like milk, even though we dutifully keep the little tags, well, how often is that going to go bad? It’s not – it’s going to get used, it’s going to be consumed, because it’s good stuff
- But it’s the other stuff – the stuff we don’t use a lot or really like that much, but we keep around anyway for some reason – that’s the stuff that we try to run the date on – well, it’s not THAT long, or “it says ‘Best before’, so that means that it’s still GOOD after, it’s just not BEST”
- And yet, here’s the test: when you come back from being on vacation, come in the door and open up the fridge to make dinner, you look at something that’s been sitting there for however long, and then you say, “that has got to go” – and so it goes, to make room for foods that you like, that you’re going to eat, because there’s only so much space in the fridge, and what you have isn’t food anymore
- There’s a part of us that is very uncomfortable with God having “expiration dates” when it comes to the number of chances He gives us – that without Him, there’s a “perish” coming at some point in our life – that we are all mortal, that we live, and grow, and decline, and ultimately expire
- We don’t want to be confronted with our mortality – which is why we speak so carefully at funerals and pretend like everything is always fine – or to be confronted about our failings, our lack of fruit, which is why we so infrequently sit our friends down and talk to them when we see them going off track – or even even look in the mirror and ask ourselves the hard questions
- And yet, it’s bigger than us, and Jesus didn’t shy away from addressing it – neither should we
- III. – plane crash in the Hudson on Friday

## **Conclusion: Plane/helicopter crash in the Hudson**

### **Fate keeps mother, son from fatal flight**

**Boy’s cold feet inadvertently saves their lives**

By Marie-Joelle Parent, Sun Media

NEW YORK – Paola Casali and her 13-year-old son were supposed to be on that doomed helicopter. They even had prepaid tickets.

But the visitors from Italy never boarded the sight-seeing helicopter ride Saturday, along with the other Italian tourists. At the last moment, Casali was held back by her son, who was too scared to get on.

“He saved our lives,” she confided to Sun Media, still in a state of shock a few hours after a small private airplane crashed into that helicopter above the Hudson River. Both mangled aircraft plummeted into the river, killing the nine people aboard the aircrafts. A search for bodies was to resume Sunday.

A 42-year-old from Rome, Casali was counting her blessings as she sat on a low wall near the Liberty Harbor Sightseeing Tours Heliport, just off 30th Street on Manhattan Island. This is where the doomed flight took off.

“My son, I don’t know why, he was very scared to take this tour, ” she said. “All morning, he was very jittery. He was procrastinating. He wasted his time at Starbucks, and so we arrived too late. The passengers had already left.”

Casali and her son waited to catch the next ride. With them were relatives of the five Italian tourists who were on the helicopter (whom Casali didn't know). Soon, rumours about an accident reached them.

"The (relatives) were very worried, but I told them, 'Don't worry, it's very safe, I've done it several times,'" Casali said.

Then, a flood of police cars, ambulances and firetrucks came streaming by.

"Nobody was telling us what was happening," Casali said.

Then the horrible news was confirmed.

"Mayor (Michael) Bloomberg arrived, the relatives were taken elsewhere and I didn't see them again."

Casali said she previously has gone on these helicopter tours for well-to-do tourists. The small parking lot is always full of luxury cars, she says. The West Manhattan tour lasts 15 minutes, and costs \$450 US for two.

"I can't believe something like this could happen in 2009," she said.

The crash occurred downriver from the heliport, off 14th Street in Manhattan but closer to the New Jersey shore. On the Manhattan shoreline, a group of friends saw the whole thing. They talked to Sun Media but would not reveal their last names. Jenn, Ernesto, Kaela and Tray were all working at the fishing-pole rental stand on Pier 46 when the tragedy occurred.

They said they heard two loud booms, one after the other – like "very loud fireworks" – then everyone present started running toward the end of the dock. None of them saw any explosions.

The tail of the helicopter was torn off by the impact with the airplane, they said, and the helicopter's fuselage sank like a rock. In fact the wreckage of both planes sank "in a matter of seconds," they said. None of it was visible on the surface after impact.

Rescue teams arrived immediately, they said.

The accident happened around noon, as thousands of New Yorkers and tourists were enjoying the sunny weather. New Yorkers kept saying "Again?" to themselves as news of the tragedy spread. Everyone was reminded of the famous forced landing of a U.S. Airways flight in the Hudson River last January, less than one kilometre north of yesterday's crash site. All 155 passengers survived that incident.

Dozens of emergency vehicles and trucks from the Red Cross invaded the bike trail from 30th Street all the way to the south tip of the island, bringing traffic to a halt on the West Side of the city all afternoon.

Marie-Joelle Parent is Sun Media's New York City correspondent

## **Response: it's all about the fruit**

- What legacy are you leading? In your relationship with God and others?

## **Song: Child of God**

\*\*\*To do in morning:

- 1) Buy more cream/fill up cream and milk to double normal
- 2) Buy fig newtons for everyone during the message
- 3) Call Malloys for an email picture of Leah
- 4) Take back the Wii games