

March 23rd message

The Saturday afternoon of the soup supper a few of us played some Bible trivia. One of the questions was, 'How many parables are in the New Testament?' I think I guessed about 20. Think about what you would say....

Well, according to most scholars, there are around 37 distinct parables in the New Testament. They are found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Some, of course are repeated as you can see by this slide. Some will say there are 43 because sometimes certain metaphorical sayings are classified as parables by different people. John 10 where Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd, the door and how the sheep know His voice are examples of this.

Jesus tells this short parable after being questioned about sin. At the time people connected sin to suffering. This had been a strong belief for centuries and Jesus needed to confront it. He tells of an incident where Pilate had decided to improve Jerusalem's water supply. It was a worthwhile project that was needed. Pilate decided that certain temple funds could be used to help finance the project. This led to a mob gathering and then being attacked by soldiers. While the details are sketchy one account tells how the soldiers were instructed to disperse the crowd without too much blood shed. Yet in the end, several were killed. Many concluded that was because of their sin. There was also an incident at Siloam. Many had already passed judgment on the people killed as sinners. They had concluded this was God's judgment for working for the Romans.

Jesus tries to tell how these incidents were not caused by their individual sin. He wants His listeners to realize how one needed to look at their own life and realize their own need to repent and change their ways. There is also a lesson for the nation of Israel at the time. Instead of following God's ways they had turned from what the Lord had instructed. Jesus has a warning here for His first listeners and for future history: You will reap what you sow; if a nation rebels against God and chooses its own way it is on the way to disaster.

Jesus then uses this opportunity to share a parable about a tree. We may not understand why He would share this parable at this time but there is a connection the people at the time would understand. The Hebrew Scriptures or what we call the Old Testament often compared a fruitful tree as an example of how one lived favorably with God. A fig tree was a favored tree that was often given valuable space and attention in an area where it was difficult to grow trees because of the poor soil and semi-arid climate.

At a glance modern day Christians may not get the full implications of what Jesus is teaching here. I have transplanted many trees over the years and have learned quite a bit about what works and what doesn't. I recently found a small redbud that I moved to a spot that should work out. All of us who have ever moved a tree know that one has to keep the root ball as intact as possible. Then some pruning might be needed. A friend of mine always insisted on throwing some green grass in with the roots. He claimed as the grass decomposes it provided nitrogen for the roots. I don't know if that is true or not but I usually do that. I have found that early spring is the best time to transplant a red bud tree.

The owner of the parable had gone to a lot of trouble to have this fig tree in a prominent place. He had grown impatient with lack of production. The point being one who is faithful to God should produce good fruit. This tree had been well taken care of, yet it produced nothing. The implications are clear: much was given and much was expected. John the Baptist also tells the same as recorded in Luke 3:8-9. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

While this parable serves as a warning, it is also sometimes known as the parable of the second or final chance.

Speaking of final chances once there was a man who went into an ice cream parlor with his dog, both walked up to the counter but the attendant says "sorry no dogs. "But my dog can talk," "Prove it." "Fido, what is the top part of a house called," "Roof," The server somewhat annoyed says, "You're going to have to do better than that," "Fido, what is the thick, grassy part of a golf course called?" "Ruff," Now the server is really getting annoyed, "I'll give you one final chance before you have to leave." "Fido, who is the greatest baseball player of all time," "Ruth." The owner hears the whole things and shows them to the door. Out on the street the dog says to his owner, "I guess I should have said Dimaggio."

In our parable the tree is given another chance. It should be noted that a fig tree normally takes three years to reach maturity and start producing. If not, it is not likely that it will, but there are exceptions. While the owner is ready to give up on it, the gardener is not.

Jesus told this parable after their questions about the sins of others. Jesus is teaching that all are in need of repentance and all need to change their ways. Today most will acknowledge bad things happen to good people. But there is always to temptation to look at others and compare ourselves perhaps thinking they are getting what they deserve or I am doing well compared to so and so. The lesson of this parable is how one should turn their attention away from others and focus on their own life. We are called to bear the fruit God has created us to produce.

Twice before the parable, Jesus tells how one must repent. We are familiar with that word, 'repent.' We usually think of the realization of sin and the need to confess. Along with that comes the need for change.

Once there was a man sitting by a fast-food chicken restaurant. When a young man in his early 20's approached, he rattled his can and asked, "Change, Mister?" The young man said, "Sure, wait right here." He entered the restaurant and in about 10 minutes came back out wearing a full-sized chicken costume that he wore for his job to attract attention for the restaurant. Not exactly the kind of change he was expecting was it?

Chances are when we like our lives pretty much the way they are. Sure, there is always something that could be worked on but we don't want to change a major part of our lives. We'd rather just make a few minor adjustments, like trying to cut out something from our diets. Sometimes during Lent we hear of people who have made sacrifices and have attempted to change their approach to something. Perhaps some of us fit that category. For example, going back to our diets, people often give up certain foods for Lent. Some people choose those things that are a particular temptation to them, like chocolate or coffee or red meat. Some give up some activity. Some add something that will hopefully benefit their faith. While these are all good there is much more to what Jesus is trying to get across.

Jesus is teaching that everybody has something in their life that needs changing. Everybody. It's not only those who have things that are very noticeable but all have stuff in their life that they need to turn away from. Perhaps it's a personal habit, or a reoccurring action, or a tendency to have foul language when things don't go right, or maybe it's an attitude that props up at certain times.

True repentance means turning away from those things that separate one from God. If chocolate or coffee or red meat doesn't come between you and God, then giving them up really doesn't help. But if a habit, one's language, an action or an attitude about certain people interferes with your relationship with God, then one needs to repent of it and by the grace of God, change.

Often just realizing how our thoughts, words, and actions are not pleasing to God is the first step in repentance. Often we can be overwhelmed at such a task. But we are not on our own, we need the Spirit's help, we need to seek this.

Again, chances are we like our lives pretty much the way we are. We may want to approach this repentance change very cautiously. We can be like the little boy saying his bedtime prayers who was planning a surprise attack on his brother later in the night. "God help me to be good, like Mommy and Daddy want me to be, and like you want to be. But could you please wait until tomorrow?"

A pastor tells about a parishioner of hers who told her about a doctor's visit before she became his minister. He was very overweight at the time and was on all kinds of medication much of it as a result of his weight. He was in the beginning stages for diabetes. The doctor encouraged him to lose weight not only for his own sake but for those he loved and loved him. To make a long story short, with help and encouragement, the man changed his lifestyle and eating. The results were beneficial. He is now on less medicine and has avoided needing insulin. But he knows many who lose a huge amount of weight can go back to their old ways and gain it right back. He is determined not to let that happen to him. He tells others how he had to change his ways. He tells how he has given me a second chance.

We have a caring gardener who looks out for us and wants us to be fruitful. Let us heed these words and examine what we need to repent from and change to further strengthen our commitment to Christ. Amen.