

## Producing Fruit

### Personal Growth and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 06-Apr-93; Sermon #068

Let us begin the sermon by turning to Exodus 13.

**Exodus 13:3** And Moses said to the people: "Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten."

**Exodus 13:6-7** "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days. And no leavened bread shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters."

The subject of this sermon is going to be on producing fruit. We are going to begin by making the statement that the Days of Unleavened Bread are a two-way street. They have both positive and negative aspects to it. But all too often we tend to emphasize the negative, that is, the time, the energy, and the thought we give to devoting to not sinning rather than to doing more positive good works.

I think all of us are to some extent guilty of this. And I know as a minister I have spent much time railing, admonishing, and exhorting about quitting sinning that would have probably been much better spent if I had spent the time railing, exhorting, and admonishing about *doing good works*!

I think of this in relation to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but primarily the Pharisees in relation to Christ. Matthew 5 makes it very clear that Christ had some respect for the Pharisees—that they were righteous. He did not say to what degree they were righteous, but He said to us that unless our

righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, why, we are not going to be in the kingdom of heaven. So, they had a righteousness, but Jesus was more righteous still.

There was a fundamental difference in their approaches to righteousness. The Pharisees' approach to righteousness was to remain blameless *by not sinning*. Jesus' approach to righteousness, it is stated there in Acts the tenth chapter (Acts 10:38) I believe it is, where Luke, when he wrote that, said that Jesus went around *doing good*! He spent His time doing good.

One had a positive approach. The other had a negative approach. This does not mean that the Pharisees were always negative in everything they did. And it does not mean that Jesus was always positive—because He had to resist as well when it came to resisting sin.

But the fundamental difference was one was defending himself all the time and the other was laying down His life. And, so, the Pharisees were doing something that was fundamentally and essentially *self-concerned*. All they were interested in was protecting themselves. So they really did not have a great deal of time to do acts of love toward others.

That just fits right in with I John 4:18, does it not, where fear is placed as love's greatest challenge. They were fearful of sinning. In fact, the Jews in their writings claim that what they tried to do was to build a fence around the law so that nobody could break it! They did this by making all kinds of regulations. The ones we probably smile the most about, or are most knowledgeable of, are some of the regulations regarding keeping the Sabbath. And we can kind of give a *tee hee* about what looks to be a futile or strange way of trying to keep the Sabbath, but they were serious. They did not do that in a bad attitude. They were serious about what they were doing. Underneath that, they were trying to protect *themselves*. And that is fundamentally selfish.

Now, righteousness has to begin somewhere. It has to begin where the Pharisees were. We do have to begin by not sinning. But if we can turn our attention to more positive things, then we are not going to have to do much worrying about whether we are sinning—because we will be doing the right things. And sin will not come to mind nearly as much as it would otherwise.

Let us go to the book of Luke.

**Luke 11:24-28** "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!" But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

That instruction is so pertinent to the thing about the casting out of a demon. See, blessed more is somebody who hears the word of God and *keeps* it than somebody, if we relate it right back to the parable of the unclean spirit, than somebody who has been cleaned up but that seems to be as far as they have gone with their Christianity.

This is really an interesting illustration. I think that one of the first conclusions that we can draw from it is that Jesus is saying that it is not good enough just to be clean. And so, we have been cleaned through the Word. We are going to see that a little later. But it is not good enough just to be clean.

We are going to look at some alternate translations from some other Bibles. *The Living Bible* says "clean and empty." *The Amplified Bible* says, "swept clean and decorated." *The New American Standard Bible* says, "clean and put in order." A commentary suggested, "unoccupied and ready to receive a new tenant." Here comes the key. I thought that was a very good comment that he felt it really should be paraphrased, "unoccupied and ready to receive a new tenant."

The Greek indicates, "the appearance of a person who may look good." And, of course, someone who had been swept clean would look good. They were ready for something. But what were they ready for?

People tend to make a vain show of trifling things. That is why Jesus corrected the woman who said, "blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you." Well, fine. But Jesus is saying in effect, without really putting the lady down, "What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?" Because His mother, who undoubtedly was blessed by God by bearing Him and suckling Him, what if she ended up in hell? She is a free moral agent. She can do with her life what she wants—even though she was an instrument used by God. She is a free moral agent. That is why Jesus said, "Yes, that is fine, BUT blessed is that person who hears the word of God and keeps it."

The lesson of this parable is that a person's life needs a new dynamic—something that will make them go; a hope, a dream, a vision, a goal, a reason to live. Once they have been swept clean by forgiveness of sin—once we have passed through that Passover stage—then the Days of Unleavened Bread begin something that has to do with the dynamic that has been put into our life. The very reason we repented has to lead somewhere.

Is it going to lead to a more or less negative protecting of ourselves, remaining blameless? Or is it going to lead to something that produces something good—not just for the self but also for others as well? If one does not find a new dynamic, a new occupant for what has been swept clean, then, we find in this parable, that the person is worse off than if he had never been swept clean.

That is especially pertinent to you and me who are living here in this time prior to the first resurrection. Let us say God had never called us and led us to repentance, and that if God had never granted us repentance—let us say we had never repented; yet God had still forgiven us and swept us clean, but we then lost salvation. Would it not have been better if we could have waited for a more agreeable time?

God does not make mistakes. God knows you can make it. That is why you are in the position you are. But we still need to be stirred up. We still need to be taught. We still need to understand. We still need to make decisions to do something with our life. And so, as I mentioned in the sermon just the other day, the concern with God is, after one has reached the point of repentance

and forgiveness and the receiving of God's Spirit, your salvation is secure *unless* you really turn it down! God's concern is whether we are going to grow into an adult, grow to maturity. He wants us to grow as much as we possibly can. He wants us to produce as much fruit as we possibly can. But if we stand still, we run the danger of actually going backwards. Do you remember those two laws I gave you—the one concerning inertia and the one concerning entropy? That law of entropy, especially, is working constantly to pull us backwards into a state of degeneration.

Science teaches us that nature abhors a vacuum. And if something has been emptied, something else is going to rush in to fill it. If you take liquid out of a bottle, air rushes in to take the place of the liquid that was in there because the fluid that was in there has been displaced by something else. Again, the lesson is the same in regard to this, we can be swept clean but something has to be done or else, the parable is teaching us about the influence of demons, will actually come back stronger than they were before. And that is another reason why we will be worse off than before. We stand at a juncture that is very important for us. It is important that we make the right decision and go in the right direction.

In Christianity then, there is no place for neutrality. We have to take sides and we have got to go on. There is a war going on. We have got to recognize that. We must *move*, or the forces of nature and the spiritual forces, the dark forces of this world, are going to pull us backwards. It is one or the other.

As we begin this sermon, there are three things we need to establish:

1) Just from what I have given you, we cannot make a religion, a way of life, on what we *cannot* do. We cannot put the emphasis on that. That will be non-productive. It will be depressing. You do not want to be depressed. You want to be up. You want to be full of hope. You want to be joyful! If you want to depress a kid, just tell him all the time what he cannot do. It is the same way with adults.

2) We cannot stand still. It is not good enough to drive evil out. Good must come in. Evil can be conquered. Let us understand that. *Evil can be conquered, but it cannot be destroyed*. There is a difference between the two. And that is a reality we are going to have to deal with. Do not ever get the

idea that you are going to destroy evil—because you cannot. It is a reality that is there because it is spiritual. That is what is impacting us in a negative way. We can conquer it, but it is going to keep coming back at us. We are in a war, you might say, a conflict, right to the end. And that is a reality we have to deal with. So, the new dynamic has to be one of us choosing to serve Christ.

3) The third thing then is *the best way to avoid evil is to do good*. Let us put it this way. God wants us to become good. The word good is derived from the word God. It has its origin, etymology, in that. One can never become good by *not* doing things. We become good by filling our life with good things, with lovely things. We have to replace evil thoughts with good ones.

Remember that other challenge of love was being idle, or lazy. Well, one final thing that we can learn from this parable is that idleness is a fatal disease. Jesus is saying that the person who was swept clean here in the illustration—if they are idle and do nothing—they are going to be worse off. They stand a chance of going into the Lake of Fire.

From here let us go back to II Peter the second chapter. This is a confirmation of what I just said in regard to Luke 11.

**II Peter 2:19-20** While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ [swept clean], they are again entangled in them [the pollutions of this world] and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.

What happened here, if we can put the parable together with what Peter is saying here, is that the person is swept clean and then he gets drawn back to the world because of his idleness. The new dynamic did not come in. The *world* came back in!

**II Peter 2:21-22** For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has

happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

In John 9 is another example hitting this from a little bit different angle, but it is an example of how the end of something can be worse than the person's state at the beginning.

**John 9:39** And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind."

In this case, those who do not see, we will just say they are the common people. And those who **see** may be made blind. In this instruction, it is the Pharisees because they are saying that they see. They are saying that they get it. They are saying that they understand. And perhaps they are using the word "see" because in the beginning of the chapter, He had just healed a blind man. So the word kind of fits. He is using the word "see" here in the sense of understanding, knowing, comprehending. They get it.

**John 9:40-41** Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him [I imagine this was said with a measure of resentment], "Are we blind also?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin. . .

You see, even God does not hold a person responsible if he is ignorant of something. That does not mean there might not be some damage to the person, if they are ignorant; but the responsibility is not the same.

A person can be ignorant, like a little child, he is ignorant that if he sticks his hand in an electrical socket of what will happen. But the little kid is not responsible if he does not know—yet he is going to get hurt if he does that. It is the same way with the spiritual law of God. If a person does not comprehend it, because the laws work automatically (you see, they are a part of God's creation), they are going to effect a penalty. But the responsibility is not going to be held against them by God. They are going to be judged lightly because of their ignorance.

But what if a person goes around saying that he knows, that he understands, that he comprehends it, that he gets it, and he sets himself up as a teacher (like the Pharisees were doing here)? That is different. Now, Jesus says, "your sin remains," because of the state of their minds. And I would say that what Jesus is indicating here is this: If a person says that he knows, and then this person goes out and lives a life that is not in harmony with what God says and what this person is teaching, then there has to be a measure of deliberateness to what he is doing; there is a wilfulness. And that is the subtle implication to Jesus' response to the Pharisees. What do you think their end is going to be? I bet they are going to be beaten with many stripes because of their circumstance.

Now, let's go to John 5. This is interesting because it happened on a holy day. Some people say it was the Feast of Trumpets.

**John 5:1** After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Then we have the pool of Bethesda described with the man beside it.

**John 5:5** Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years.

Now it does not say that the man was thirty-eight years old. He had an infirmity thirty-eight years. He may have been a great deal older than that. In fact, I think there is an indication a little bit later that he indeed was a great deal older than that. Verse 9 tells us that this took place on the Sabbath. The Jews were immediately up in arms because Jesus had done this on the Sabbath, and they felt He had broken the Sabbath.

**John 5:13-14** But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in that place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, . . .

"See, you have been made clean!" "See, you have been healed!"



**John 5:14** ". . . Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you."

Now, I said that the man was not thirty-eight years old, but that he had an infirmity thirty-eight years. Jesus telling him to "sin no more" gives the indication that the man was in the condition that he was because of sin. The implication is that it was his sins that made him infirm. Jesus was saying something like, "Don't you go back sinning, or it is going to be worse than it was before." *Worse?* What could be worse than thirty-eight years of misery and pain? Something was worse. Because once he had been swept clean, the rules of the game changed somewhat. Now there had to be a new dynamic to his life.

I will tell you, I think it probably would have been a real challenge to that man—because for thirty-eight years, he was accustomed to other people taking care *of him*. That would be hard to overcome, having been waited on for all those years. And you can imagine the state of his mind—not being productive, how sorry he felt for himself. We can understand that. I am not trying to blame him or anything. We can understand that his path would have been awfully difficult because of the frame of mind. Everything in his life, I am sure, would have been referenced to his critical condition. So, we have to consider, then, this—that we have been swept clean (illustrated by Passover) but now we have to go on.

There are working on us subtle pulls, I will call them, to use the love of God actually as an excuse for sin. I do not mean that we intend to do this, but we play on the mercy of God. And God certainly is merciful. He is gracious. He is willing to forgive. But we have it somehow or another lodged in the back of our mind . . . . I think maybe it must come from this Protestant society we live in—maybe influenced by Catholicism too—because a person can go to the priest and they receive absolution; and they have a cleansing of their conscience for a short period of time. Yet it is so easy to keep going back there (to confession) and be forgiven. You know what those kinds of thoughts do: They lure us into idleness. And so we are faced with putting the prod on ourselves to **do something** in order to make sure that the dynamic that has come into our life just does not settle comfortably into our lives; but, rather, it becomes a vital instrument, motivating us to go on.

Turn to John 15. A little bit later in the sermon we are going to get back here in more detail, but in John 15:8 Jesus said, "By this My Father is glorified." I believe that it is part of the Presbyterian church's creed that *the chief end of man is to glorify God*. That comes pretty close to being right.

Now, how do we glorify God? By bearing much fruit. What is so interesting is that last phrase: "so you will be My disciples." Is He subtly suggesting there that we are really not a disciple unless we bear fruit? It kind of indicates that now does it not?

One thing is clear here, when we get back to this a little bit later in more detail, is that uselessness invites disaster. This fits right in. I have just changed the word, but it fits right in with the opening—that once we are swept clean, we have to do something. *Uselessness invites disaster*.

You ought to be able to get the drift of my thinking. That is, that it is not good enough just to stop sinning. Fruit has to be produced. And if fruit is produced, then we will truly be a disciple. You see, the sinning has to be replaced with something. It has to be replaced with good habits or good works, or one will actually go backwards!

You might say that the ultimate test of life is whether we are a fit vessel for God to use. I mentioned Mary earlier—not by name, but calling her Jesus' mother. She was a vessel that God used to bear His Son, to give birth to Him. So God used her. But what happened after that? She seems to have been a very fine woman. She seems to have made good with her life.

I have not made this statement yet, but I am going to—because it is going to play a part in the remainder of this sermon. And that is that "getting rid of leaven," "doing good works," and "producing fruit" are just different ways of saying virtually the same thing. Now they are not exactly the same things, but they are closely related because they are all part of the process of conversion.

We know that sin is the transgression of the law. And getting the leaven out implies quitting sinning. But sin is not all that simple (as just saying "a transgression of the law")—nor is overcoming, nor is producing fruit. I think

that you understand that the words that are used in the Greek in the New Testament to indicate sin mean "to miss the mark," or "to stray from the path." That is not near as precise as breaking the law. And this is what I am getting to when I say that sin is not quite that simple. There is more than meets the eye to I John 3:4.

In the first chapter of Isaiah in verses 16 and 17, He says,

**Isaiah 1:16-17** "Wash yourselves [you see, be clean], make yourselves clean [that is another way of saying repent]; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."

There are eight admonitions here. And it is interesting, maybe we can get some kind of balance here. Three of them are negative and five of them are positive. Three of them tell us to do something that is stopping something, and five of them tell us to do something positive.

In order for one to do good works and produce fruit, I think we have to get away from this negative fixation of not doing, and begin concentrating on the doing. And I think that we will find throughout the Bible that God puts more emphasis on the positive than He does on the negative. But somehow our mind always picks up the negative. And I think it is because the commandments are written in a negative style. Perhaps that is the reason anyway.

If we follow Isaiah's formula here, there is always going to be a negative element present. Now please, as I instruct here, please do not get the idea that there is nothing negative to this—because there is. There is the negative. But the positive should be the stronger of the two. Now, the reason for that is because human nature is always present. So, it is always going to want to slide back the way that we are fighting against.

I want to make a digression here, for a short period of time, to show how important it is to do good rather than to just merely avoid sin. We are going to go to Romans the fourteenth chapter,

**Romans 14:22-23** Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. [Now listen to this] Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats [that is part of the subject of the entire chapter], because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

I said earlier that sin is not always simply defined by I John 3:4 whenever we find ourselves in actual, practical experiences. Now it would be awfully nice to be able to categorize sin that way. And if you understand, this is exactly the direction that God is taking us. Do you understand what I mean there? Until eventually we get to the place where everything *is* black and white and it will fit within the parameters of I John 3:4. And we will be able to see, even in difficult to understand situations, that "Yes, this is a breaking of the commandments" or "No, this is not."

But since we are not to that point yet, this is why God has explained to us—by the use of other words, like *hamartia* or *paraptoma*—the one meaning "to go off the path" and the other "to miss the mark." We begin to see that sin is not quite so easily categorized. And so we do not see things as clearly as we should.

Now, what should a person do if he is in doubt about whether a thing is right or wrong? It is very human to have doubts, because we do not know everything. And there are sometimes situations that we have never faced before; and we wonder what is the right way to go, what is the wrong way to go.

Now, most of us have convictions about what is right and what is wrong, do we not? And even if we do not know for sure, it is very likely that in the back or the front of our mind—or however you want to put it—there is going to be a nagging doubt as to whether or not what you are about to do is right or wrong. Now, which do you do? That is what is posed here in Romans 14: 22-23.

I will tell you God's instruction. *When in doubt, do not!* It is that simple. Because, even if you are about to do something that is lawful and right in God's mind, if you doubt that it is right, you have sinned if you do it. Now how about those apples? We can actually sin doing something that is lawful

and right in God's mind, in God's eyes, because we doubted whether it was right. We were not convicted it was right.

That is what I mean when I say sin is not all that simple. And what God is telling you is that when there is doubt, you better hang onto your conviction. And the reason for that is that, if you go against your convictions, you are doing something that is destructive to character. And God is going to know that, when push comes to shove, you are going to crumble. Your integrity is not going to hold.

God's instruction then would be—do not do what you are not convicted is right. Hang on to your conviction but then go check it out, think about it, meditate on it. Come to Him in prayer and ask Him for help. Ask Him to give understanding, the right kind of conviction as to what is right and wrong. And He is faithful. He will do it because He wants you to be educated in these things. And then, when your conviction changes, you can go ahead and do it. Your character will not be damaged in doing it in that manner.

Let us go to James the fourth chapter, where we have another aspect of this.

**James 4:17** Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

This is sort of like the other side of the coin. To know to do good and to fail to do it, is sin. The person has missed the mark *even though* not committing adultery, stealing, lying, or whatever. He knew that he should do something that was right and good, and did not do it; and he missed the mark.

Now, this gets into another area that is important as part of this sermon—considering verse 17 here, of chapter 4—because there are those who equate goodness with respectability. They are not the same thing. There are many respectable people who *know* things about God's way, but they *will not do them*. Now they are not lying and stealing, but because they know but do not do it, does that not put them in the same category as the Pharisees that we just read of in John 9:41? They say that they know but they do not do them. Those people are in bad shape.

What is the solution to this? What can one do? What direction should a person move in—if he is going to get the heaven out, to do good works, and produce fruit?

Now, we are going to string several scriptures together here, beginning in John 15:

**John 15:16-17** "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another."

**John 13:34-35** "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

You will notice how the word "love" pops up in those verses. Now, let's go back to I John 3.

**I John 3:10-18** In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest [In other words, one is shown clearly by this and another is shown clearly by that.]: Whoever does not practice righteousness [What is righteousness? "All Your commandments are righteousness." Psalm 119:172] is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's

goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

I am sure that I could have used dozens of scripture to illustrate this and to prove it, but it all boils down to this: *It is the way we live that reveals who the children of God are.*

Those three sections that I have read to you . . . "by this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). That illustrates something. The children of God are made known or manifested by the way they live. I John 3:10 makes that very clear.

We understand what righteousness is, and in this context righteousness is love. Loving your brother, to be more specific. To not do anything—I am taking [picking] this out of what John says here—is almost equated as a form of hatred. It is almost equated with murder.

Now, how can we help? I would say, at the very least, everybody can help his brother by praying. That is at least a beginning. At least we would not be doing nothing. It would be a form of love toward him if we will *at least* pray for him. I am sure that if we are praying that it will begin a process of positive thoughts toward how other ways might be found to help.

John makes it very clear in verses 17 and 18 [I John 3:17-18] that fine words, or fine thoughts, or fine feelings can never take the place of something that is *done*.

Now, is this all tying in with what I gave at the beginning? Idleness invites disaster! It is not good enough for us to be swept clean. A new dynamic has to be found. That dynamic is love! *Love is something that is done*. It may possess fine thoughts, and that is good. But it does not really become love until an action is motivated.

God's emphasis is on action. It is on doing something. There is so much positive instruction that is given in God's Word. Here is another one: Christ laid down His life for us. He did not sit up in heaven and say, "Aren't they nice? Oh, look at that. Isn't that sweet? Isn't she pretty? Isn't he handsome?"

No, He came down and did something! And what He did, of course, was very costly. And so we can expect that acts of love are going to have a cost attached to them. And there is always the fear that we are going to be rejected or misunderstood or whatever, but it still has to be done.

So the solution lies in understanding the relationship between getting rid of the leaven, doing good works, producing fruit. In the universe, there is this principle at work: *We are either growing or we are degenerating*. We cannot stand still for very long, because if we do, we are going to slide backwards.

Mr. Armstrong used to say, "Any old fish can swim downstream." And that was the way he put it, but what he was saying was that nothing will ever be produced unless effort is made to fight against the natural pulls that are there. Whether the pull is from the world, whether the pull is from the laziness or the fears that are within us, we nonetheless have to fight against it. So, we might say, among living things, we are either coming or going. We are either increasing or we are decreasing.

Now, with plants and animals, they are alive. But they can do almost nothing to alter their circumstance. They cannot change their environment. An animal can move around a bit. But a plant can do nothing. Do you see that animals and plants are at least an illustration to us this way? They can do almost nothing against the forces of nature.

*God* made you and I with minds and He gave us free moral agency. We can change! We have awesome impact on the environment! We can destroy it. We can abuse it. Or we can build it. We can do the same with ourselves. We can stand still and let the forces of nature pull us backwards into degeneracy. Or we can choose to fight against it, to exert ourselves to go in a direction that we know absolutely is true and right—because God's Word says it.

Let us go to Luke the thirteenth chapter, because I think we are beginning to see that our problem is that we do not exert enough influence in a positive way.

**Luke 13:6-9** He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for



three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. 'And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' "

Now this parable is just as much for us today, because it gives us insight into God's purpose for us. The man who had a fig tree in His vineyard is God. The dresser is Christ. And the fig tree, we could say, is either the church or us as individuals.

The fig tree was considered hardy for the Palestine area. It would be normally expected that it would do well there. The climate was agreeable to it. Apparently the right amount of rain generally fell. And it was expected then that it would produce a great deal of fruit.

Jesus repeatedly warns us that we are going to be judged according to what we do with our opportunities. It is obvious that everybody does not have the same opportunities. Everybody does not have the same abilities. God gives gifts according to natural ability. And God chooses some to do things that He does not choose others to do. And, so, God does not expect the same thing from everybody. That is very clear. Those who are more gifted and those who receive greater gifts, greater grace, from Him are expected to do more with what they have been given. But whether they receive one talent, two talents, or five talents—*everybody is going to be judged according to what they did with their opportunities and with their gifts.*

This quote I am going to give to you was from a man named C. E. M. Joad. He was making this comment in regard to the world. It was not us. But I think that it illustrates something that is important to us. He said, "We have the powers of God and we use them like irresponsible schoolboys. Never," he says, "was a generation entrusted with so much as ours, and, therefore, never was a generation so answerable to God."

He is talking about this generation right now. I do not know who C.E.M. Joad is, but he hit the nail right on the head. Never has a generation been given so much in the way of technology, tools to use to advance our time to spend profitably. Never have we had so much knowledge of things that have

happened in the past. Never have we had such insight available from the studies of men and women into the mind of man and woman, and what we can do with the soil, and what we can do with the ocean, and what we can do with this that and the other thing. We have so much available to us! And, yet, all things continue as they were and maybe worse.

Now, in this parable here, salvation is again not the issue. *The issue is growth*. And again, Jesus is teaching us that uselessness invites disaster—a tree producing no fruit when it should be expected to produce fruit.

I said earlier that God does not make mistakes. He knows you can make it. You and He together can make it into the Kingdom of God. The only issue is how are we going to use our opportunities? Are they going to be used as vehicles for growth? Or are they going to be used by saying, "Well, I don't feel like doing that."

What was the tree's sin? It was not producing anything. In the analogy here, it was taking from the ground. It was taking from the heavens. But it was giving nothing back! It was giving nothing back.

Again, remember the sermons on love. God's love to us is expected by Him to be reciprocated back to Him and then out to others as we have the opportunity. In other words, God expects us to give something back. We are obliged for His sweeping us clean to do something with what we have been given.

We sometimes wonder if it is possible for us to have the strength to do this. You see, right in the parable, the dresser is fertilizing us. Christ is giving us the strength to do what we need to do. So, it puts us right in the corner. We cannot go to Him and say, "God, you never gave me what I needed to do this"—because we have been given. And He gives us what He gives us for what reason? So we can produce fruit. Now, what He gives us is called dung, or fertilizer, in the parable there, but I think we get the point. Growth for growth's sake is not the issue. It is *fruit* that is the issue. The tree was growing, but it was not producing any fruit. That was the issue.

Now, does a tree eat its own fruit? Yes, it does. But it does not eat it until others have taken of it and what is left falls on the ground. God wants you to

benefit from your fruit too. But He wants you to understand, that first of all, it is for others. And if we are really a productive tree, there is going to be so much more on there than is actually eaten, and there is going to be plenty left over for the tree which produced it. Because the fruit falls, it fertilizes the ground and then it comes back to the tree again to use to grow. It is a beautiful parable.

So, you see, God boxes us into the corner in terms of whether or not it is possible for us to do this. Yes, we can. We are swept clean. Then He begins to work with us—not for the purpose of salvation but for the purpose of producing growth because, like any good parent, He wants to see His kids grow up.

Now, let us go back to John 15.

**John 15:1-8** "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

A grapevine has two kinds of branches: those that produce and those that do not produce. The non-producing ones are shown in the parable to be cut off and burned. Even the wood is not good for anything. Can anyone tell me what a grapevine is good for? Producing fruit—that is it. Other than that, I have never seen a good use for grapevines—unless it was Tarzan in the jungle, and he could swing on them.

Now if a branch does not produce fruit, it is purged. But even those branches that are producing fruit, they are pruned even further! So they will produce even more in the future.

Let us go back to John 15:1. In order for good fruit to be produced, there has to be good stock. We have the best stock because Jesus Christ is the vine and we are tied into Him. If you do not have good stock, then the branches are not going to produce good fruit. The important thing in producing good grapes is first of all it begins with the stock. If the stock is good then you have a pretty good chance.

In verse 2, we found out about fruit. If we are not producing, it is thrown away, and if we are producing, more will be produced. Now, verse 3 is telling us that *because we are clean, **we are ready to bear*** ! That is the point in the parable. We have been cleaned, now we are ready to bear. But the communion, the fellowship, the relationship, the connection with the stock has to be kept—if you are tied into the vine. . .

Verse 7 indicates how that is done. It is through prayer, talking with God, listening to His Word, keeping the communication going, getting to know one another. And if that is occurring, the Spirit of God is flowing back and forward and fruit is going to be produced.

**Luke 17:5** And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

And then comes this instruction regarding doing our duty. Pick it up in verse 9.

**Luke 17:9-10** "Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

We are going to begin to close the circle here on how to produce fruit, how to overcome, and how to get the leaven out. I think that it is interesting to

begin here by noting that He did not call the servant sinful. He called him unprofitable. He was not producing anything.

Keeping the commandments is our duty. And, even if we do a very good job, we are only doing what is our duty to do! We could be compelled to do that. And, so, there is no thanks, you might say, for doing what everybody on earth is responsible before God for doing.

Now, again, remember that just being cleaned up is not good enough. Being clean actually does what? If we remember the parable at the beginning, it actually leaves the person in a state of vulnerability. We might go so far as to say that, in all of their converted life, it is right after they are cleaned that they might be most vulnerable to going backwards. If we think of the analogy of Israel coming out of Egypt, it was when Israel got out to the Red Sea there that God personally intervened and got between them and the Egyptians. He came between them and it was a wall of fire to the one side and a cloud to the other. He personally intervened until they could get through their baptism and on into the journey. So, being clean leaves a person in a state of vulnerability.

The work that is necessary is that of reversing the habits that we were forgiven of and replacing them with good ones. If we do this, it will largely get the leaven out.

Let us again string a number of scriptures together here starting in John 14. As we begin to get the leaven out, this will also begin to work toward producing fruit from which others will be strengthened. Now what we are looking at here is a process. Let us go back to the beginning of God's calling. God calls us and He begins to educate us in things pertaining to salvation. Now, remember that verse in Romans 2:4 that says, "the goodness of God leads us to repentance"? Hang onto that because we are starting something important to this sermon.

**John 14:15-17** "If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees It nor knows It; but you know It, for It dwells with you and will be in you."

**John 14:26** "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, It will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.

**Romans 8:14** For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

**Galatians 5:18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

I said that the goodness of God leads us to repentance. And repentance is a benchmark in a process of education. We would never repent unless God began to educate us in certain things, would we?

But there is more to it than that—**because it is not just an education. God by His Spirit does something to our mind!** I mean, He does something in our mind so that the words that we are hearing in this educational process means something to us that they otherwise would not have meant. In other words, they have impact on us.

You know this is true because you can take a person who is unconverted, and he can read a section of Scripture. Then you can read it. You see something entirely different from what he sees. He may not see anything in that at all that pertains to him personally. Take a scripture like keeping the Sabbath. It is not just the words. God by His Spirit did something to our mind so that the words mean something to us that they did not mean before He did what He did to our mind. It is a miracle of conversion.

Now, the educational part is important, but *it takes the two of them together* to get us motivated to do something. And if any part of that process is ever interrupted, the growth stops. I am telling you, we can never stop imbibing, eating, studying into God's Word. We can never stop allowing ourselves to be led by His Spirit, and praying to Him on a daily basis to keep those things moving. If we do allow that cycle to break, we are going to begin to slowly

starve to death spiritually. And the source of strength, that Spirit that works on our minds—the fertilizer, the water—that makes these things have impact on us, it will be cut off.

At best we are only going to go along, if we allow that cycle to be broken. We are only going to go along in a half-hearted fashion as if Christianity is some sort of bothersome duty. But I will tell you, if we will keep those lines open and if we will go after it, we can enthusiastically and faithfully forge ahead with all of the strength that is going to be needed to do good works, to get the leaven out, and produce fruit. It will be the natural result. You can no more stop it than a fig tree or a grape arbor can stop producing fruit if it has the right things to feed it.

So producing fruit, and getting the leaven out, and overcoming sin are all interrelated as part of the growth process.

Now let us go to Ephesians 4 and we will end here.

**Ephesians 4:13-16** Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

That is another way of saying what I said in this whole sermon. *God's purpose once we are cleaned is to produce growth in us.* And just like a plant, if we are growing, there is a very good chance that we are going to produce fruit. And if we will take the feeding that He gives to us, then we will produce fruit, we will get the leaven out, and we will grow all at the same time. It is a wonderful, simple analogy. It is beautiful.

Now the benefit to us is—just like the fig tree, just like it says here in verse 16 "for the edifying of itself in love,"—that, when we do this, we are the

ones who profit as well. It is sort of that "getting by giving." Because God ensures that the blessing will come back to us as well—because of what has been produced.