

Don'T Stand Still!

Growth and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 02-Apr-94; Sermon #122

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 . . .

There is a very definite connection between the eating of unleavened bread and solidifying a memory of what it is that we are observing.

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."

I think that we are learning that the Days of Unleavened Bread are a two-way street. That is that there are both positive and negative aspects to it; on the one hand we are to get *rid* of leaven and on the other hand we are to *eat* something that is unleavened. There is a negative aspect; there is a positive aspect to it.

I think in practical applications we tend to emphasize the negative aspect; that is of not doing something. We all understand that leaven represents sin, and sin has very disastrous consequences to one's life. In fact, a continued living in a sin can cause, or bring about, a person's eternal death. And so it is a very negative thing, something that we do not do, by the instruction that God has given to us. We very naturally want to make sure that we do not do something that will bring us to the place where we are going to have the death penalty executed upon us.

Emphasizing the negative has negative aspects to it and do you not think that it might be better if we would emphasize the positive doing of something, rather than the negative not doing of something?

The emphasis in the Bible is very definitely on doing, rather than not doing, although we are going to clearly see that *not* doing is something that is required, the *doing* of something is even more required, even more emphasized in the Bible. And incidentally, I think in most cases, it is exceedingly more difficult to do, than not doing.

Luke 11:24-26 "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."

That is a very interesting illustration that Jesus used here and overall the teaching of it is, that it is not enough just to be clean. You will probably recall from I Corinthians 5:6-8, that we are given a charge from the apostle Paul to "purge out the old leaven." It also says in exactly the same verse that, "you are unleavened." Now is that a contradiction? How can a person be unleavened and have the responsibility of getting leaven out all at the same time?

The answer to that is that there is no contradiction. The line that has to do with being unleavened, by God, is telling us that we have been put into a state of *being* unleavened by God, but the reality is, the practical aspect of it is, that leavening actually remains in our lives. We are unleavened as a result of a legal maneuver, manipulation that God performs on His part in considering us without any leaven because we have been cleaned up. We have been forgiven. But the practical reality of it is, sin remains within us and sin has to be battled, sin has to be overcome, sin has to be gotten rid of; so there is no contradiction there.

The Days of Unleavened Bread are teaching us that it is not enough to be clean, there is much yet that remains to be done. *The Living Bible* says in regard to those same verses, "clean and empty" the *Amplified Bible* says that this person is, "swept clean and decorated," a measure of embellishment, the *New American Standard* says, "clean and put in order." A commentator suggested on this verse, that it means "unoccupied and ready to receive a new tenant." That one is kind of interesting. The Greek indicates an appearance of an idle person who may look good.

Luke 11:27-28 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! [Indicating an action]"

If we reflect back on what Jesus just said onto verses 24-26, he is in effect saying that there are people who can look good, they can be cleaned, things can seemingly be in order because they are making a vain show of trifling things—the outward appearance, clothing, church attendance, they might even be able to talk a good fight, in other words. Jesus said in this context here, that people can be prepared for use, that is, unleavened, by an act of God, but the person has remained in a more or less static state. Nothing has been done to embellish the cleansing that God has done through the blood of Jesus Christ. The warning is, this person has allowed himself to become wide open to be worse off after he has gotten rid of the leaven, than he was before.

Think about this: what good would it be for a farmer to plow a field, that is to prepare it for use, and then never plant anything in it? Science teaches us that nature abhors a vacuum. When one thing leaves it makes the way open for another thing to enter. There is an overall lesson that Jesus is getting at here and that is this: that in Christianity there is no place for neutrality.

If a person tries to straddle the fence, if a person will accept the blood of Jesus Christ and then does nothing on his own to overcome and grow, that person is going to end up worse off than he was before. We have to understand that God has involved us in a process and part of this process is a conflict. It is a conflict that takes place within us internally because there is another spirit that is doing all that it can in order to persuade us to either stand still, do nothing at all, or go back to the way that we have just come out of.

But Christianity involves making effort. We must move on, because if we stay static, because nature abhors a vacuum, we are going to take something else into it. That is not John Ritenbaugh's idea, that is what I have gleaned from this parable that Jesus gave.

There are three things that we need to understand.

» We cannot make Christianity, that is, this way of life, work by emphasizing what we cannot do. Christianity will not work emphasizing what we cannot do. I can guarantee you that it will be nonproductive and it will be depressing.

» We cannot stand still! It is not good enough to drive evil out, **good** must come in! Evil can be conquered, but it cannot be destroyed, so there must be a new dynamic and that dynamic is fulfilling our obligation to Christ for the forgiveness of sin and of course striving to be prepared for the Kingdom of

God. We cannot stand still!

» The best way to avoid evil is to do good. One can never become good by not doing things. Not righteous in the way that God wants. We become what God wants us to be by filling our lives with lovely things, by lovely things I mean the things of His Word, His way. Evil thoughts have to be replaced with good ones. So idleness, Jesus is teaching us here in this parable, is a fatal disease.

II Peter 2:20 For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.

Is Peter echoing what Jesus just said in that parable? The latter end of that person out of whom a demon has been cast, is worse off than it was if it had never been cast out—if the person does nothing; if he is swept clean and put in order but nothing replaces what left, then that person is worse off.

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."

If a person has not known the right way then they cannot be blamed for not following the right way. But if the person has known the right way, then I think the judgment is going to be that there has been a measure of deliberateness in the persons' inactivity. That is, they have actually willed it to try to stand still or, not to do something or, simply to drift with the tide. Or simply to accept the blood of Jesus Christ but then not make the effort that is going to be required in order to do what is right. So there is a measure of deliberateness, it is at least the very beginnings of a willful sin and that is the kind that leads to the Lake of Fire.

So a person who is clean by the blood of Jesus Christ and then decides that they are going to just allow themselves to be distracted by what is going on in the world, allow themselves to be distracted by interests other than the main interest that God has put into their life—just allow themselves to have others impact upon them in a way that is

detrimental to their own growth and does not really take control over their own life and go toward the Kingdom of God—that person is showing a measure of willfulness in what they have done.

Let us go to a place that amplifies this a bit, in the book John. This is the occasion when Jesus healed the man of blindness and after He did this, the Pharisees, recognizing who the man was, accused Him. Slowly but surely, this episode worked its way around where there was a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, and in the process Jesus makes a very interesting statement that applies to this theme.

John 9:39-41 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." Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, "Are we blind also?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains.

He is showing these people clearly that sin is far more devastating if it is done with knowledge than with ignorance. In other words, the very fact that Jesus was there and Jesus was teaching them, verbally, and also, Jesus was showing them an example, was putting them into judgment. They then had a choice.

It is obvious from all the confrontations that took place between Jesus and these people, that there was a measure of conviction coming upon the minds of these people that were bringing them a measure of guilt, and they felt it necessary to defend themselves and what they were thinking, what their attitudes were, and what they were doing.

So knowledge was coming to them, knowledge that would prepare the way for them to be cleaned if they would repent. But as we can see here, there was instead a deliberate rejection because they eventually put Him to death. And so Jesus said, "If you were blind—that is, if you were never cleaned; if you were never shown these things—you would have no sin, but now you say, we see and therefore your sin remains."

Let us amplify this just a little bit more, in John 5. Here we have another place where the Jews had a shattering experience with Jesus because again on a Sabbath day, Jesus healed a man and in this case the Pharisees accused Him of working on the Sabbath. That becomes the great issue. Another statement that Jesus made to the man who was healed is important to us.

Don't Stand Still! by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

John 5:14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. [You have been cleaned up; the demons, as it were, have been swept out.] Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you."

Now wait a minute here. Back in verse 5.

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

You mean to tell me, there is something worse than an infirmity that crippled this man for thirty-eight years? Yes, and I am pretty sure that the thing that Jesus was alluding to was spiritual rather than physical, because now this man had been brought into contact with the very One that created him. The very One who was going to be his Savior, the very One who was going to administer the Spirit of God and be His High Priest.

Jesus was concerned that now that he had been brought into contact with Him, that the man begin to make steps to do something about his life because maybe if the man did not do something about his life, if he went back to his old life, if he just allowed himself to drift, maybe if he decided just to live on the notoriety and fame that came upon him because, this was the man who was healed, and he did not really take advantage of what had occurred to him.

Sin had made this man the way he was—a lot different from the man in John 9 where the disciples asked, who sinned that made this man blind? And Jesus said, no one sinned in this case, but in this case in John 5, somebody did sin. Sin had made him that way and he was warned that if he goes back into sin, things would be worse than they were before.

There are subtle pulls at you and me. To use the love of God as an excuse for sin, you can see this illustrated in the Bible, in the book of Romans where Paul uses one of the rallying cries of a group of people who said, "let us sin more that grace may abound." I think that we know better than that, but nonetheless, we have to make sure we do battle with the pull that is within us, to take advantage of God's mercy.

Now God is merciful, there is no doubt about that at all, but there is an end to God's mercy. God gives us plenty of time to repent but all too often as we find in Ecclesiastes 8:11, men take advantage of that to do more evil. We do not want to get into that kind of

Don't Stand Still! by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

thinking, but you see there is lodged in the back of our mind the idea that somehow or another we can get away with it. That this little thing is not going to matter all that much.

But you know what, that kind of thinking, though we may never actually do the sin, has a bad result. It lures us into idleness, because rather than conquering, we instead have a tendency then to do little or nothing and to just drift.

John 15:8 "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

John 15:6 "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."

What is the lesson to this illustration here? Uselessness invites disaster; if there is no fruit. . .need I say anymore? A branch is supposed to produce fruit and if it is not producing fruit then it gets thrown into the fire, so uselessness invites disaster.

You should be able to clearly see the drift of my thinking. It is not good enough to stop sinning. The sinning actually has to be replaced with good habits or good works or one will actually go backwards and be worse off than before conversion. The ultimate test of life then is whether we are fit vessel for God's use. If we produce fruit, we will be.

Getting rid of leaven, doing good works, and producing fruit are pretty much different ways of saying the same thing. They are not exactly the same, but they are closely related parts of the process of conversion. We all know that sin is the transgression of the law and getting rid of leaven implies quitting sin, but sin is not always that simple. I think that you understand from your own experiences that overcoming and producing fruit, though simply stated, is not simple to accomplish.

It sometimes requires a great deal of time, always requires a great deal of energy, concentration, memory, and other factors, sacrifices are involved in producing it. It is a goal that is simply stated but not always easy to accomplish. Sin is easily stated, well, it is the transgression of the law, but I am going to proceed to show you that sin is not always a transgression of the law. As we see this we begin to see something else that has to do with overcoming and growing.

Isaiah 1:16-17 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless,

plead for the widow.

We are given here by Isaiah eight admonitions. Three of them involved the removal of evil that is in principle, wash, make yourself clean, and put away the evil of your doings. Five of them, the performance of what is good, that is the next five.

In order for one to do good works and to produce fruit, we are going to always be involved with both sides of the equation. But if we can use this as any kind of an illustration, we find that one has to do both, but it seems as though from Isaiah's point of view that we have to get away from the negative fixation of not doing things and progress on to the positive of doing things.

Almost as if one is elementary, that is the not doing of something, and the other one is more difficult and at the same time requires progress to get to that place, that is the positive doing of something. So it is easier to stop doing something than it is to adjust one's life to where they are doing something.

About seven hundred or so years after Isaiah, we come to the time of Jesus, and Jesus' major battles it seems were with the Pharisees. The Pharisees had developed, over the preceding centuries, a way of righteousness, primarily based on not doing evil, and it was combined with an excessive self-concern, that is the keeping of oneself uncontaminated.

Unfortunately that way of life is essentially egocentric. It is self-concerned. We are not going to go off into Pharisaism here, but I think once you begin to catch a glimpse, an idea, of what the problem was with Pharisaism, you can begin to see the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees.

The Pharisees did have a measure of righteousness; there is no doubt about it. But they became righteous by a negative approach, *not* doing something. They did not become righteous by *doing* good things. You can really see this clearly illustrated in Matthew 23, where Jesus climbed all over them. So they tithed of mint, anise, and cumin, but they would not help a widow across the street.

Now which was better in God's eyes? Certainly they should do the one but they left out the other one, judgment, mercy, and faith, which Jesus said were far more important. But that whole way of life was built upon that premise.

Again looking at Isaiah, if we follow his formula here, the negative element will always

Don't Stand Still! by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

be present because of human nature, but it will slide into the background. If we are growing, if we are making the effort to do good things, then the doing the negative things are going to slide into the background considerably.

I mentioned earlier that sometimes sin is not all that simple and it is not a matter of "breaking a regulation, breaking a law."

Romans 14:15-20 Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil [how can good be evil? The way it is used]; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. [Is something evil? Not sin? We are seeing a description where something good turns into something evil and that is sin. We are not talking about the transgression of a "regulation"] For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore [notice the wording] let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.

So in an actual practical experience, it is possible for us to turn something God intended for our good into something that is evil. It would be very nice to easily categorize every thought or act, but sin is not always a matter of legalities.

It is interesting that the two words used in the New Testament that are mostly translated into the word "sin" have little or nothing to do with legality. They are *hamartia* and *paraptoma* and they simply mean, to miss the mark, *hamartia*, and to go aside, *paraptoma*.

This is a subject that may seem strange to us because we cannot relate to its importance at the time these things were written. But eating meat offered to an idol was a major concern of the church then. It was big enough to be included in the decision of the Jerusalem Council there in Acts 15 and two times it occupies a fairly large portion of Paul's teaching. The smaller of the two here in Romans 14 and the other occupies the teaching that appears in I Corinthians 8-13.

Basically what Paul is saying is that if one uses his liberty to do something lawful and in the process offends his brother, it is not love, and if it is not love, it is sin, because one is guilty of missing the mark or going aside.

So Paul's instruction is clear, it is our Christian duty to think of everything, not only as it affects ourselves but also how it affects other as well. He is not saying we are to allow our conduct to be dictated by others, but there are matters that are neutral or indifferent—things that are neither good or bad in themselves—and it is Paul's conviction that we have no right to give offense in such matters by doing them ourselves or trying to persuade our brother to do them. He is saying that our responsibility to our brother takes priority.

I am sure that you heard of Augustine. In the world they call him St. Augustine, one of the great teachers of the Catholic Church. I am going to quote him, he said, "love God and do what you like." That is patently wrong! That is an evil and misleading statement and he could very easily lead a person into sin. That is exactly what we are reading about here in Romans 14.

"Love God and do what you like." Paul said that the Kingdom of God is righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit. Righteousness consists of giving God and man what is their due, and what is their due in Romans 14 is not doing what we like, but doing what is love toward your neighbor, toward your brother. What we are seeing in this context is that Christianity consists of putting the other first and the self, last. We cannot give our fellow man what is his due and at the same time do what we like, and so what Paul was teaching here is that a man is always his brother's keeper.

It becomes very important that we learn what is right in every circumstance. If we are going to do right, we have to learn what is right in every circumstance, and as we learn what is right, we begin to get at the essence of what love is.

There is another aspect of this thing about sin, and it appears back in the book of James.

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

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, or what any other aspects of the legal aspects of the commands of God cover.

This gets into another area and that is the area of those who equate goodness with civility and respectability. If civility and respectability were all one needs, then one does not need a church. What we are delving into here is a major area of Protestantism.

Civility and respectability are both good, but the Protestants have virtually thrown out the law of God.

The Corinthians divided the congregation through their attitudes. Their pride almost reached the point of arrogance. In I Corinthians 5, Paul did call them conceited, which is another aspect of pride.

Pride is not a matter of law, it is a matter of attitude, but it is an attitude that motivates to what? Pride motivates to abundant self-concern and then the result is lawbreaking in order for the person to gratify himself. Why is this in James 4:17 a sin? Because it is a presumptive act, it is something that is motivated by pride. The omission stems from one's pride and it is in effect saying that one is okay the way one is. I do not need to do that good thing, I am okay the way I am.

These two aspects of sin, Romans 14, and I Corinthians 8, combined with James 4:17 seem to put a person between a rock and a hard place because we can either sin by doing a bad thing, doing an act that would normally be legally right but wrong in certain contexts, or we can sin by doing nothing at all.

Are you beginning to see that it becomes essential that we learn to do the right thing? Are you beginning to see perhaps a little bit more that we *grow* into liberty? It is not something we have automatically simply because God declares us justified. Because He declares us unleavened and puts us into that state, and why we have to purge out the old leaven. We have to learn to do good, and learning to do good begins with the negative aspects of not doing things. But if we are ever going to be in the image of God it is because we have switched away from merely not doing things to doing something that is positive and right in every circumstance.

There is a solution to all of this and a lot of the solution lies in God's mercy in taking us through this process and His patience in dealing with us as we learn what we are to do. But mostly I want us to see that we cannot stand still, we have to move forward! We cannot grow if we are merely not doing things; we have to take steps to begin doing the right things. If we are doing the right thing, it is almost impossible to sin!

Jesus did not remain sinless by *not* doing things. It is reported of Him virtually in every page of the Gospels, and other places as well, that He went around doing good and that is what kept Him sinless. Certainly there were certain pulls that were on Him, but if He filled His mind and His life with the activity and the energy required to do good, He did not have time for doing evil.

I am telling you what the secret of growing and overcoming and not sinning is. Again it is simple in principle, but it is not simple in doing.

John 15:15-16 "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, [There is our charge. He did not say go and avoid sin, He said, "go and bear fruit."] and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

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."

Now back in I John, then we will connect all these together.

I John 3:10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.

What we are seeing here is an amplification of what Jesus just said there in John 13, that we have to learn to love our brother and by this we will be known as His disciples. Love is not pleasant thoughts. Love is not sympathetic feelings. Love is not having warm regard for somebody. Those things may all be included within what love is, but love is an outgoing concern for the well-being that motivates a person to do something about it. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son." His concern motivated Him to do something. We have it stated that love is keeping the commands of God, keeping being an active verb here.

I John 3:11-16 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.

That is interesting to think about. Hating is not an activity that takes place out of the person's mind and so the person may restrain himself from actually doing the murder but the very fact that the hate is there makes him what? A murderer. Do you not think that something has to be done to get the hate out? Yes. It cannot just be allowed to dwell there; it has to be gotten rid of.

I John 3:17-18 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. [Again it is an activity, it is something done.] 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? [Nice warm thoughts, yes, go and be filled, but John says if nothing is done then love really is not there.] My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

In gleaning what these men have said, it is the way we live that reveals the children of God. John is especially clear that the accent is on *doing*. Now in this context what is righteousness?

We may be able to give a legal definition from Psalm 119:172, "all your commandments are righteousness." But that is a bare-bones, legal definition of what righteousness is. In the context it is to love our brother, to not do anything is a form of hatred. It is almost equated with murder. John says what we have to do is to reach out and really help the person.

There is something we can do. We might not be able to help the person physically because we are simply unable to do it—we are not where they are, we have not the mind in the sense, the technical expertise, or the resources in terms of finances, or whatever to actually do something that way physically—but the very least we can do is pray for the person. That is doing something, is it not? That is expressing your concern for the person to God. Surly we can all do something like that. That is an active step toward doing righteousness, a very important one.

So we can have fine words, fine thoughts, fine feelings, but none of those things will ever take the place of deeds. God's emphasis is always on action. Christ laid down His life for us.

The solution here lies in understanding the relationship between getting rid of leaven, good works, and producing fruit. In this universe there is a principle at work that is right

Don't Stand Still! by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

at this moment affecting your relationship with God and that is, that in this universe there is nothing that is static for very long. Maybe I can leave it at saying; there is nothing that is static.

The reason I say this, and it would be true, is because in Hebrews 1:10, the second law of thermodynamics is stated in very simple terms, and that is that everything in the universe is tending to degenerate toward randomness. We call it oxidation; things rust, is an illustration of this second law of thermodynamics.

We are living beings. What happens if you stop taking care of yourself? Are you going to improve? If you do nothing about your physical health, I guarantee you, you are going to degenerate. You take action, do you not, just to stay alive! You have got to do something to stay alive or you are going to die.

By the same token, we cannot be static spiritually either. We cannot concentrate on not doing evil—that is at least doing something, it is part of the equation—but if there is going to be real growth, it is because positive action is taken to increase and make better the spiritual health that has been given to us because God has forgiven our sins. We have been swept clean, we have been given the Spirit of God.

The fruit primarily comes from taking action to do good and so we see then in the universe that things are not static, they are either growing toward the production of fruit, seed, whatever it might be, or they are degenerating and moving toward death, at the very least decreasing.

In the case of plants and animals, they exert little or no control over the process, this second law of thermodynamics. But in the case of human beings, we exert tremendous influence, especially over ourselves, and you see therein is the crux of the problem. The crux of the problem is that we frequently do not exert enough effort in a positive direction.

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.'"

This parable is just as much for us today as it was for those people then and it gives us a great deal of insight in regard for God's purposes for us. The man in the parable is God, Israel is the vineyard, or it could be the church, the fig tree is us, the dresser is Christ. The fig tree is considered to be hearty and productive for the Palestine area. It has a very good batting average for producing fruit, not merely surviving, but it will produce fruit.

You might remember the time that Jesus came along and cursed the fig tree because it did not have any fruit on it. People get upset that He was cruel and mean. Christ never did a cruel, mean thing in His life, even against God's nature, at all and when He cursed the fig tree it was because it should have had fruit on it, but it did not and so it withered and died.

We are the fig tree and we are in a position where God expects that we should have a much better than average chance to produce fruit. Jesus repeatedly warns us that we are going to be judged according to what we do with our opportunities.

There is a man by the name C.E.M. Joad and he was a biblical scholar of a number of years ago. He made this comment in regard to we human beings, and he said, "We have the powers of God and we use them like irresponsible school boys. Never was a generation trusted with so much as ours and therefore never was a generation so answerable to God."

Salvation is not the issue in this parable, but the parable teaches us again that uselessness does invite disaster. No fruit, cut it down, God says. Jesus intercedes, and He said, no let me dung it about one more time and let us see what they do. So we are seeing here that it is not merely a matter of survival. The tree's sin was that it was not producing anything, it was taking up space in the ground, it was taking up rain from the heavens, but it was giving nothing back!

Are we not obligated to God to give Him something back on His investment? Yes we are, but we cannot give Him anything back simply avoiding evil. That does not glorify God all that much because it is not going to produce a great deal of fruit. The parable does show us that Christ, as the dresser, does give us the strength to enable us to produce fruit, and in this case, the dung represents His Holy Spirit.

Growth for growth's sake is not the goal—fruit is. Does the tree eat its own fruit? The answer is, to a limited degree, yes. To some extent it does because if the fruit ripens and falls to the ground then the fruit provides a measure of fertilization for the production of more fruit. But fruit's primary use is for someone to receive a benefit from what is

being produced and so the value of what is produced is primarily for the one who owns the tree.

Who owns the tree? God does and the fruit is what? What is its purpose? To glorify Him! This is what we just read in John 8, that if we produce a lot of fruit, God is glorified. It is our responsibility to give Him back on His investment. That is our obligation, to produce fruit to glorify Him. But, you see, there is a secondary aim in the production of fruit and that is that others are benefited from it.

So we find God is the primary recipient. Others receive the benefit of what the tree produces and the tree itself receives a benefit from what is produced. It is not a matter of producing fruit just for the sake of producing fruit, that is not the goal. The reason for the production of fruit, the reason for God's concern, is that others will benefit and we will benefit as well from that.

John 15:1-2 "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.

We are seeing here how God will work with us and we of course understand that He is quite patient with us and He will work with us through Jesus Christ to the extreme limit of His patience in order to make sure fruit is produced. So even when we are producing fruit He cuts us back, He prunes us back in order that we produce even more fruit.

John 15:5 "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 we do not produce fruit then we are purged. Do you know that men have not been able to find little, if anything, that a grapevine is good for, except for producing grapes. What is the wood good for? I do not know. Maybe somebody can make a decorative piece from it that might fit on somebody's mantel or coffee table or something like that. Cut it, whip it into shape, and maybe stain it or something, but other than being decorative, I cannot find a good use anybody has ever made grapevines put it to. But they can produce fruit that is wonderful to eat and to drink.

John 15:8 "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

If we are a non-achiever, are we going to a fit into a whole kingdom of achievers? We will not fit there. So God cannot use us.

Let us look at another illustration that Jesus gave in the book of Luke that has much to do with being prepared and able to produce fruit. At first it may seem to you that Luke 17 has little or nothing to do with producing fruit, but yet it has very much to do with producing fruit, even though fruit is not even mentioned.

Luke 17:5-10 And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? 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 beginning to close the circle here on how to produce fruit. We have seen we cannot just stand still; we have got to take action. If we are producing fruit, I can guarantee you we are getting the leaven out and we are overcoming sin. I chose this example because it involves faith, and without faith there will be no fruit.

I want us to notice here that it does not say that the servant is sinful, he is merely unprofitable. Remember at the beginning, Jesus showed us that it was not good enough just to be cleaned up and that being cleaned by God actually leaves a person in a state of vulnerability. The lesson here involves understanding the state or the position we are in relative to God *after* we are cleaned by the blood of Jesus Christ. We are totally obligated to Him; we do not have a life of our own.

Please think about John 17. When we are cleaned by the blood of Jesus Christ, we are **totally** obligated to Him, we know longer have a life of our own, we **belong** to Him. I want us to get this because if we do not understand the position that we are in relative to Jesus Christ, relative to God the Father, we are not going to be able to increase in faith, and if we do not increase in faith, we are not going to grow.

We are dealing with something that has to do with increasing faith. "Lord increase our

faith." His answer seems so indirect, but it is not indirect at all, it is very direct. It has to do with recognizing our total obligation to Him. We do not have a life of our own. When the master comes in what does he say to the slave? "Oh why do you not eat first." No, the slave's life does not belong to him, it belongs to the master. He is totally obligated, so the master says, "prepare something for my supper." "But sir, I just came in from the field and working since sun up and I am tired, I am dirty." The master says, "you don't have a life of your own, fix my supper first and then we will see if we can find something else for you to do."

Is that the basis of your attitude toward God, that He has every right to demand of us that we never stop serving Him, ever! That we are obligated to Him in every circumstance, there is never a time that we can walk off the job, there is never a time that we are free to do our own thing. Is that the kind of attitude that you have toward your Savior? Jesus is saying this is the foundation of growing. We are totally obligated to Him. We do not have a life of our own. We are His slave. We are totally at His back and call. He has *absolute* authority over our lives.

This is not all of our relationship with Him, but He is answering the question, "how do you grow?" I think many times we do not have much understanding of this aspect and so what Christ is doing, He is showing us that our duty, our obligation to God never ends. We are never off the job wherever, whenever, or whatever the situation might be. We are called upon to serve Him and no past work that we have done, no past obedience absolves me from what I am now called upon to do.

Paul said that we are to forget the things that are behind and to go forward. When we complete one thing with God, what is God's reward? It is more work. When He gives us a responsibility and then rewards us because we have done that responsibility, the reward is greater responsibility. You see, we have no claim on God! Do you understand that? This is the foundation of our working relationship and Jesus is saying that if we want to grow in faith we have got to understand where we are in relation to God.

You see, there is subtly, most of the time (and sometimes not so subtly), working a pull on us to declare our independence of God. Do you know why those people in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 sinned? Even though they were doing something that was normally their right to do, it was lawful to do, because without realizing it they declared their independence from God. God, who says your first responsibility is to your brother in this case, not to yourself. And even though they did something that is normally lawful, it was wrong in this case because God demanded something better of them, to take care of their brother.

We are *never* off the job. Our duty to God comes first and foremost in every circumstance. Now we do not always know what our duty to God is, and that is why we have to grow in the grace and knowledge. But God will be faithful and He will teach us what these things are.

Look what motivated this question. It is in verses 1-4. It had to do with what if your brother sins against you, how often do you have to forgive him? Well, it is endless, is what it is saying there. So what is He talking about? After they said increase our faith, how can a person do this? Jesus is talking about human relationships; He is talking about offenses. And our service to God as His slave takes place in the midst of human relationships.

It does not matter how much we know about God if we have not been able to turn that into the humble service of mankind. Otherwise we are not going to grow. You see, when we sin God is involved in it because it is His law, it is His world, but is He hurt by that sin. He may feel badly about it because we did not do better. His concern will be for us. But when we sin who is damaged, who is hurt, who receives the pain? It is human beings and this is why our relationships with our brother are the evidence of whether or not we love God.

Can you see where I am going, what I am saying? If we are going to increase, if we are going to grow, it has to begin by understanding our relationship with God and that we are always obligated to Him in every circumstance. There is never a time that we can walk away from our responsibility and our obligation to Him.

There has to be the total commitment to service of a slave. The action then that will produce the fruit will take place in the area or the environment of mankind because that is where the problems are. And as we overcome, as we work on our relationships with each other, the fruit will begin to be produced, but the obligation to God begins it.

It will help you to understand John 15 a great deal better and why Jesus said there in several different cases that if we lay down our life for one another, you will be known as My disciple. The spiritual realm is so constituted that certain blessings are always derivative, that is they are the product of something else.

Happiness is one of these things, it is not derived from pursuing it, but rather it is derived from following an unselfish life, giving oneself completely to God, and giving oneself in service to the brethren, primarily, and to the world secondarily. This will produce happiness. It is something that is derived.

Back to something that Paul said in Romans 14, he talked there about God's approval; this is also something that is derived. If we make a deliberate effort to win God's approval, we are not going to find it, but rather we will find that we will have God's approval through the faithful discharge of our duties to mankind.

The Pharisees created havoc in Matthew 23. They created havoc with their excessive self-concern about obeying God. The havoc was created in other people's lives. Read the things that Jesus said about them in relation to people, that they made every effort to try to win God's approval, but they went about it in the wrong way. The way to produce fruit is to place oneself at God's disposal constantly and to make the efforts through the service of men.

There is much more that could be added to this, but I want finally to come to Romans 12:1. I am sure that you understand something that is involved in every aspect of growth and it is good to look at this where it falls in terms of the book.

Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

In the course of the book Paul has given his doctrinal instruction and finally in Romans 12 he begins by making the practical application. If you will take the principle from Romans 12:1 and apply it to Luke 17:5-11, you will find that they agree perfectly. Jesus said in Luke 11 that a person has to sacrifice himself totally to God, and we will find here if we continue through Romans 12 that Paul says that that it is done in the area of our relationships to man and with man.

Sacrifice of oneself does not have to be grim. It simply means that in order for us to take advantage of what God has revealed to us, we are going to have to give ourselves over to it because either doing nothing or remaining in the old rut, the world will make us a clone of itself. Sacrifice is the outward expression of our devotion to God's purpose, to His program. Do you realize, do you understand, that the central issue of sacrifice is not death but the offering of a life to God?

What a person gives his life to is what he worships. That is his god and God wants us to take the ordinary responsibilities of life and make them an offering to Him. That is the principle that will produce the fruit, and if we give ourselves over to that, not only will fruit

Don't Stand Still! by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

be produced but we will grow, and the leaven will be gotten rid of.