

“THE FIG TREE AND THE VINE”

America is such a diverse land that it would be hard to find a phrase that represents home for everyone. For one group it would be a house in the country or the mountains. For others a cottage on the beach. For others a ranch house, for others a farm house, for others a house in the suburbs with a driveway and a picket fence. For Jews a single phrase came to symbolize home and contentment. “Everyone shall sit under and eat from his own vine, and everyone from his own fig tree.”

When we say “vine” we think first of all of grapes. There is a wide variety of foods that grow on a vine – tomatoes, beans, cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, melons to name just a few.

The fig is a very interesting tree. Figs can be picked twice or three times in the year. The fig isn’t really a fruit. It is the flower of the tree. The flower blooms inside the fruit. A fig wasp crawls inside the fruit and pollinates the flower. That causes seeds to grow. The sap of the fig tree is very irritating to the skin.

Figs do not keep once they are picked. That is why they are dried or made into jam. Figs are very nutritious and are an important food in the Middle East.

One of the ways fig trees can be propagated is to bend a long branch to the ground, scrape the bark off an area of the branch and cover it with dirt. When it develops roots, the new plant is cut from the branch and is transplanted.

We associate parables with Jesus but there are parables in the Old Testament. Isaiah has a parable about the vine. The Book of Judges has a parable about an olive tree, a vine, a fig tree, and a bramble.

1.) There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." 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.'" (Luke 13:1-9 NKJV)

This is the first of three times when Jesus used a fig tree to illustrate His teaching. In this instance He uses a parable about a barren fig tree to illustrate His warning, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." John the Baptist had similarly illustrated his call to repentance:

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:7-9 NKJV)

The fig tree represents individuals who profess to be followers of God. God expects to find fruit from them. If their life as a child of Abraham or as a disciple of Christ is barren of fruit, He will remove them from His vineyard. They are hypocrites.

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. (Matthew 21:18-19 NKJV)

In the preaching of John the Baptist and in Jesus' parable there was still time for the fig tree to bring forth good fruit. Now, Jesus has come to the fig tree, representing His coming again. Finding no fruit on the tree He pronounces judgment upon it. When Jesus comes back to earth

in power and glory, there will no longer be an opportunity to believe the Gospel and be saved. The age of grace will be ended. Jesus concluded His teaching on the Mount of Olives about the end of the age by saying that the fig tree is also a warning light of His coming.

“Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.” Then He spoke to them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.” (Luke 21:28-31 NKJV)

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. 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.” (John 15:1-6 NKJV)

In all the instances of the use of a fig tree in a parable – in the Book of Judges, by John the Baptist, and by Jesus the fig tree always represents an individual person. In all the instances of the use of the vine in parables, the vine represents the whole company of God’s people. In the Psalms and Isaiah the vine is used to represent all the people of Israel. Jesus’ Jewish listeners were shocked when He said the master of the vineyard would give it to others more worthy.

In Jesus’ teaching in the Upper Room, on the eve of His betrayal and death, He reveals that the Vine is no longer the children of Abraham, joined in covenant relationship with God. Now He is the Vine and the branches are all those, both children of Abraham and Gentiles, who are joined to Him in a new covenant sealed with His blood.

I do not know enough about vines to explain how a branch can be part of the vine and yet not bare fruit. Although I don't understand the botany of Jesus' story, His spiritual lesson is clear. There are those who pretend to belong to Jesus. They may even believe that they belong to Jesus. However, they are only taking nourishment from the vine and growing leaves so that they look like all the other branches. However, these branches never produce fruit.

In the New Testament there are three varieties of fruit. Ideally every believer produces fruit of each variety. The first category are the fruits of temperament - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, and faith. The second category are fruits of service - wisdom, knowledge, healing, preaching, teaching, music, leadership in the church, encouragement, giving money, counseling, works of mercy. The third category of fruit is leading lost souls to Jesus Christ. That may come about by bringing someone to church, by sharing your experience of accepting Christ, by sharing the sermons with someone who is reluctant to come to church. Fruit has many varieties.

The singular difference between a branch that bears fruit and a branch that has leaves but no fruit is that the fruitful branch abides in Christ. There is a communication between the branch and the vine that is more than the nourishment it receives. There is a consciousness that it lives to produce fruit and there is a consciousness that it belongs to Christ and there is a consciousness that Christ loves and hears it.

“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.” (John 15:7,8 NKJV)

