



THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE

Part 57 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Luke 13:6-9 | January 09, 2011

Luke 13:6-9

⁶ And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

INTRODUCTION

Howdy Mars Hill. We are back in Luke's gospel. We started it two falls ago, and we'll finish it the fall of this year. And we find ourselves in about the middle of the book, Luke 13:6-9.

As you're finding that place in your Bible or on your app, we wanted to let you know that the big theme for today is fruitfulness. And in light of that I wanted to do a brief summary of last year, which was by God's grace and your faithfulness the most fruitful year we've ever had as a church. Under the leadership of Pastor Jamie Munson and Pastor Tim Beltz, our annual report will be forthcoming in about a month. Right now all of the MBAs and CPAs at Mars Hill are back to work compiling all of the year-end giving and attendance and details. That'll all be published as an annual report.

But the good news is, kind of the snapshot is, it was the best year we've ever had. We saw more church services, over 1,300, on Sundays. We saw more people attend Mars Hill, over 440,000 people in total on Sundays alone. Our community groups grew to the highest number ever, more than 400 groups, now pushing 500 groups.

We saw more addicts and abuse victims by God's grace helped in Redemption Groups and the book for that is finished and will be out within weeks by one of our pastors, Mike Wilkerson. In addition, Justin Holcomb, one of our elders, has finished along with his wife their book for those who have been sexually abused. That is on its way out any day now as well, and so we've been able to help a lot of people there.

We gave away more money than ever to church planting. We gave away more money than ever to the poor and those in need, including a large donation to Haiti, and I'll be returning there very shortly for a return visit to see how things are going with our service there.

Additionally, we have seen more baptisms, I believe, than perhaps ever, almost 800 people meeting Jesus this year and getting baptized as new Christians. And the good news is that every single campus of Mars Hill Church grew this year. Not one has plateaued, not one is declining. Every single campus of Mars Hill Church is growing and we beat budget and brought in more money than we even needed. Praise God, thank you. Great year, great year.

I took, I don't know what it was, five or six weeks off. I had a fantastic vacation and break with my family to work on writing a book on marriage with Gracie, got time with the kids. And while I was gone, attendance was great, giving was up, so apparently that's the key to all of our financial problems. And sometimes the accusation against a big church is, "Well, it's all about one man." It is, his name's Jesus and when I'm on vacation he's still here, everything's fine, and the other elders did a great job and it makes me very glad to be part of this team. So I want to publicly thank all the elders who covered the pulpit while I was out and just to let you know, it's a great team we've got and it's a great church we've got. And some of you were incredibly fruitful this year and we have been blessed by it, so thank you very, very, very much.

PARABLES

That being said, the theme of our study today is fruitfulness, and Jesus is going to hit this theme in a parable. So before we launch into Luke, let me do a little work on parables. By definition I will say that a parable is a small story that teaches a big idea. It's a small story that teaches a big idea.

Nearly all if not all cultures have parables. We have record of them going back four and a half thousand years in varying civilizations. And they're simple stories that are memorable and they're built for the ear and they work for the young and the simple but they also are complex enough that they can even stun those who are gifted and profound. And so stories help to shape our life and parables are small, brief stories that pack in big, life-changing meaning.

And when it comes to parables in the Bible, the Bible uses parables a great deal. The Bible uses parables in the Old Testament primarily in the prophets,

as well as places like Proverbs, and Jesus uses parables frequently. And they're not commonly used in the epistles and letters following him. But they tend to serve a prophetic function, meaning they tend to point out people's sin, call them to repentance and change. That's why in the Old Testament the book with the most parables is Ezekiel.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher who was a Christian, he had a great insight regarding parables. He said that parables sneak up on you. They're like ninja stories. All right, you don't seem them coming. Because if you're confronted with the truth—let's say for example you're in sin and you're confronted in the truth, you may bristle and fight and defend yourself, and a story, a good parable, sneaks up on you because you don't see it coming.

There's an example of this with a guy in the Bible named David. He was a king and the Bible says that he was a man after God's own heart. He was also a man after another man's wife. And he committed adultery and he stole another man's wife. And he was hard hearted, stiff necked, rebellious. We can assume that people had confronted him on his sin and the Holy Spirit had convicted him of his sin and he still wasn't repentant, so a friend came to him. And a friend told him a story, a parable.

He said, "Now, King David, imagine that there's a very powerful, mighty man who has many, many, many sheep. And there's another very poor and powerless man who has only one sheep. And the mighty man steals the one sheep from the poor man. What do you think of that?" David said, "That's an atrocity." His friend said, "That's you." And his heart was broken. He penned Psalm 51 in repentance of his sin. The story snuck up on him. The parable got him in a way that face-to-face confrontation wasn't working. The parable was able to get his heart, and that's the intention of the parables, to get our heart, to expose our sin, that God might change our life. That's the purpose and function of a parable.

Now, let's talk a little bit about Jesus' parables. Jesus' parables are the most famous stories in the history of the world. Jesus is the perfect storyteller. Even people who don't know Jesus, don't know anything of Christianity, they've heard about the Good Samaritan, they've heard about the Prodigal Son. These are parabolic stories that Jesus told a few thousand years ago that live on today.

Jesus' parables are short, anywhere from one to twenty-two verses. Depending upon which scholar you read, there are between maybe thirty-five and sixty-seven parables, depending upon how they define them. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, what is called the Synoptic Gospels, roughly 35 percent of Jesus' teaching is in parable form. He's telling stories.

So if you want to understand who Jesus is and how he teaches, you and I really need to understand parables. And I was thinking about this. In the history of my teaching, which is now fifteen years at Mars Hill Church since we started the core group to launch this church, I've not really ever taught on the parables and I haven't done a lot of work in the parables.

So I want to give you a little bit of background on the parables so that as you're reading ahead in your Bible, which I hope you would, and discussing the parables in your community group and with your family, you have an appreciation and understanding of them. After all, it's about a third of Jesus' teaching, so it's very significant and important.

And as we come to study Jesus' parables, we find that Luke is filled with parables from Jesus. In fact, two-thirds of all of Jesus' parables are in Luke. Eighteen parables of Jesus are unique to Luke, meaning they're not recorded anywhere else in the Bible. They're not recorded anywhere else in the world. So if we didn't have the gift of Luke's gospel, we'd be missing these great stories that Jesus told. Life-changing, earth-shattering, history-altering parables. And most of the parables happen between chapters 10 and 20 in Luke's gospel. That's exactly where we find ourselves.

Jesus has left the region of Galilee—fishermen, country folk, rural people, farmers. He is journeying over the course of a few months to Jerusalem, where he's ultimately going to suffer and die on the cross for our sins and rise as our savior. And along the way you'll see continually Jesus healing and teaching through the medium of parables. So this is going to be something that we study together in the ensuing months as we move toward the crucifixion of Jesus later in Luke's gospel.

INTERPRETING JESUS' PARABLES

That being said, I want to give you a few principles for interpreting parables in general and then we'll look at today's parable in particular. Now, when it comes to interpreting the parables, one thing I will say is that they are frequently abused and misunderstood. They are mistreated, misinterpreted, misapplied. So we have to be careful with them.

One way that this happens is that people will use the parables to teach doctrine. The parables are simple stories. They're not intended to introduce new doctrines. They illustrate, illuminate existing doctrines, they're extended analogies. So the Bible teaches a propositional truth claim and the parable illustrates it. It helps to expand it, illuminate it. It gives us new perspective on it.

And in that way, a parable functions like a good film. If you're highly visual, if you're artistic and creative, if you love story and narrative and plot line, particularly in film, you'll really appreciate the parables because they create another universe, another world. And from that world we get a new vantage point on our own. And we see ourselves and our world in a different light. That's the purpose of a parable, to help us to see our life in our world from another perspective through story.

Most of these stories include people. Most of these people in Jesus' parables are unnamed. In fact, with the exception of one parable in Luke 16, all of the parables have nothing but anonymous characters. We don't know their name. These are fictitious stories of fictitious people in ways that mirror reality, and so as we come to the story we're not trying to learn a new doctrine, but we're getting fresh insight and perspective on truth that the Bible teaches elsewhere.

And one of the ways we can most be served by studying the parables is figuring out in the story, “Who am I? Which character in the story am I?” and inserting ourselves so that we receive not just information but transformation, that we don’t enjoy just a good story, but we emotionally enter into it to see how God would want to change us through the telling of the story. And so we don’t use the parables to teach doctrine but to illustrate it.

Number two, if you would, consider a parable like a pitcher built to hold, let’s say, water. Jesus is the one who pours the meaning into the parable and as we study the parables we want to pour out the same meaning that Jesus poured in. So we need to consider the original hearers and the original audience, and the original context, the fact that these are simple stories for, what is commonly the case, simple people. We don’t want to pour our own meaning into Jesus’ story. Jesus pours in the meaning, we just want to faithfully pour it out.

I’ll give you a few ways to do that. There are a few questions as we’re studying these parables for the next few months together.

1. WHAT DOES THIS PARABLE TEACH ABOUT GOD AND HIS KINGDOM?

The first is, what does this parable teach about God and his kingdom? Jesus is King of Kings, Lord of Lords. He is eternally existed creator God. We have sinned against him. He came into history on a rescue mission. He lived without sin. He died for our sin. He rose as our savior. He’s ascended into heaven. He has a kingdom that never ends where there’s no death, where there is no sadness, where there is no enemy, and he ultimately will bring his kingdom to reside forever, crushing his enemies, blessing his friends. And sometimes we have a hard time getting our mind around this big concept of the kingdom of God, so Jesus comes and teaches the big concept of the kingdom of God with little parables and stories. So as we study the parables we’re learning about Jesus as king and we’re learning about Jesus’ kingdom.

2. WHAT QUESTION DOES IT ANSWER?

Number two, what question does it answer? Twenty-two of Jesus’ parables actually begin with or include a question. And then the story is the answer to the question. So to understand a parable we have to determine what the question is, either expressly stated or inferred through the story itself.

3. WHAT IS THE CLOSING PUNCH LINE?

Number three, what is the closing punch line? Every good joke has a good punch line. Every good parable has a good punch line. And that is the story goes on and then there’s a reveal at the end, just like a great movie has an inexplicable close where it all makes sense and all the lines of the story converge together into meaning. That’s the way the parables work. All right, if you’re into literature, if you’re into creativity and film and story, you’re going to love the parables. You creative types are going to have a blast. Read ahead, read ahead, read ahead, it’s all good. And there’s a closing punch line and all but nine of Jesus’ parables have a closing punch line that gives you the point of the story.

Some of them, like today’s, are left wide open. We don’t know what happened, there’s no resolution. What happened to the characters? And the point is then we are to insert ourselves in the story and say, “Well, I guess the story of my life could go good or bad. I have to write the ending for myself. What am I going to do? How will I respond?” And so it becomes very personal when that punch line is omitted.

4. WHAT DID JESUS WANT THE ORIGINAL HEARERS TO LEARN?

Number four, what did Jesus want the original hearers to learn? You can’t just read the story and begin in our world. You have to go all the way back culturally to the fact that Jesus is walking from one town to another. It’s going to take months. People are traveling with him. Some are coming out to see and hear them. Many of them are illiterate. Some of them are children. A handful are educated religious people. We’re talking about a diverse, ancient audience. What would they have originally and initially understood Jesus’ parable to mean? And then we understand that and we apply it principally to our own lives.

5. WHAT ACTION DOES JESUS EXPECT FROM ME OR FROM US?

Number five, lastly, what action does Jesus expect from me or from us? It’s not just about information, it’s about transformation. It’s not just about what we believe, it’s about how we behave. “Jesus, what do you want me to do, individually? My family, my community group, my campus, my church? What do you want us to do? What’s the call to action?”

So, for those of you who live a little too much in your mind, you would run down every potential rabbit trail of what the parable could mean and maybe even fall into the area of allegorizing and taking the simple story beyond its intention and trying to ascribe meaning to every detail, know when to stop interpreting and start obeying. At some point you stop trying to figure out what he was trying to say and you realize it was a simple statement to get you to get up and go do something. So you need to get up and obey.

THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE

Now, that being said, let’s look at the parable of the barren fig tree. Luke 13:6–9, “And he,” Jesus, “told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser,’” his gardener, “Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’” And he answered him, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’” That’s the simple story. That’s the whole story.

FRUITFULNESS

Here’s the question that is seeking to be answered by the parable: Does God care about results, yes or no? Yes, God cares about results. God cares

about effectiveness. God cares about performance. Here the word that encompasses all of that is “fruit,” “fruit.” God cares about fruitfulness. Fruitfulness here is good works. Good works, obedience, a changed life, living a kind of life that makes a difference, that when your life on the earth is done, people miss you because you were a gift to them. You were a channel of God’s grace to them. You provided wisdom or generosity or help or service or rebuke or encouragement. That you were giving. That you were fruitful. That your life counted. That you weren’t just a consumer, you were a producer. You didn’t just take from everyone and everything, but you gave and they were blessed by you.

And this is different than religion. Religion teaches that we’re saved by our fruit, that we’re saved by our good works, that if you live a moral life and you’re a good decent person that you will stand before God and he’ll find you pleasing in his sight in the end. Essentially the essence of all religion is the same: that you work hard, bear much fruit, God then judges on a curve and if you were better than most he finds you pleasing in his sight. We don’t believe that at all.

We don’t believe that we’re saved by our fruit, but rather we’re the fruit of the work of Jesus. Jesus lived the perfect life, not us. Jesus paid the penalty for sin on the cross so that we don’t have to. Jesus rose to give the gift we don’t deserve: salvation, eternal life, citizenship, and adoption into the family of God. But some of you have misunderstood Christianity. Some of you, particularly who were raised in the church or maybe gave your life to Jesus when you were young, you misunderstood the gospel. And you thought, “Belong to Jesus, give your life to Jesus, give your heart to Jesus, and when you die you get to go to heaven.” That’s almost true but it’s missing something called life.

It’s not about just belonging to Jesus and going to heaven. It’s about belonging to Jesus, living a fruitful life, and then going to heaven for an eternal reward. Your life counts, your life counts, your life matters. God has fruit for you to bear. He has good works for you to do. He has things for you to accomplish. Not so that you can become a Christian, but because you are. Not so that you’ll become pleasing in his sight, but because through Christ you already are.

Ephesians 2:8–10 says it this way, “We’re saved by grace through faith in Christ alone.” It’s a gift, we didn’t earn it, there’s nothing for us to boast about. That’s Ephesians 2:8–9, and it goes on then in Ephesians 2:10 to say, “To do the good works he prepared in advance for us to do.” So we’re not saved by good works, or to use the parable, our fruit, but we’re saved to our good works, to our fruitfulness. Once you meet Jesus, you’re supposed to become increasingly fruitful, a little more fruitful every year throughout the course of your life, demonstrating the character, love, affection, generosity of God because you’re in Christ. And Jesus says elsewhere, “If you abide in me, I’ll abide in you and you’ll bear much,” what? “Fruit.” Fruit that will last.

Now, we hit this time of year and in the providence of God we hit this portion of Luke and this is the time of year when everyone looks back on their year. And we look and examine those areas that we were not fruitful.

And so, to extend the analogy, Mars Hill is a vineyard. He’s a tree, she’s a tree, you’re a tree, I’m a tree, we’re all trees. This is God’s vineyard. We’re all fig trees. And it’s a good time for us to look back on the previous year and celebrate and rejoice. Say, “You know what? Insofar as a vineyard goes, what a great vineyard Mars Hill Church is. So much to celebrate, so much to rejoice in. Biggest harvest ever, praise God. Look at all the figs.”

And also then to look at our own life and ask, “How many figs were on my tree last year? How many figs were on my tree? Was I fruitful? Did I bear good fruit last year?” Some of you were very fruitful, praise God, by the grace of God you’ll be more fruitful this year we hope and pray. Some of you would say, “Well, there were areas of my life that were very fruitful.” And we’d say, “Rejoice in those, praise God for every fig.” But my assumption is, because we’re all sinners in a fallen world, there are at least a few branches on our tree that were not very fruitful last year.

And I’ve been praying for you that the Holy Spirit would highlight for you one particular part of your life that really needs to become more fruitful this year. It’s usually the place we make a resolution. A resolution really doesn’t work. Statistically they last two weeks, all right? We’re not talking about a resolution. What we’re talking about is a life of fruitfulness. They’re very different, they’re very different. A life of fruitfulness is in relationship with God out of love for God to bless and benefit and help other people like Jesus loves, blesses, and helps us.

So what is it for you? What is it for you that, with the departure of last year and the entrance of this year, that God the Holy Spirit is highlighting for you? Is it more fruit in your marriage? Is it more fruit in your studies in school? Is it more fruit in your employment? More fruit in your finances? More fruit in your ministry? More fruit in your Bible reading? More fruit in your difficult relationships that are perhaps even strained with friends? Your health, your weight, your wellness, what is it? I don’t know. But for this to be helpful for you, you need to determine where fruitfulness should be increasing and take the principles of this parable and apply them individually to that aspect of your life.

A FIGLESS FIG TREE

Now, as we come back to the story, we’re talking about a figless fig tree. That’s not very good. Fig trees—I’ve been in Israel. They grow pretty easily, they’re not hard to grow. They’re not difficult to grow. They kind of just grow. Kind of like sticker bushes in the Northwest, all right? Nobody says, “I’m a really good sticker bush grower.” We’re all like, “You know what, it’s not hard. All you have to do is just ignore your lawn and you’ll have a lot of sticker bushes.” And they just produce blackberries, right?

I didn’t know this, but in a lot of places in the U.S., they have a hard time growing sticker bushes and obtaining blackberries. We had people come into our neighborhood, visiting from out of state last year, and they said, “How did you do it?” “What do you mean?” “How did you cause all those blackberries to grow?” “We didn’t cause those blackberries to grow in the Northwest.” “You could just pull over on the side of the road and pick blackberries?” “Yes, they’re everywhere. All right, if we don’t do something there won’t be room for people. It’ll just be all sticker bushes, the whole state.” “Oh, we can’t get them to grow in our area!” “Oh, really? We can’t stop them from growing in our area!” Fig trees are like sticker bushes in and

around Israel. They just grow. They're kind of everywhere. They're not that difficult. Once they take root, they don't require a lot of maintenance.

And this man owns a vineyard in the parable and apparently he's got all of his trees numbered and he keeps coming back, three years in a row, to the same tree. He says, "That tree is three years fig-free. What a worthless tree." Now some of you are like that. Some of you have been sitting in Christianity or sitting in Mars Hill months, years, no figs. There's no fruit at all. Say, "What have you done?" "Nothing." "What have you given?" "Nothing." "How's it going?" "I don't know." You're fig-free, all right, you're fig-free.

HOPE FOR THE FRUITLESS

And there's a guy in the story who comes along and he says, "Cut it down!" Right? Basically then, "It's worthless, throw it in the fire." Okay? Now, as I read the story, that's me. There are three things I like: results, results, and results. Those are my three favorite things, okay? So I read the story, if the story would have read, "And the guy came and said, 'Cut it down! Why should it use up the ground? Why should we let it take resources?'" Some of you take resources, you just sit there. See, my first inclination is, "It's not working, shoot it! They're not working, shoot them!" Right? If the story would have stopped with, "Cut it down," I would have said, "That's a good story right there."

But you know what? God's not like me. God's not like—I mean, we're all glad for that. I'm glad, too! All right? Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Instead of, "Cut it down," God comes and says, "No, let's give it more time." Isn't that great? Some of you are here today and you wonder, "Is God angry at me? Is God mad at me? Is God done with me?" All right, your picture of God, he's just got an ax and a clipboard. "No figs? Cut it down and send them to hell!" Like, "Ah! Is it too late?" No, you're still breathing, God's not done with you. He loves you, there's hope for you.

See, God's not like me. God's holy, that means he's just different. He's good and he looks at some of you who maybe whole areas of your life, it's really been fruitless, I mean you really haven't accomplished what you were supposed to. God wants to encourage you today. God wants to love you today. God wants to serve you today. God wants to help you today. God wants you to hear the voice of Jesus saying, "No, we're not going to cut it down. I'm going to put more effort in." Isn't that amazing? Isn't that amazing?

This goes against prevailing business wisdom, by the way. I subscribe to the *Harvard Business Review* and I love business stuff. And usually it is, you know, "Hey, if it's not working, cut it. If it's working, put more resources into it." Here's the kingdom of God, it works upside down. God says, "If they're not working, be more gracious to them." "What?" "Yeah, they're going to need extra help, extra love, extra attention, extra affection, extra patience."

Now God does have a long wick, he's slow to anger. God's not going to put up with us all forever. Right, we're supposed to hustle up and be about his business. But you're getting a word of hope and encouragement here, that God—God's hope, God's heart, is not to cut you down and throw you in the fire. God's heart is to give you more time and to work on you and to work with you and to work through you because God wants you to share in the joy of being fruitful. Be encouraged, be hopeful, God is good. That's why I love this story. It's not what I was expecting.

HOW TO BE FRUITFUL

Now, let me say this as well, I want to give you a few principles for being fruitful, and I hope and I trust and I pray that your desire would be fruitfulness. Don't be ashamed of the areas that you are not bearing fruit. Be honest about them. Don't bristle and defend yourselves. Don't blame other people. Don't make excuses and don't settle for fruitlessness. By the grace of God, we can be fruitful. I'll give you some principles for how to do that.

1. CULTIVATE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

How to be fruitful, number one, cultivate your relationship with the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5:22 it speaks of the what of the Spirit? The fruit of the Spirit. How do you get fruit? Fruit—good works, changed character, new life, helpfulness to other people—comes out of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Friends, fruitfulness is not what we do for God. It's what God does for us. It's what he does in us and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, it's what he does through us.

So, again, don't look at God as a middle manager with a clipboard saying, "What have you done for me this year?" Look at God as a friend who's there to help, as a gardener who's willing to prune and serve and aid. And the seed of new life, and the seed of fruitfulness, is the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. That's the seed from which new life and fruitfulness come. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in every Christian.

See, the non-Christian lives a natural life by their own willpower and strength. That's why their resolutions don't work. Willpower only lasts so long. Instead, Christians live a supernatural life not by their own power but by the power of the Holy Spirit, that God is at work in us, that God is at work through us, so that we can be fruitful. So you want to cultivate your relationship with the Holy Spirit. Get to know and love and enjoy the Holy Spirit.

A couple simple ways to do this. Number one is regular Bible reading, regular Bible reading. Something that basically all Christians believe but not all Christians obey. God the Holy Spirit, through human authors, he wrote the sixty-six books of the Bible. And through the Scriptures, this is the primary means by which God speaks to us. And so when you pick up your Bible and you pray and ask God the Holy Spirit to meet you, you'll learn Scripture.

You can read the whole Bible, and this is a great time to commit yourself to it, fifteen to twenty minutes a day, you read the whole Bible in a year. You can do it. Some of you have, do it again, praise God. Some of you haven't, you need to.

This last year my eleven-year-old son and my thirteen-year-old daughter both did. They both did, my thirteen-year-old daughter, the year before she read the whole English Standard Version of the Bible, this year she read the whole ESV translation of the Bible in the study Bible format with all the notes. With all the notes. She reads a little bit in the morning, a little bit in the evening. She read through the whole Bible this year. My eleven-year-old

son read through the New International Version of the Bible this year.

I really want you to read through the whole Bible this year. Get an app that will do it, mark it out in your Bible, go old school, use something called a “bookmark,” the second half of which is fantastic word. You can use something like that—you can use something like that to just get you reading, right?

So, through Scripture we cultivate our relationship with the Holy Spirit by listening to God, and we talk to God through prayer. So praying to God, beginning your day in prayer, praying over your decisions, asking God for wisdom, asking God for help, and then seeing God answer prayers.

One of the things we do at the Driscoll dinner table is we have a notebook and we write in prayer requests for family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates. And when prayers are answered we check them off and we recount how God hears and answers prayers. We have pages and pages and pages of prayers and one of the things we love to do when we have people over for dinner, sometimes when we start our prayer time, if they're in the book we'll pull it out and say, “Look, here you are. We prayed for you and God answered that prayer.” We've seen people cry at our dinner table.

Pray, pray for people, pray for yourself, pray for your needs. That's how we communicate with God and that's how you cultivate your relationship with the Holy Spirit, listening to God, talking to God. That could be plugging into Mars Hill, joining a community group, getting involved with God's people, having the Holy Spirit minister to you through the community of God's people.

All right, what do you need to do, how do you need to reorganize and reorient your life to be filled with the Holy Spirit? And this includes being sensitive to the Holy Spirit. When he convicts you of sin, stop and listen. Don't quench, grieve, resist, fight. When he lays something on your heart, go with it. All right, be led, filled, directed by the Holy Spirit. That will cultivate fruitfulness in your life.

2. REPENT OF SINS OF COMMISSION AND OMISSION.

Number two, repent of sins of commission and omission. Sins of commission are the occasions when we do what we're not supposed to do. Omission is when we don't do what we're supposed to do. Much of our fruitlessness or our lack of fruitfulness is the result of sins of omission. So repent of your sins of commission, meaning if you're doing something you're not supposed to be doing, stop doing it by the grace of God. Stop doing it.

But what about those things that you should be doing that you're not? I'll give you an example. You may say, “I didn't steal any money last year.” That would be a sin of commission, you're not supposed to steal. What about your sin of omission? Were you generous? “No.” Okay. “Well, I didn't hurt anybody!” Yeah, but did you help anybody? “Oh yeah.” See, our goal is not just to abstain from evil, but to be fruitful. So it's looking at those areas of your life, saying, “Yeah, last year I didn't do this, I didn't do this, I didn't do this. There were some things that, yeah, I was supposed to do and I didn't do them.” All right, those things that you neglected, they reduced your fruitfulness. So repent of what you weren't supposed to do and did do and what you were supposed to do and didn't do.

3. COUNT YOUR FIGS.

Additionally, another principle for fruitfulness, number three, count your figs, count your figs. Now, I'll extend the analogy. This guy owns a vineyard, apparently he's got all the trees numbered and he keeps an annual accounting of all of the trees. And he goes to tree number twenty-seven and says, “Tree number twenty-seven has had zero figs three years running.”

Some of you, your big problem is you don't count your figs. You've got to measure, count. Some of you are naturally administratively gifted and organized. You're so freakishly tidy, you actually need to calm down, okay? But some of you need to get a label maker and you need to get a plan, right? You need to put some plans together.

Let's say, for example, you want to lose weight this year and you want to be healthy. First thing you need is a scale. “How many figs do I weigh? Okay, how many figs do I weigh? I got to count my figs.” And then you got to read the boxes and labels. “How many calories, how many figs am I eating?” You've got to track it.

How about time? How many of you are perennially late? You're always, or often, late? You know what you need? You need to track time. You need to count it. You need to measure it. “How long does it take to go somewhere? Why am I always late?” And I'll tell you what won't work, setting all your clocks to different times. I married that girl. I love her but I don't understand this. She's like, “Well, I'm always late so I changed all the clocks.” Well, now you're late and confused. Like, that didn't fix anything. Set all the clocks to the same time and then count time and show up on time, or early.

All right, how many of you, the issue really is money, where you're like, “I exceed my budget. I get upside down. I'm in debt, then I'm not generous, everything's—” You know what you need? Some sort of accounting software and a budget. You got to count your figs. “How many figs do I have coming in? How many figs do I have going out? How many figs go to God? How many figs go to the poor? All right, how many figs go to, you know, the cable company. What am I doing with all of my figs?” You got to learn to count your figs.

Some of you say, “I don't like numbers. I'm not good with numbers.” You got to learn to count your figs. You won't make changes in your life unless you're tracking it, keeping an accounting and a reckoning of it. That's the point of the parable. He's got an idea of where his figs are coming from and where there is fruitlessness.

4. MEASURE FRUITFULNESS, NOT BUSYNESS.

Number four, measure fruitfulness, not busyness. This one's huge. Some of you say, “I'm busy! I'm active! I'm so busy, I'm committed to every—” but are you fruitful? There's a big difference between busyness and fruitfulness. Some people, they are filled with coffee. They're returning e-mails,

talking on the phone, texting while they're driving, doing their make-up and their hair while doing Pilates on their way to work. I mean, they're multi-taskers, they're busy, they're active, they're rushed. They're always late, they're not emotionally present when they're there with you. They're taking calls over dinner, I mean they—stuff's falling through the cracks. They're not sleeping enough, they're stressed out and shaking. "I'm so busy!" And what they want is compassion. What they need is fruitfulness. Some of you need to learn to say, "I can't do that, I can't do that, I can't do that. I need to see three things through to completion rather than seven things through to incompleteness. I need to be fruitful, not just busy."

I'll give you an illustration from a cage fight. Back in the old pride fighting days, which cage fighting was in Japan. It was a big deal. And they had the most magnificent epic entrances for the fighters. The fireworks would go off and this huge screen would go up and the fighters would come down this walkway toward the cage and they'd have a whole posse and hip-hop dancers and music and costumes and it was awesome.

And this—I remember this one fight, this guy's coming down the ramp and he is busy. He is dancing. He's screaming. He's banging his chest. He's very active. I mean, this guy's just shaking. He gets in the cage, he's running laps in the cage. And then his opponent comes out and it looks like somebody woke this guy up from a nap and he needed a cup of coffee and he didn't even want to be there. He just walked, no fly girls, no posse. Nothing with rims, nothing. Just him walking down this walkway, this ramp toward the ring. And he's like, "Ah," he's just kind of—the guy is barely awake.

And he gets into the ring and he sort of meanders to the middle and the other guy's running around the ring, "Argh!" And then they finally come together and the one guy's shaking and looking him in the eye and talking trash. And the one guy who's kind of asleep, he's like, "Mm-hmm, whatever." And then they come out, they touch gloves, and this one guy dances and he's screaming and he's, "Argh!" yelling. And the other guy punches him and knocks him out.

I remember watching the fight thinking, "I want to be that guy. I want to be that guy." Because the one guy, if his family asked him, "How'd it go?" "I was really busy today." The other guy would be like, "I threw a punch and then I went home. And I knocked the other guy out." And the truth is, so many of you keep getting knocked out—you're not focused. You're not present. You don't have a plan. You don't have a budget. You don't have a schedule. You don't have priorities. You're just busy.

Busyness and fruitfulness are two different things. Some of the most fruitful people I know are also some of the most present, focused, relaxed people I know. They don't waste their energy on things that they shouldn't waste their energy on. They focus it. "Need to love Jesus, need to love my spouse, need to love my kids, need to help the poor, need to serve those in need. Going to do that and not going to waste all my time and energy on everything else." Don't exchange busyness for fruitfulness. Don't exchange busyness for fruitfulness.

5. LEARN FROM FRUITFUL PEOPLE.

Number five, learn from fruitful people. Mars Hill, what a gift some of the people in this church are. Some of the people in this church are incredibly fruitful, wise, gifted, skilled, talented, competent, and able. There are some amazing people in our church. They have some skills in areas that would tremendously benefit you. This is where community and community groups are huge.

So here's what you need to do. Find people who are fruitful where you're not very fruitful. And don't call them up and say, "I would like a mentor. Can we meet every Tuesday for the rest of my life?" Because they'll say, "I'm busy. I'm busy." What you need to do is figure out where you lack fruit, find someone who is fruitful, and then start recording.

And I'm someone who takes notes on everything. I try to be ever present, paying attention in my life, making notes. Say, "You know if I could meet with them." Maybe they've got a great marriage. They've been married for years. And you say, "Man, I would like to have a marriage like theirs. I bet you they could teach me a lot. What questions would I ask them? What things in our marriage would I want their perspective on?" They raised amazing kids who totally love them and love Jesus. How do you do that? You meet a mom, she's got her act together. House is organized, everything's got a system, kids are always wearing pants, it's amazing. And you say, "How does she do that? How does she keep all of her complex life in order?" You meet someone who's good with investments and they know how to make it through tough economic times, whatever it is. Somebody who really knows their Bible and is really wise and reads the right books and listens to good teaching and they have lots of biblical wisdom. You say, "Man, if I could get a little time with them, what would I ask them? What would I want to know from them?"

See, wisdom is in the Bible first and foremost. It's also in books. And it's also in God's people. So you go to those people and you extract that wisdom as a gift. But to do so, number one, prayerfully consider what questions you'll ask in advance. Write those questions down. Don't waste their time, it's a treasure. Number two, humbly ask them. "Could I get thirty minutes of your time?" "Could I get sixty minutes of your time? I won't waste it. I've got a couple questions I would really like your help on so that I could become more fruitful in my life. And I promise you if you tell me things I'll do them. I will not be a waste of time." And then, if you ask them, what do you think they will say? "Sure." Fruitful people love to help make other people fruitful.

The most fruitful person that I have personally ever met in my life goes to Mars Hill. And a few years ago I hit the wall, I wasn't doing well, things weren't working. And I didn't know how to become more fruitful. And this person who's very fruitful and very godly and very generous and I really love him, they're more fruitful than me and more calm and relaxed and easy going and happy. And I thought, "How do you do both?" Because that was a mystery to me. So I met with him and I had a list of questions, and I don't know, maybe it was an hour or two. I didn't track time. I would take as much as they would give me. They just told me, "Here's what I do. Here's how I think. Here's what I've learned. Here are mistakes I've made. Here's how I put my life together. You know, here are parts of Scripture that have helped me. Here are books that have helped me. Here are systems." I just took notes, page after page after page. I typed all those up. To be honest with you, that's a file I go back to over and over and over. I have for, I don't

know, four or five years. It's been life changing. One hour with the right person asking the right questions can actually change a whole course of life. So, learn from fruitful people. Learn from fruitful people.

6. BE AN ACTIVIST, NOT A FATALIST.

Number six, be an activist, not a fatalist. Some of you have a theology of fatalism. "God's sovereign! God does whatever he wants! It's unavoidable, there's nothing we can do!" And you use that as an excuse to be unfruitful. You're not trying hard. You're not doing your best. You're not making plans. You're not giving generously. You're not staying busy.

God's sovereignty and human responsibility are like two pedals on a bike, they work together. God initiates, we respond. God gets his work done through his people. He's sovereign over the ends, what happens, and the means, how it gets done. If you only have one pedal, "It's all me!" Well, you forgot about God and you're starting to act like God. If, "It's all God!" then you forget the fact that God works through us. Yeah, God's going to get all his figs. And some of them are going to be on our tree. Don't have a theology of fatalism. Have a theology of activism. Stay busy, be fruitful, do good works. Make your life count. Don't waste your days.

7. TURN YOUR PAINS INTO PLANS.

And, number seven, turn your pains into plans. I am a furious note taker. I always carry a little notepad with me and I try to take notes. And when something doesn't work or it hurts, I want to make a plan to fix it. Now let me say this, some pain in life you can't avoid. It is what it is. A lot of pain in life, a lot of pain in your life, you can fix it. You can fix it. And so it's turning your pain into your plan.

So for me, when we go on vacation as a family, I'm taking notes. Not continually, but I'll jot things down. "This really worked! This did not work at all." And I put them together as a file on my laptop under "vacations" so when it comes time to plan a family vacation I pull it up and I've got years of learning. Because you know what happens? You go on vacation, something doesn't work, it's a total bomb, you forget about it, the next year, oh, you didn't have the right plan, it's a bad vacation again. You come home more tired from vacation than before you went.

Some of you just came through the holidays and it was painful. It didn't work. You say, "It didn't work." What are you going to do? "I don't know." I'll tell you what, within two weeks you won't even remember why it didn't work. So write it down now.

Christmas 2009 didn't work. It didn't work. My daddy dates with my daughters got rushed. I didn't get an away night with my wife to really connect with her and make some great memories. We didn't have our schedule put together and it didn't really work. And at the end of the holidays I felt like I missed it. It wasn't horrible, but it wasn't wonderful. I missed the opportunity to make memories with my wife and kids. And so I made notes and I made a plan. I put it in my laptop, and this year I pulled it up a couple of months before Christmas. And we put it all together, Gracie and I did.

And honestly, 2010, best Christmas season of my whole life. I got a whole daddy date with Ashley, a whole day, it was fantastic. I got a whole daddy date day with Alexie, it was great. I got guy time with the boys, I got away in the snow with Grace for an overnight. It was amazing, it was amazing. Christmas worked. It wasn't painful, it was wonderful. I feel encouraged, I feel refreshed, I feel hopeful.

So I spent a little time working on my life, not just in it, putting together my schedule for this year, my travel schedule for the next eighteen months, my preaching schedule for the next twenty-four months. Plans for Mars Hill, plans for my family, trying to tee it all up. Yeah, there will be adjustments, nothing's perfect. I sat down with Gracie and we took a whole day, just us, laptops, paperwork, put it all together.

What's an ideal week look like? What do you need from me? What's working? What's not working? How can we help? How do we need to adjust the kids' chores? How did the holidays work? What do we need for vacations this year? What are we going to do for the kids' birthdays? What about sports? You know the complexity of life. And Gracie and I spent a whole day putting the year together. We made a plan. We made a plan. And by the grace of God, we'll take notes along the way and we'll make adjustments and next year will be better than the year that we're looking forward to right now, I hope and pray, by the grace of God.

Turn your pains into plans. Learn from it, do something different. If your thing's not working, try something else. We do this with our kids as well. What worked for you on vacation? What are you learning in school? How could we serve you better? Who do we need to serve as a family? We set goals like how much can we give this year, because for twenty years Grace and I have set a goal to give more every year than we did the year before, and God's always answered that prayer. But you got to have a plan.

I didn't know this for years. It hurt my wife, it hurt my kids, it hurt my health, it hurt our church. All right, I want to be fruitful. I want my family to be fruitful. I want our church to be fruitful. I want you to be fruitful. And one big helpful idea is to turn your pains into plans. This is the time of year to do that. A resolution doesn't accomplish anything without a plan and the power of the Holy Spirit.

8. USE YOUR MANURE.

Lastly, my favorite point of all, use your manure. This is the best point of all. All right, I will use a—make sure I get the right bowl, okay, here we go. What are these? These are Fig Newtons. Did you get one on the way in? How many of you walked in like, "What kind of weird cookie cult have I walked into? They're handing out Fig Newtons in the foyer." I love Fig Newtons. I have since I was a little boy. Eat them by the sleeve, fantastic. Love Fig Newtons. Jesus' parable is about what? Figs. Every time you eat a Fig Newton, and I would recommend fairly frequently, think about Luke 13:6-9, the parable. And every time you see Fig Newtons at the store, remember Jesus. And, "Yeah, Jesus wants me to be fruitful, and he uses the analogy of a fig." Now, this could be a while. I might eat a few more figs.

In the analogy and in the parable, Jesus says to get figs, first you need manure. Now if I came to you today and I said, "Would you like some Fig Newtons?" You would say, "Why yes." "Oh, and by the way, it comes with manure." You'd say, "Can I just—can I just get the Fig Newtons? I would like the Fig Newtons without the manure." But here's the point of the simple analogy and the parable. It takes manure to get a fig. Amen?

Okay, now let me tell you how this applies to your life. You look at your life right now, where's the manure? Where's the manure? Is it in your marriage? You say, "Yeah, my marriage is a pile. I got a lot of manure there. Yeah." Is it your finances? "Oh, yeah, my finances. I go to the ATM, and I hit the button and manure comes out, not money. I just—that's all that's going on." How about your walk with God? You say, "Yeah, this last year, woo-hoo. Yeah, a lot more manure than figs."

All right, and some of you, when you get a lot of manure in your life, and sometimes it's suffering, it's hardship, it's pain, it's loss, it's failure, it's trauma, it's trial. You know what? It just stinks. That's what it—it just stinks. And some of you will look at it and you'll say, "You know what, God? How come you don't love me? How come you're not good to me? How come you don't care about me? How come you're not helping me? You know, this part of my life, or maybe my whole life, it's just manure!" God would say, "I love you so much that I gave you that manure. And I'm digging around the roots and I'm putting the manure on your roots because I have a whole lot of figs in your future."

So it takes a while to go from manure to fruit. It takes a little while. Do you know who the best counselors are we have found in Redemption Groups for rape victims? Who do you think the best counselors are for rape victims? Those who have been raped. Those people who have the best insight to help someone dying of cancer is someone who has battled cancer. Those people who have the greatest insights on marriage are those whose marriage has endured some really rough water. Those people who have tremendous insights, wisdom, gifts to give, generally speaking, it started for them with a lot of manure in their life. Something painful, stinky, hard, difficult, disappointing, maybe even embarrassing. But by the grace of God, you don't waste your manure. You use your manure and eventually there's a harvest. There's fruitfulness.

I want you to be encouraged. I want you to be hopeful. I want you not to give up. I do want you to turn your pain into plan and I do want you to use your manure. Whatever right now stinks the most in your life could be something that God uses for an enormous harvest. And some of you say, "You have no idea how much manure I have." Well then you have no idea how many figs are going to come. God apparently has a big harvest for you in fruitfulness and righteousness and ministry and testimony and service. He does. He does! He's not angry and looking at you today saying, "I'm here to cut you down." He's here to say, "I have great hope for that little tree and what stinks today will be joy tomorrow and fruitfulness if you will use it."

And we want to help you. We do want to help you. Community groups, get connected. Redemption Groups for those of you who are addicted or abused, get connected. Be reading your Bible, praying. Work on your plans. Fill out a visitor card when we take the offering. Let us know who you are, how we can help you. And let us know what gifts you have to give us. Some of you are fruitful, and say, "I play drums. I'm a financial coach. I can help people out." Great, let us know how we can serve you, how you can serve us. Number two, you can also drop by the connect desk on the way out. Say, "You know what, I want to plant my tree in this vineyard. Get me plugged in." Number three, you can register on The City on your way out, which is our online social networking tool. Plant your tree in our vineyard. Give us the fruit of your life. Let us give you the fruit of our life and together this next year, by the grace of God, will be the biggest harvest we've ever seen.

I hope you're encouraged. I come with tremendous hope for us as a people. This has been a great vineyard. It's produced a lot of figs. And some of you God has wonderful things in store for your future. I don't want you to lose hope because you've not been fruitful in the past and I don't want you to lose hope because right now it just smells like manure on your roots. Amen? I hope you're encouraged. I'm encouraged for you. Jesus loves you and so do we.

Father God, I pray against the enemy, his servants, their works and effects. Jesus, we thank you. You're the master perfect storyteller. Thank you for this simple little story and thank you for the rest of the stories we'll be studying in Luke. I pray for those, Lord God, who would look back on the year and say, "It was fruitful, there is a lot to rejoice in." Wonderful, we rejoice with them. For those who would look back, Lord God, and there was a part of their life or maybe the majority of their life that was not very fruitful, God, I pray that they wouldn't be condemned but convicted, that they wouldn't lose hope, that they'd borrow the hope that we have for them, that I have for them. And God, I pray for us individually and corporately that this would be a fruitful year for us. Not just a busy year, but a fruitful year. So Holy Spirit, we invite you to make us like Jesus, in whose name we pray, amen.

[End of Audio]

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.