

Yes, But How?
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March 7, 2010 Lent 3C
Based on Luke 13:1-9

When I was in seminary, my professor assigned a new book for us to read mid-semester. Since my book fund was already drained for the semester, I asked an upper classman if I could borrow his book to read. He was kind enough to oblige.

As I started reading the book, I kept finding the letters YBH written in the margin. I couldn't figure out what those letters meant. And so when I returned the book, I asked him what the letters YBH meant. My classmate told me that wherever he read something that he knew to be true, but didn't know how to go about making it happen in his life, he would always write, "YBH" which stood for "Yes, but how?"

Think about it: those three letters could be written on the margin of our life.

I should take better care of myself. Yes, but how?

I should be more loving to my spouse. Yes, but how?

I should be more supportive of my friends. Yes, but how?

I should devote more time to God in prayer and Bible study. Yes, but how?

As your pastor, I should be out doing more visitation. Yes, but how? We're in the middle of Lent! Each week I'm planning two services, and writing two sermons.

Taking better care of ourselves, being more loving, devoting more time to God – we know that those are all wonderful things. But often times we don't know how to make it all work, or we struggle to devote enough time to the most important things in life.

Most of us aren't new to the Christian faith. We know exactly the kind of life we ought to live. We have the best of intentions to always be faithful to Jesus. But then life happens, and we wonder, "Will I ever get it right? Will I ever reach a point where I start making all the right decisions? Or will I just continue to do things the way I've always done them?"

This morning we hear Jesus tell a parable about a fig tree. If you ask me, it's not a very comforting story. A gardener plants a fig tree, and after three years it still has yet to produce a single fig. The fig tree is not doing what it is supposed to do. A fig tree's one and only purpose is to produce figs. But this certain tree remains barren, year after year.

Understandably, the gardener wants to cut it down. It's just taking up room and stealing all of the nutrients from the other fruit-bearing trees. Cut it down, the man says. That suggestion should make us nervous, especially when I tell you that the barren fig tree represents us.

If we take an honest look at our life, we realize that we don't always do what we are supposed to do. At times, in the eyes of God, I bet our lives look barren, fruitless.

Cut it down, the man says. No! Please! Don't do it! We beg for a second chance. We promise that we'll bear fruit by next season. And so the gardener, hearing our plea for mercy, gives us one more chance. "Whew!" we say. "That was close. We were almost a goner!"

We think we've dodged a bullet, but then we hear the words, "We'll give it one more year. If it's not bearing fruit by then, then we'll cut it down!"

And once again we start sweating bullets. Yes, we make a promise to ourselves that we will stop sitting idle and start bearing fruit for the Lord. But we also know that even the best of intentions don't always bring about fruit. We don't always measure up to God's glorious standard. We know that God commands us to bear fruit, but we are left asking ourselves, "Yes, but how?"

By telling the parable of the barren fig tree, Jesus is calling us to repent of our selfish, self-centered ways and to start bearing the good fruit of God's kingdom – the fruit of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked; the fruit of offering God 10% of our income; the fruit of loving our enemies, praying for those who mistreat us.

Our desire is always to bear good fruit, is it not? We want to do what God asks of us – we really do! But for some reason, the branches of our lives aren't always as fruitful as they should be. It is Jesus' expectation that our branches always be overflowing with fruit, which leaves us with the question: "Yes, we know; but how, Lord?"

St. Paul experienced this same feeling of "I want to, but I don't always" in his life. In Romans, Paul writes, "I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. Oh, how miserable I am!" he concludes. "Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"

Paul fully recognizes that we often times do not bear fruit for the Lord. Our branches are often barren. We do nothing to help us cultivate a stronger relationship with Jesus. We fizzle out as we try to live out the truths of Scripture in our daily lives. And all too often we are OK with barren branches. We sit barren, idle, for years without it even bothering us.

This is why the Lenten season is so important. Lent forces the issue of us taking an honest look at our lives and repenting of those areas which are barren. Lent affords us the opportunity to confess our lack of fruitfulness, to admit our apathy in not producing fragrant fruit that brings glory to God.

“Repent,” Jesus says. “Acknowledge your sinfulness.” That’s the first step in drawing closer to God. And yet how difficult it is for us to admit that we have made a real mess of our lives.

We have learned the hard way that if we want to get ahead in this world and be respected by others, then we have to conceal our shortcomings and put on a good front. We have to make our branches appear fruitful, whether they are or not.

But God sees right through the façade. When we stand before the all-knowing God, we have no case, no worthy excuses. Instead of trying to justify ourselves, God just wants us to come clean, to disclose the sin within us, to admit that we have failed. John the apostle reminds us of this when he writes in the Scriptures, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not us.”

No matter who we are, we all have one thing in common. We are sinful creatures. With a smirk on his face, Mark Twain once wrote, “Humans were made at the end of the week, when God was tired.” We have a habit of veering off the designated paths God has shown to us. We disregard God’s instructions for life.

So is there any hope for us? The Bible assures us there is! But how? We need to continue reading what the apostle John says. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. **BUT** if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just, will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

That **BUT** never sounded so good. **BUT** if we confess our unfruitfulness to God, God who is good and merciful will forgive us and offer us a second chance to bear fruit. To use the imagery found in the fig tree parable today: If we confess our sins, God will transplant us from the hard, barren soil into rich, fertile soil, equipping us to grow in the Lord and bear fruit for his kingdom.

If our guilty conscience haunts us, if we grieve the thought of not living up to God’s expectations, then confession is exactly what we need. Confession is the first step in making some real change in our lives. As one author put it, “we might be willing to admit to a blemish or two on our moral complexion, but none of us wants to admit that our sinfulness may require reconstructive surgery!”

If we are not bearing fruit, then reconstructive surgery is exactly what we need. The parable today teaches us that God is not content to just let us sit idle without bearing fruit. Bearing fruit is an expectation that God has for us.

God even sent us a model of what fruitfulness looks like. The model, of course, is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the tree of life that bears enough fruit for the whole world. Christ grounds himself in God so fully and so deeply that he is able to feed all of humanity with an amazingly sweet, satisfying fruit – fruit that satisfies us both physically and spiritually.

Instead of sampling the forbidden fruit of sin that Adam and Eve helped themselves to, Jesus chose to eat the fruit of life – fruit that was ripened on the old rugged cross of Calvary. If we are willing to accept the life-giving fruit Jesus offers us, we will experience the freedom and renewal that comes through the mercy and forgiveness of God. And as we eat of the fruit of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we will find the tree of our own life bearing fruit as well. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God brings forth fruit from the barren branches of our lives as a sign of his glory and power.

I spoke earlier of how St. Paul mourned his sinful, human condition. He wrote, “I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. Oh, how miserable I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?”

He then answers his own question: “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The death of Jesus Christ is the solution to our sinfulness. Jesus Christ is the answer to the question, “Yes, but how?”

How do we get our priorities in order?

How do we know that God loves us unconditionally?

How do we fully love our family and friends?

How do we learn to cultivate a prayer life with God?

The answer to all of these questions is the same: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the key to living a life worthy of our calling as children of God.

Jesus Christ is the only one who is able to bring forth abundant fruit from the barren branches of our lives.

Jesus Christ is the only one who can free us to be the people God created us to be.

So repent, Jesus says. Confess your sin and brokenness so that the power of God’s love and mercy can take root within you. Allow God to cultivate the soil of your soul, that you might bear much fruit to the glory of God.

Let it be so. Amen.