

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 21

The purpose of blessings

How do we respond to the life God has given us? One important aspect of our response is a willingness to help other people. The good things God gives us should be used to serve others.

People often ask why God allows trials. When we are in a trial, we want to know why. Why has this pain come upon us? Why me? We may even stay awake at night thinking about it, praying about it.

But have we ever considered why God allows blessings? We usually don't lie awake at night wondering why God has allowed such a thing to happen to us. We act like it's normal for God to give us a good life. We usually accept these blessings, give thanks and enjoy them without a lot of further thought.

But we really do not deserve blessings, so when they come, we ought to ask, Why? God doesn't owe us anything. He has not promised us health and wealth. Yet every one of us has blessings, and we need to ask, Lord, why has this happened to me?

What is normal?

The parable of the fig tree in Luke 13 gives us an illustration about blessings. If we start in verse 1 we will see the context of the parable: "There were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."

And it seems that the people assumed the victims were somehow more sinful than others. That was the thought Jesus answered in verse 2: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse

sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

The common assumption was that people got what they deserved, that pain and suffering are a result of sin. But the cause is not always the sin of the people who are suffering. Sin hurts innocent people—that is one reason that God hates it so much—so people who suffer are often suffering because of someone else's sin.

The people of Jerusalem used an example of Galileans who suffered. Now Jesus uses an example of Jerusalemites who suffered: "Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (verses 4-5).

In this fallen world, disasters are normal, and our response to them should be repentance. That is the context of the parable of the fig tree.

A tree with a purpose

Then Jesus told the parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down'" (verses 6-9).

The owner could have used the space for

grapevines, but he wanted figs, so he planted a fig tree. But the tree wasn't doing what it was supposed to do. The owner made a business decision: Get rid of it. It's just taking up space.

Jesus was not giving us agricultural advice. The parable is not really about trees—it's about people. When Jesus first gave the parable, he was talking about the Jewish people. But the same principle applies to Christians today. God wants people to bear fruit—good results. He wants them to love him, but most people are just taking up space, doing nothing in particular. But God did not create us to do nothing—he created us to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). Good works are not for our own benefit, just as fruit does not benefit the tree that produced it—good works are to help others.

God doesn't want us doing nothing. He made us for more than being selfish. We are to love our neighbors. That means doing something. It means producing fruit. It means making a difference in other peoples' lives. Of course, we can't fill every need of every person. But each of us is able to help some people in some ways. Are we a blessing to other people?

Blessings for the tree

But Jesus also offers forgiveness. The parable doesn't end with the removal of the fig tree. It has a different twist, and that's what we need to focus on now. The vinedresser asks for patience and mercy. Wait, he says, let me give the tree some special attention. Let me dig around it and put in some manure to fertilize the tree. And if it still doesn't produce any fruit, then we'll cut it down.

The vinedresser is saying, in effect, Let me give this tree lots of blessings, and if it doesn't start producing fruit after it has been blessed, then we'll get rid of it. So, if we have blessings in our lives, perhaps we should consider them as fertilizer given to us so that we will bear some fruit and do some good and not just take up space.

We have all had times in our lives when we have been unfruitful. God is patient and merciful. He gives us blessings anyway, with the hope that we

will begin to bear fruit again. We deserve punishment, but sometimes we get grace and blessings, and the purpose is that we bear fruit. Blessings afford us an opportunity to be a blessing to others.

Can't judge by appearances

If someone saw the tree being fertilized, he might assume that the tree was especially good to deserve such treatment. But the truth would be the opposite. In this case, the tree with blessings is the bad tree.

Likewise, a person who is being richly blessed may not be particularly righteous. Maybe the person is, but maybe not — the blessings may have been given because the person was unfruitful. He or she is being fertilized in the hope that those blessings will help the person become a blessing to other people.

This parable challenges some common assumptions. People don't always get what they deserve. People who have trials may have been fruitful Christians. It may be that they are simply being pruned for a while to help them produce more fruit in the future.

And on the other hand, when we are blessed with abundance, we would like to think that we are being rewarded for good behavior. Perhaps, but it's not necessarily so.

Even worse, when we have blessings we find it easy to look down on people who have trials. But the well-fertilized tree is not necessarily better than the vines that have been pruned. It may even be worse. We cannot judge by appearances.

Blessings are for sharing

It is easy for people to receive blessings and enjoy them for themselves. Ironically, though, blessings can distract us from God and into ourselves. But blessings are given to us so that we might produce more fruit, and if we don't, there is a word of warning here. Blessings are a sign of God's grace, that is, his goodness to us even though we don't deserve it, not a reward for good works. We

need to use them in the way that God wants.

Grace is given to us so that we will bear fruit for God and for other people, so that we might help others and become a blessing to others. Grace enables us to become a conduit of God's love and grace and blessing to others.

Just as he has loved us, we should also love others. Just as he has been forgiving toward us, we should be forgiving toward others. Just as he has been generous with us, we should be generous with others.

Let us think about how we might use our physical blessings for God's glory. We all have spiritual blessings, too, and we need to think about how God may want us to bear fruit with those, to use them for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Blessings are wonderful, and as God's people, we can learn how to share them with others, just as God shares his good gifts with us.

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