

Keep your lamp burning: a picture of faithfulness

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Today marks the end of our series we've been calling *Keep your lamp burning*. Open your Bibles to Luke 13:10 and notice the way vs. 10 starts by announcing a change in the setting; "Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath." That verse begins a new section with a new setting and theme. The beginning of our section began in 12:1 where Jesus was teaching his disciples with a huge crowd of onlookers pressing in to hear, too; it sounds like he was in some sort of outside setting if so many people were there to hear. This means that what we are going to read today is the concluding thought, the summary, of Jesus' emphasis to you and me to be ready in our faith.

I don't know about you, but when I conclude my thoughts or messages with, say, my wife or my boys I often give a concluding word. It might be something that I think is really important that I don't want them to forget. When my boys started driving I would often say right before they'd leave, "Don't be in a hurry." When you're in a hurry you're more likely to speed and get into an accident. If my boys go to a job interview I might say right before they leave, "Smile. Give a firm handshake. Look them in the eye. Tell them you have an awesome dad." You know, all the things that help you land the job. That's kind of how you should read this passage this morning. Jesus is giving his disciples (and us, his readers) one last, "Don't forget," or "Make sure you remember to...." He's spent all this time telling us to be ready, to stay alert. Luke 13:6-9 is Jesus saying, "One last thing!" Let's read our passage (READ).

Jesus finishes by teaching a parable; a parable is teaching device, a story, that's meant to emphasize one, big idea. What do you think the one, big idea is? A man with a fig tree went looking to collect fruit from it, but didn't find any. He's a little put out; he says, "I've been coming for 3 years and no figs! Let's cut this thing down." But his gardner intervenes and says, "Give it another year. I'll give it more attention. I'll use fertilizer; maybe I'll prune it some. Hopefully, it's producing fruit then. If it's not then, I'll cut it down." I think you could conclude that the big idea *be fruitful*. Make sure you're producing fruit, doing good works, for Jesus.

This theme of fruitfulness is all over the Gospel of Luke. It starts in Luke 3 when John the Baptist shows up preaching a message of repentance. Imagine how insulting John's message must have sounded. This rag-tag preacher from the desert with no diploma from the local seminary starts telling the religious, the Bible-quoting, the we don't drink, smoke, cuss, chew, or go with girls who do crowd to repent; to turn to God. He was saying they were lost and needed to find their way back to God. Those folks were beside themselves; "who do you think you are, John?" And "don't you know who we are? We are children of Abraham." Now, if you don't know, being a child of Abraham was the trump card. God gave all the promises of blessing and salvation to Abraham and to Abraham's children. If you wanted God's promises you needed to be a child of Abraham. And that's who these people thought they were - direct descendants of Father Abraham.

And do you know what John says? Big deal! Who cares? In vs. 8 he tells them what's most important; "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." Here's the things that really matters - repentance. And do you know how you know you have repented? Do you want to know how you can tell if you've turned and are turning to God? Fruit. You prove your repentance with fruit. That's just like what we read.

Later in Luke 8 Jesus tells another parable; one about a farmer planting seeds. The seed is the Word of God. The soil is the condition of one's heart. And what's the goal of the word of God taking root in a person's life? Fruit. That's how you know if someone has received the word in faith.

So, it shouldn't be surprising to us to hear Luke, the author of this gospel, highlight this theme in Jesus' teaching again. What's worth emphasizing (I think I've mentioned this a little over this series) is that this call, this charge, to bear fruit is given to us in spite of the reality of the stress and pressure on our faith. Or another way of saying it might be: even though there is increasing opposition to us because of our faith, even though the screws are tightening in our culture and it's becoming more and more challenging to stand firm in our faith, that's not an excuse for being unfruitful for God. God won't look at the difficulties of our lives, the increased hostilities and opposition and give us a pass for not being fruitful.

I don't know about you, I sometimes see hardships, troubling times as that; as an excuse not to bear fruit for God, an excuse for not having a kingdom mentality. Almost like, "Well, you can't expect much from me now, Jesus. Look how challenging life is right now. I can't possibly bear fruit for the kingdom with people mad at me at work. You don't expect me to perform good works while I've lost income and friends because of my faith, do you? I'll bear fruit for you, Jesus, you know, when you make my life a little easier - I won't be so distracted and preoccupied then. I'll have more time. You've got to give me a happy home life. And I need a little more money. And my health, Jesus - you've got to keep me healthy. You can't possible expect me to bear fruit if I'm feeling a little under the weather or if I've got this bum foot." That's not the way it works; you and I never have an excuse to take a break from following Jesus; from bearing fruit for the kingdom.

2 things help me stay focused on kingdom matters when I'm tempted to put fruit bearing for the kingdom on the back burner. 1) Keeping my eyes set on the unseen realities of eternity and the kingdom. In the mess of my life, in the midst of the temptations and trials around me, God is doing something eternal. But the stresses, the trials, the oppositions blind me to that reality. Without grace all I'm going to see, all you're going to see, is how much your life is hard and how much you're struggling. Bearing fruit for God is going to be the last thing you have in mind. We're so tempted and conditioned to think that the things that we see with these eyes and touch with these hands is what's most important. My bank account. These relationships. My health. And so when Jesus graciously touches our life with trials to show us what's in our hearts so that we might turn to God more and more, we think something is wrong with our faith and something unloving about God because our earthly life is struggling. But God is working on something more important: our soul. He's developing and maturing your faith so that on that day when you meet Jesus you are perfect

and complete, lacking nothing. Set the eyes of faith on the unseen realities of eternity, FBC. When you do you will care about bearing fruit.

2) Remembering that Jesus has grace for me to keep going helps me stay focused on kingdom matters and to bear fruit while life is hard. There's a great verse that tells us this; it's 2 Cor. 9:8. It says, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work." Now, look at that verse on the screen, FBC. What word do you see repeated over and over again from Paul to make sure you know you have the grace you need in life? All! God is able to make all grace abound to you, my dear brothers and sisters. Having all sufficiency (meaning, contentment), in all things, at all times God will give you grace. And why does God give you all this grace, in all things at all times? To abound in every good work. What's that, FBC? That's bearing fruit for the kingdom.

Now, pay attention to this, too: does Paul say that God gives you all this grace at all times and in all things so you can do a little bit of good works every now and then? No! This all-sufficient grace strengthens us to abound (what's another word for abound? - thrive, ample, abundant) in every (not some, not a few) good work. Isn't God's grace amazing? Not only does God's grace rescue us from our sins, saving us from the wrath to come. Not only does God's grace usher us into the family of God where we become the very sons and daughters of God himself and heirs to the inheritance promises. But God's grace also provides us with all the sufficiency and contentment in all things at all times to do the very thing that God commands us to do as his covenant children, which is good works, bearing fruit, for the kingdom of God. Do you ever think God expects too much of you, my dear brothers and sisters? Do you ever wonder if God is a little unfair holding you to a standard that you are not able to keep? Sometimes, the demands of following Christ seem that way to me. But when I think that way it's because I'm forgetting that the God has set up the standards and expectations also has provided me with all the grace I could possibly need so that I have all the contentment, and all the things, at all times to do whatever he asks of me.

One more thing about this: one of the things I love about FBC is that we are a church family filled with people who have experienced this reality. I've watched you for almost 16 years and I have seen so many of you abound in grace to keep bearing fruit for Jesus in spite of increased stress, increased pressure, difficult trials and temptations. God is proving himself true among us. Spend some time remembering how far God has brought you and thank him for the grace to keep you fruitful for him.

Our own Al DeBuhr (PIC) has been a consistent example of fruit bearing here at FBC the whole time I've been here. I hate picking on Al this way, but Al isn't our fastest FBCer. That probably has something to do with the wear and tear all the decades of his life has done to his body. But that hasn't stopped him. For years Al was our financial secretary. A big job that required a person of integrity. Al was the man for the job year after year after year. But with his body slowing down and the demands of the job increasing, he finally passed the baton a few years ago. But Al was still committed to bearing fruit. After that, he joined our office team where he is one of a handful of FBCers who makes sure the bulletins get folded, who makes sure envelopes get

mailed off and newsletters get in your hands month after month. Bearing fruit. That's just a few examples of the many ways he and his lovely wife have produced fruit for the kingdom. And it's not like he hasn't had his share of trials; he's not bearing fruit because God has made his life easier than the rest of us. No, Al has had his share of stress, trials, and difficulties. But he still bears fruit. Do you know why? Because God has granted to Al all the grace he needs at all times in all things. This is a work of God in his life. Al wouldn't take credit and he didn't ask for this recognition. And friends, that grace is available to you, too.

Maybe you're thinking, "Brian, it's too late for me. I've wasted too much time; I've made too many mistakes." Look at the parable again; what does it say? The first thing it says is that the vinedresser, who represents God, endured 3 fruitless seasons from the fig tree. Not one; not two... three of them. He was patient with the fig tree; he waited. And then, after that, when he was ready to move on so as not to waste the fertile soil any longer, his gardner comes and says to him, "Give it another year. Let me work on it; let me provide even more nutrition, more fertilizer. Let me gives this fig tree even more TLC so that it becomes fruitful." And the vinedresser says, "Yes, let's do that."

Do you know what all of this is? It's mercy. It's patience. It's God communicating to us that he is giving us every opportunity we need to bear fruit for God. Friends, don't miss this emphasis in the parable. In fact, it might be fair to say that is the big idea of the parable. Not that we should bear fruit, but that God is patient with us in bearing fruit. He's merciful to our seasons of lack. And maybe that's how some of you see yourself. You look back at your life and see too many seasons where you did not produce the fruit you know you should have. And so, you're feel guilty and regretful. I understand; I feel that way, too, about my lean years. But don't say, "It's too late." It's not too late. You can still bear fruit. Turn back to God. Admit your mistakes and sins and trust in the forgiving and strengthening grace of Jesus.

Just make sure you don't presume on the kindness and patience of God. Do you know what I mean? Don't look at God's patience and mercy and think, "Oh, I've got time. I can focus on other things. God's merciful and patient." Romans 2 makes it pretty clear; those who presume on God's kindness are dangerously close to his wrath. No, tell yourself, "today is the day of salvation" and get right with God.

Key vs. Luke 13:7

Questions for the week

- How important are God works to your faith? What reason would you give for your answer?
- How does knowing God is merciful help you produce fruit for God?
- What are a few critical things God has convicted you of in the *Keep your lamp burning* series?