

# Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

## Lesson 47

### *The Gospel Of Second Chances*

By Sharon K. Griffiee

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#### **Our Season Of Opportunity**

What will we do with our season of opportunity? Will we use this precious time here on earth to bear good fruit for the Kingdom of God? This is the underlying question Jesus raises in the following parable of the barren fig tree.

*Luke 13:6-9 (NIV) - Then he told this 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.'*

The facts first; a fig tree normally takes three years to reach maturity. If it is not bearing fruit by that time, it is not likely to bear fruit at all.

In this parable, the fig tree was looking pretty hopeless. It was not bearing fruit after three years. It should have been doing better. The fig tree was planted in a vineyard where it would receive the best opportunity for growth and maturity. It received the daily care of the vinedresser. It was getting plenty of water and was drawing strength and nourishment from the soil, yet it was producing no fruit. This was its sin. It was taking out, but it was not giving back.

Jesus was making an analogy (comparison) here through the example of the fig tree. He was showing us the characteristics of two kinds of people in the world; those who *take out* more than they put in, and those who *put in* more than they take out.

Notice that the vinedresser [Jesus – our intercessor] did not plead for the indefinite existence of a fruitless fig tree. He only asked for *extended time* to see if the fig tree would bear fruit. During that time, He promised to give the tree *special care* (digging and fertilizing) to see if it would bear fruit. That's just how God is. In His mercy He gives us second chances to bear fruit, to see if we will make something good come out of our lives.

God is infinitely kind to those who fall and rise again. He is long suffering, not willing to give up on anyone who is trying. He waits a long time for people to *repent* - but there is also a warning in this parable. There is a limit to his waiting. At some point a person openly demonstrates (through their failure to give back) that no matter how much grace God offers, they have no intention of bearing good fruit, now or ever.

Jesus brings the end result of this parable: People are not saved so they can sit, year after year, living off of God's grace. After some period of *extended time*, they must either bear the nature of God in their life, or they cannot be *known* as a child of God. Jesus firmly directs,

*Matthew 12:33 (KJV) Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.*

Whether its fruit is good or bad, Jesus is telling us that a tree is known by its fruit. How so? A pattern of behavior will begin to emerge, exposing the *nature* of the tree. A while back I received a letter from an inmate who wrote expressing his regret about the fruit he was bearing in his life.

*"Dear Sister Sharon, I am very happy that our Almighty Jesus Christ, by his Grace, is with me. I should be serving a life prison term, because this is my fifth conviction. The State of New York has the "three strikes you're out" law. But, it only falls for violent felony offenders. In my situation I have been committing non-violent offenses. Sister Sharon, I have already asked Jesus to forgive me. I will soon be 43 years old and I'm getting too old for all of these wrongs I have committed. I'll be transferred to another facility as soon as a bed is open. I am looking forward to receiving more of your spiritual growth letters!"*

I was filled with hope because of this man's desire to honestly examine the fruit he was bearing in his life. He not only acknowledged God's Grace in his life, but his deep soul searching had put him on red alert! He had repented and become aware that his time of grace (to bear good fruit) was running out. At his age,

approaching his mid-forties (with 5 convictions), he saw the years rapidly slipping by, along with the opportunities. Time was of the essence. He knew he must not delay. He must seek complete reconciliation with God (**See: II Corinthians 5:19-21**). For it is only through Jesus Christ that we might become the righteousness of God.

*II Corinthians 5:21 (NIV) - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

This inmate's situation may seem commonplace to those who are incarcerated. Prisoners come in, prisoners go out – only to see the same faces return again a few months down the road. It is a daily occurrence. But his concern is in no way isolated to the inmate population. We, the human race as a whole, tend not to recognize the significance of the many *opportunities* God brings our way. What's our problem? Time and again we fail to acknowledge the countless servants God sends across our path to help us. We are too quick to send them away; not willing to listen to their sound counsel. Worse yet, we do not readily accept, nor do we trust the vinedresser's (Jesus') promise to give us special care; to lovingly dig out the debris that has been stifling our spiritual growth. Stubbornly wanting to do it our own way, we lack the patience to receive correction and let Him fertilize the soil of our hearts with His goodness.

But, after all is said and done, God's judgment will be based on those *opportunities* and what we have chosen to do with them. If we refuse chance after chance, and God's appeal to us is in vain, the day will finally come when we, by our deliberate choice, have shut ourselves out of God's presence.

Jesus weeps over lost opportunities.

*"...How often I have longed to gather you...as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing..." (Matthew 23:37b - NIV paraphrase)*

### **A Tree Is Known By Its Own Fruit**

*Luke 6:43-44a (NIV) - No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.*

*Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.* If we meditate upon this scripture, as well as upon the parable of the barren fig tree, we come to an important truth; one that can be life changing. Jesus isn't looking at

individual sins so He can hold them against us! No, He is looking at fruit to determine the nature of the tree! This is very important for us to understand; unless the *nature* of the tree changes, the fruit will remain the same, year after year. How do we accomplish this change in our life? This is how John the Baptist did it, as recorded in the Book of Matthew.

*Matthew 3:8 (Amplified Bible) - Bring forth fruit that is consistent with repentance [let your lives prove your change of heart].*

Our nature can be like Jesus. Our lives can prove our change of heart. In the parable of the barren fig tree, the Vinedresser (Jesus) puts in all the *special care*, digging and fertilizing on our behalf. Willing to give us another chance, He lovingly digs out the debris and replaces it with his goodness. We need only to *receive* His correction and nourishment into the soil of our hearts, and the good fruit will flow out!

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### **Questions for personal or group study:**

1. Jesus made an analogy (comparison) through the parable of the barren fig tree. He showed the *characteristics* of two kinds of people in the world. Describe them.
2. What was the sin of the fig tree?
3. How much *extended time* did the vinedresser (Jesus) ask for the fig tree to bear fruit? What did he promise to do during that extended time?
4. What is it about God's nature that would cause Him to give us second chances? **II Peter 3:9**
5. What warning does Jesus give in the parable of the fig tree to those who only use up the soil [God's grace]? **Matthew 3:10 and 12:33.**
6. Jesus tells us that the *nature* of a tree is known by the fruit it produces. What then can we learn about our own nature by examining the *pattern* of our behavior?
7. If others are to believe we have changed, what kind of fruit are we to bring forth? **Matthew 3:8**