

God Looks for Fruit!

1. He expects it.
2. He gives us time to bear it.
3. He alone cultivates for it.

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Pastor Benjamin P. Schaefer
revschaefer@yahoo.com

Luke 13:6-9

In the name of Jesus, dear friends,

As the year two thousand and ten draws to a close, what will be the highlights (or lowlights) you remember from 2010? **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS?:** Mid-term elections in November drastically changed the make-up of our Congress. The year 2010 was all about shaking the ground under our feet. From the devastating earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and China to the Deepwater Horizon explosion that spewed millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, to the dramatic rescue of 33 miners trapped underground for 69 days. There were headlines around the globe. **PERSONAL HIGHLIGHTS?:** the birth of a child, sending a child off into the world, the loss of a spouse, a marriage in the family, the loss of a job, the gaining of a job. And your list may have many more. But what does God look for? What are the highlights God is concerned about, which he therefore, wants us to be concerned about? And even more importantly, why does he want us thinking about them? In the words before us tonight, Jesus tells us exactly what God is searching for and why. God's highlights from 2010? **God Looks for Fruit!**

When Jesus spoke about fruit, he wasn't talking about the juicy stuff that fills our stomachs. When Jesus told this parable about a fig tree in a vineyard, he wasn't encouraging each one of us to make a New Year's resolution to eat more fruit. Jesus was talking, as he often did, about **Good Works**. Jesus said, "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any." Not much to highlight when it came to this owner's visit to his vineyard! But there is much for us to consider as God's people.

You and I are fig trees. We are planted in the vineyard of our God. There's one thing this parable doesn't teach us: How did we get to be in the vineyard? We arrived in the vineyard of our God through the work of our Savior Jesus and the gift of his Holy Spirit. As trees our root systems go deep into the ground and they take their nourishment and strength from the wood of the cross and the lifeblood of Christ. We are planted in God's vineyard, completely by his grace, completely through faith in Christ. He planted us right in the middle of his family of believers here on earth. Then comes the search. Our owner is looking for fruit in our lives. Jesus is looking for Good Works! Jesus expects Good Works!

But what is a good work? Simply put, a good work has a two part definition: A good work is done only by a believer in Jesus, and it is done according to God's Word. Many people in our world may be doing good things for others, helping the needy, giving to the poor, building houses in Africa; and those things might be good for the benefit of society, but if they are not done by a believer in Jesus, they're not good. Good works are only good because Christ makes them good. He washes away all the sin and self interest and he makes the work something beautiful in God's sight. He makes it into sweet, juicy fruit! Without Christ, even the best thing a person could do (even if Bill Gates gave away all his money to the poor) without Christ, that action would be a miserable sin in God's sight. And without God's Word as our guide, we wouldn't know what God wants us doing. A good work is something only believers are capable of doing, and we will follow God's Word.

So, Jesus is expecting you and me to do good things. **God looks for fruit!** He expects us to produce Good Works: to help our neighbor, to obey our parents and others in authority, to speak well of others, to talk about God's word with our kids, to share a kind word with a hurting friend, and to be the brother or sister in Christ we are. He expects us to be fig trees. I haven't seen many fig trees in my life, but in ancient Israel the fig tree was everywhere. And it was a fruitful tree. The tree produced two crops each year: early figs in June and late figs in August and September. Because you and I are rooted in Christ, he expects us to bear fruit too, abundant fruit.

In the history of the church, Lutherans have had a bad reputation when it comes to Good Works. Different denominations and other teachers have accused us of neglecting Good Works, as if we don't think good works are important. But we Lutherans have never neglected Good Works. We give Good Works their proper place. We aren't saved by our Good Works; we're not working our way to heaven. We are saved by faith in Christ alone, but what we will add is this: *faith is never alone*. True believers in Christ will be doing good works. You and I, saved by the love of Jesus, planted in his vineyard, will be working hard to thank our God and produce good fruits. That's one reason we gather together in congregations. We want to bear fruit together. We want to make a bigger impact in our world, so we pool our resources for mission work here and elsewhere, and for training future pastors and teachers. It's a great opportunity for us to carry out God's command to bear fruit.

But with every blessing comes a challenge. Notice that the owner of the vineyard looked at the fruit on one individual tree. God the Father is looking at individuals. On the Last Day the Judge is not going to gather congregations on his left and congregations on his right. He's looking at each of us individually. It remains for us to honestly look at ourselves individually. Have I been bearing much fruit this year? Have I taken the opportunities God puts in front of me, or have I been selfish and lazy? The owner got upset because the fig tree was using up the soil and not producing fruit. We must ask, Am I a waste of space? Did I look to the needs of my neighbor or did I think only about my time? Did I act/live/love to the best of my ability? In our congregation and in our world there are so many options for doing good, for volunteering and for helping others. But Satan loves that too, because when we get bombarded by options, then we start thinking that Good Works are optional. Friends, good works are not optional; God the Father expects them. At the end of the day, at the end of the year, we have to confess with one church father named Bernard: "I've wasted my time."

Time is a gift of God for us to consider tonight. The passing of another year, the coming of a new one, and in all things we confess with King David, "My times are in your hands" (Psalm 31:15). God gives us time. Why? God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, so he gives us a time of grace. Our time of grace is the time we have on earth to know and trust in Jesus as our Savior. In Jesus' parable the time of grace is the three years the owner repeatedly came to the vineyard. God warns us that our time of grace is limited. Maybe it's seventy years or eighty if we have the strength. Maybe our time of grace is eight or nine years of life—but whatever the length, we have a gracious gift from God. "God is patient with us, not wanting anyone to suffer but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

God never wastes his time, because his time is tirelessly devoted to loving you and me. God's highlight for 2010: YOU are his dear child. You are his fig tree! He warns us in love to use our time wisely, and then his Son, Jesus continues to intercede on our behalf. "We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1). Jesus is the man who takes care of the vineyard. When the owner wanted to cut down the tree, the caretaker said, "Sir, 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."

God is giving us another year of grace, and we are standing on the threshold. What will the coming year hold for us? Will there be more personal highlights and maybe lowlights? Only God knows the exact plans he has for us, but he does promise to continue digging us around and fertilizing. God is the one who's doing the hard labor. He's rooting out our sins and he's applying his love to our lives. God alone does the cultivating. Through Word and Sacrament he tells you and me, "I'm going to continue working on you." He's not done with us as his fig trees. He gives us another year of grace. Yes absolutely, our prayer is that God would give us the strength to bear fruit for him, and that he fills our lives with fruit. But remember it's his gift of grace that allows us another year and it's his gift of love that continues to cultivate our hearts. Amen.