

Matthew 21:33-43

Pastor Steve

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Let's Be Real: Fruitless Faith Isn't Faith

If we want to get our heads and our hearts in the right place for Jesus' parable, I think there are some quotes we need to start with.

"Ahhh, Christianity in America. Or should I say, the single greatest cause of atheism today. You know who I'm talking about, right? The type of people who acknowledge Jesus with their words, and deny him through their lifestyle. I give you the most hypocritical religious group in America, Evangelical Christians."

"The Christian faith in particular raises hypocrisy to an art form. It takes what's already a problem for everyone and intensifies it. Ask anyone who regularly interacts with those who believe they "follow Jesus" (however their group defines that) and they will tell you it's a consistent pattern. I've never felt more condemnation for my mistakes than I've felt from those Christians who have done the exact same things I've done."

Don't like hearing how so many people view Christianity? There's a reason it's where we need to begin. They've got a point and you need to hear it. You're going to need to check your own heart and actions for hypocrisy.
Let's be real: fruitless faith isn't faith.

Jesus' parable centers around fruit. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. This guy wanted grapes. He planted the seeds. To stop people from coming in and stealing his grapes, he put up a tall state of the art security system, probably one made of dirt and thorns on the outside

and a watchtower on the inside. He needed a winepress where they'd crush the grapes and make juice and wine. So it meant carving deep into a huge rock, which I doubt was easy. This guy wants grapes so bad he puts a lot of money and effort and time into his vineyard.

Producing grapes doesn't sound like a big deal to us. But we need to get out of our modern day American perspective, where you can go to the store and buy a bag of grapes in 5 minutes. For these people, fruit was a treasure that was worth the years and effort. This guy must have been waiting anxiously to see some results. And when the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

But instead of enjoying his fruit that his servants would have brought, he was left with at least one dead, the rest injured, and nothing to show for it. No fruit. That must have been a frustrating experience for him.

So the landowner sends more servants. He must have reasoned with himself and come to the conclusion that he just needed to send more. They wouldn't do the same thing again, not to that many people. But the tenants treated them the same way. Instead of enjoying his fruit that more servants should have been bringing him, he still had nothing.

Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. Knowing what they had done, knowing what could happen, this guy sends someone the tenants should respect. It's not quite the boss but it's almost there. He must have reasoned that they wouldn't dare do anything to him. He'd be able to get the fruit. This father would have been waiting for his son to come back home where they could enjoy the fruit together.

But he didn't come back. The tenants killed his son. They thought they might be able to keep the vineyard for themselves if they got rid of the son. Then there would be no one to pass the vineyard down to. So instead

of fruit, the father would only get news that his son was dead and that he wasn't going to get anything from these tenants.

Not the happiest parable, right? It kinda fires you up. You, the listener, want justice done to those evil men. So did the people who heard Jesus. He asked them what the landowner would do about everything and they agreed. The owner would kill those awful tenants and rent his vineyard out to somebody else who would give him his fruit.

Standing there, listening to Jesus' parable were the teachers of the law and the elders. Religious leaders who should have been pointing everyone to Jesus as the Savior of the world and their own Savior too. Instead their lives centered around bad fruit. They were all about keeping rules and making new ones, about an outward show of righteousness with rotten hearts inside. It looked like they produced fruit for God but they only followed God's commands if it impressed people, or kept them in charge. Hypocrites, producing no good fruit. And with this parable, Jesus was calling them out directly. **Let's be real: fruitless faith isn't faith.**

But you feel it too, right? You can't help but see yourself in the parable. You get what Jesus is saying. The owner is God. He gives you every reason to produce good fruit. And you don't always. Sometimes what you offer God looks good on the outside but is rotten at its core. When you give to God your time, your helping out around here, your weekly offering but you do it to make yourself feel better. As if you could balance the scale and pay God back a bit. When you look for opportunities to serve other people at your job or at school but only because it'll help you move up or make you look good. Rotten fruit isn't really fruit.

And on top of that, are the times when you choose not to produce fruit at all. When producing fruit is hard, it's much easier to ignore the need for it. Like when being involved means getting messy in someone else's mess so you don't. Or think back to the quotes we started with and what those

people said about you. Was your first thought to love them or dismiss them and look down on them for not knowing who you truly are? It's much easier not to show love to everyone. Let's be real, we struggle with producing good fruit in so many ways too.

Jesus warned those people, Jesus warns me: **fruitless faith isn't faith**. It's the warning I need to hear because I'd rather ignore my problems. More than a few times, I am a hypocrite. What other people see is what I need to see too. And it's why I need Jesus.

After hearing this parable are you worried about your faith? You don't need to be. Your faith doesn't depend on your fruit. You can take your focus off of yourself and put it back on the landowner. Your faith comes from him.

What did the landowner do? He sent his son, who would die so that his father could enjoy good fruit. God sent his Son so that the Father gets glory in our fruit! The Son changes everything. He comes into the vineyard and gets rid of our bad fruit. He cuts off everything that is rotten and lets it fall far from us. He takes away the bad so only good fruit is left.

This Son does more too. He gives us something good to be connected to, to make us good. Our roots dig deep into his grace. His undeserved love gives us life. At the core of our faith is our forgiveness that the Son died to bring. A forgiveness that comes completely because that was the will of the Father. We're connected to the perfect love of God's obedient Son and it means we're his.

And he keeps us connected. The inheritance of love and forgiveness is ours since we are God's children. In our baptisms he adopted us into his family. And in the Lord's Supper, in every time you dig into God's Word and find a connection to Jesus, you grow. Your faith is strengthened. Your core is cleansed. You get healthy.

This connection means you produce good fruit and you can't help it! You can't stand by and do nothing. You take action for God and for other people. You look for opportunities to serve just to serve. You view everyone as someone that you can share God's love with. You listen to the disconnect people see between Christians and their lives and you answer it in what you say and think and do. You let your guard down and you show everyone who you really are: someone who finds forgiveness for sins in Jesus and who can't help but live for him.

Have you watched the movie Liar, liar? It's about a guy who can't lie. Not by choice but by some force that controls him. You watch as he reveals everything he wants to cover over. You see what life is like when the truth gets squeezed out of you when you have to be real and honest all the time. I hope that's not what you're taking from this sermon series! When God calls us to be real, he doesn't force anything out of us. He enables us to be who we are because we want to be. To be the kind of people who admit when you're wrong. Who let other people see when you struggle. Who get rid of being fake. Who find their identity in forgiveness! **Let's be real:** it all goes back to Jesus and what the Son has done for you. Amen.