

December 31, 2023 (New Year's Eve)

**Luke 13:6-9**

**“God’s Business for 2024:”**

As we approach another new year, people are talking about what they want to see in the year ahead – their hopes / dreams / goals / plans / accomplishments / etc. Here at church we want to shift our focus and ask – *what does GOD want to see in 2024 and beyond?* What exactly **is His business?** He’s not into making money, obviously – and He doesn’t seem to be too concerned about ending diseases, ending war, ending crime, ending violence, or stopping natural disasters from happening. In fact, Jesus told us (Mt. 24:4-14) that all those things will actually get **worse** the closer we get to the End of all things – they are “birth pains” that He allows to wake us people up so we are ready to leave this world of sin and death behind / so we are ready to meet Him / ready for His glorious return.

*So what is God’s business?* He’s in the business of **saving souls** as the Good News about Jesus goes out across the globe and the Holy Spirit brings people to faith. Yes – but, He’s also got *another* business venture going on in this world too. It’s really quite amazing and totally unique. He’s interested in the production of something spiritual – it’s tangible to Him and only produced in one way. He calls it **FRUIT**. It’s sweet, good, and pleasing to Him in a spiritual sense. The production of this unique commodity, however, is humanly impossible, and it’s not very cost effective. But – God **loves it** so much that He’s made it His special pet business venture.

He had to turn the *traditional business model* completely upside down because “fruit production” does not happen in the way other things are made. If you want to make SHOES, for example, – you invest in a factory, you get some designs made up, you pay your workers for their labor, then SELL the shoes – and, hopefully make enough money to offset your costs and turn a profit.

**That’s the traditional model** – THIS is what God did with HIS pet business venture: He paid the employees UPFRONT a lifetime of wages, including an awesome retirement package – *BEFORE they did ONE SECOND of work for Him!* The capital / the wealth it took to do that didn’t come from nowhere! He **earned it all** by His own blood, sweat and tears. That capital – that RIGHTEOUSNESS was earned by Jesus and it took more effort and

work than we could imagine. God took what HE worked for and ***gave it away!!*** In the Gospel He gives it ALL to His employees upfront / in full / no strings attached, and then sits back and says, **“Look: they come to work anyways! They sweat, they toil, they struggle – what they produce is BEAUTIFUL!! What they produce is *fruit!*”** It’s not labor to GET a paycheck (to get something from God) – it’s service that flows from a heart of love and thanks! It’s ***grace-based fruit production*** / it’s not: merit based payment of wages. That’s God’s **pet business venture** – the production of spiritual fruit that is totally unique in this world and only flows from His grace in Christ working in the life of believers – that’s the **ONLY** way to make it – and He loves it!!

Now, God’s business involves the use of **corrupted human beings**, *so – can you guess what problems might arise?* People take advantage of His grace and kindness – they don’t bother showing up for work, or they don’t put all that much time or effort in, or they don’t do a very good job. Christians always have excuses for not being involved in God’s business – after all, they have to get everything *else* done first – God’s work and God’s business almost always lands at the bottom of the priority list.

Thankfully, God is PATIENT – but, as Jesus’ parable here shows us – **His patience DOES have a limit.** He is willing to “*let people go*” if they reject Him, and He will take away their retirement package, and give their positions to someone else. He’s quite in favor of “*outsourcing*” actually – that’s how the Gospel got all the way over here! Presently, Christianity is (as far as we can tell) dying here and thriving in many places overseas! People here are too rich and comfortable – they don’t have the time for God anymore – well . . . OK, He can find people joyfully willing to do His work.

Thankfully, He **warns** people before He takes our positions away – well, here’s one of His warnings: **Luke 13:6-9 (NIV) 6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. 7 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?’ 8 “ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ ”**

Let's take a minute here and examine the details of the parable: The OWNER would be: **God**. The GARDENER, who has invested Himself in the trees would be: **Jesus**. The TREES are: **us** / believers / members of His kingdom by faith. The FRUIT that God's people produce are things only done from a pure heart that is motivated by the Grace of Christ Jesus and all the love / forgiveness / mercy that God has showered upon us in Him.

So – I suppose the FRUIT has **2 sides to it**: *the SACRIFICE side and the EFFORT side*. What are some of the **sacrifices** God's people do willingly in response to Christ's love and forgiveness? *Our offerings . . . . our time . . . our leisure activities . . . our sinful pleasures . . .* On the **effort** side of it you have: *our service / all the work of the congregation / volunteers who serve in different areas / Sunday school. . . our outreach events. . . and there's a host of things we do and give up for Christ in our daily personal lives too.*

You'll notice that congregational life is really designed around growing in faith, then giving us ways and opportunities to PRODUCE FRUIT and let our light shine. You can be a believer in Jesus and not be a part of any church – but you'd be missing out on the rich blessings of having a spiritual family / and missing out on many opportunities to grow and produce the fruit God so dearly loves. Just keep in mind that many churches use guilt and manipulation to force people into doing what they *think* pleases God. That's not fruit. Churches are supposed to help people grow in grace and knowledge and give them opportunities to give and serve if they want to do so joyfully and willingly – that is fruit.

OK – (one might say) you're *preaching to the CHOIR here pastor Halldorson!* We ARE the people who DO **sacrifice** and put in **effort!** We give offerings every Sunday in line with our income and we bring in offerings for the weeks we miss, and we give up our weekends and nights, and we attend classes, and we serve in a million ways, and we share our faith, and if something needs to be done we do it . . . OK **choir** – I'm intentionally preaching to you now: ***Do you ever get frustrated at the lack of fruit production that's going on out there among the other "trees" here at Grace?***

I know you do, because I hear about it – and I feel it right along with you. You always hear how 20% of the people do 80% of the work – it's the same everywhere and everywhere people complain about it. I've got a question for "the choir" – *who, in the parable, was*

*frustrated at the lack of fruit on the tree?* (GOD.) Now, CHOIR – when you get frustrated at the lack of fruit being produced out there – **whose shoes are you standing in?** (God's.) *Are you qualified to see hearts and make those judgments?* If we're critical about fruit production among the other trees, consider also this: WHOSE work is it we're criticizing? **Who** is doing the gardening? **JESUS IS!!! Is it a wise thing to try and do God's job and then criticize how Jesus does HIS job?** **No.** Remember the last phrase Jesus spoke in the verse right before He told this little parable? **Luke 13:5 "But unless you repent [that includes the "choir"] you too will all perish."**

We respond: "Sorry boss. *You do your job – it's not our place to judge other's fruit production, or how you do YOUR work. Forgive me Lord.*" What does God say to those who repent? **Your sins are forgiven!** You are still my people and trees in my vineyard. Your retirement is secure with me in glory. I'll continue to fertilize you, and tend to you, and delight in the fruit you produce, until your labor is done.

We're the TREES, right? What **is** our job? PRODUCE FRUIT! Where? On *someone else's* branches? No – we can give *that person* opportunities and encourage him/her to be near the Gardener of our souls – but I'm really only responsible for the fruit on MY branches! Today we've heard about the Grace and Mercy and Love of God in Jesus our Lord and Savior. And – we've heard his warning in these lessons. *There are 2 ways God's trees can respond to these words:*

1. I'm going to **go on taking advantage of His grace and patience.** I've got too many other things to do. I'm not ready to get to work in His business. I'll just see how long His patience lasts. *Or –*
2. **THANK** Him for his grace and patience! Serve Him with a joyful heart that is moved by God's love and is looking for nothing in return – we do it for Jesus, case closed.

You know the right path, therefore why not make work for the Lord your own **pet business venture – for this new year and beyond!** Make it your **passion!** Pour your time / energy / effort / dollars into it and just find out how incredible and rewarding it is to produce the fruit God delights in! It's what we're created and designed to do – *bring GLORY to God* – and it's the greatest thing God's "trees" could ever do in response to what our Savior has already done (and continues to do) for us – His beloved trees.