

Divine and Holy Tensions

Introduction

The Text

⁶And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’⁸ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6–9)

Repent or Perish

- A. Last week our text ended with these sobering words from Jesus back up in v. 5: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”
 - 1. You remember, perhaps, that He was responding to a couple of tragic events that had taken place in recent days in the nearby area there in Jerusalem. In one case, Pontius Pilate had murdered some Galileans as they were offering sacrifices in the temple. In another case, a tower had collapsed and fallen on some unsuspecting bystanders down below.
- B. Those in Jesus’ day who had witnessed or heard of these unfortunate events, it seems, were inclined to interpret them a certain way: “Well, it is too bad that this happened to those people. I wonder what it was that they did to deserve it?” The inference is that they must be worse sinners than the rest of us and deserving of God’s judgment in some particular way.
 - 1. But Jesus will not let them, nor us, off the hook. He will not let us wiggle free so easily. He loves us too much for that.
 - a. He knows that when tragedy strikes, even somewhere off over there, it is a reminder to all of us that we now live in a fallen world under the curse of God because of our sin and, if we do not repent and flee for refuge in Him, we shall all have to face something far worse than the sword of Pilate or a collapsing tower—we shall have to face the wrath of almighty God!
- C. I said it last time and I feel it important enough to say once more again: The call to repent or perish here—though it sounds harsh and grates on our proud, American ears—is, in fact, an expression of Christ’s love and care for us.
 - 1. The call to repent or perish is not merely a threat, it’s an invitation. It’s not merely a warning of impending judgment, it’s an offer of free, unmerited grace. It’s not merely an expression of God’s anger at our sin, it is, above all else I would say, an expression of His concern and compassion for us.

- a. In a mysterious, ironic, paradoxical sort of way, Jesus is calling us to flee from God . . . to God! The great problem hanging over yours and my life is the wrath of God. And the great solution to this problem is nothing less than the grace of God.
 - i. Repent or perish. It is not so much a bad word as much as it is a good one!
- D. And we must not miss that. But I suppose, if for some reason we did miss it, that is precisely why, in our text for this morning now, we see that Jesus is going to come at the same basic idea again, yet from another angle—this time using picture and parable.
- E. Now, you'll see that I've titled this sermon Divine and Holy Tensions. I recognize that you may at this point have no idea what I am referring to. I trust that, by the end, what I mean by this shall be made plain.
 - 1. But up front I should tell you where I plan to go with all of this: (1) Identifying the Tensions; (2) Tracing the Tensions; (3) Resolving the Tensions; and (4) Applying the Tensions.

(1) Identifying the Tensions

A Fig Tree in a Vineyard

- A. Before we can really dive into the matter I'm particularly concerned with this morning, I need to at least make you aware of one detail that may otherwise be lost on us. In this parable, if you noticed, Jesus speaks of a "fig tree" planted in a "vineyard" (v. 6).
- B. What's important to understand by these images is that, in the whole complex of Biblical revelation, vines, vineyards, and fig trees are often used as symbols for the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God.
 - 1. Isaiah says it outright in Isa 5:7: "[T]he vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting."
 - 2. The Psalmist in Psa 80:8-9, reflecting on the Exodus, writes: "⁸You [YHWH] brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. ⁹You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land."
 - 3. Jeremiah, warning Judah of the impending Babylonian exile, says in Jer 8:13: "When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them."
- C. So when Jesus is talking here about a fig tree planted within a vineyard that is not producing fruit, He is referring to the Jewish people in particular, and the dangerous situation they find themselves in as many continue to hear His words and see His miracles and remain uninterested, unmoved, and ultimately unfruitful.
 - 1. What we have here really is the same sort of thing John the Baptist was getting at back at the beginning of this gospel when many Jews and the religious leaders were all coming out to the Jordan to be baptized by Him: "⁷You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?⁸Bear fruits 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.⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:7–9).

- a. The coming of Christ initiates a crisis in Israel. In many ways it signals the beginning of their end if they will not repent, receive Him, and finally start to bear fruit. And Jesus is continuing to develop this idea here.

Who's Who?

- A. But now, with these things understood, we are prepared to consider that which I found myself most captivated by in this little story Jesus tells. I want to bring your attention to it now.
- B. Let me do so by asking you a simple question: In this parable, if the fig tree and the vineyard are symbols for the people of Israel, who do you think the owner of this vineyard is? Who is this man who originally planted the fig tree, who comes looking for fruit on it year after year, and who is now fed up with it and calling for it to be cut down?
 1. Look again at v. 7: "He said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?'" Who is saying that? Who is this?
 - a. Well, I suppose when we hear a bit of that harshness in the tone there we might want to say: "Ahh, clearly it is Satan. God would never talk like this, would He? God is love."
 - i. But, upon closer investigation, such an interpretation will not hold. For Satan never planted Israel, but rather he has always been looking to uproot her. And surely Satan has no desire to see fruit on the tree. He is always only hoping to dry it up and wither it out. No. That interpretation will not hold. The owner of this vineyard and tree, as in all the texts I previously mentioned, is God, YHWH Himself.
 - b. "All well and good," you say, "God indeed is holy and just, and I can understand why He would be ready to cut this tree down if after three years nothing has come of it."
- C. Yes, yes, I agree. But now here comes the interesting point. For, if you noticed, the owner of this vineyard is not only character in this story. There's a dialogue that takes place here. The owner is talking to another identified there in v. 7 as "the vinedresser."
 1. Well, then who is this we wonder? For it would seem that this vinedresser is, in some ways, pushing back on the orders of the owner. Look at his response to the owner's request for the fig tree's removal there in vv. 8-9: "⁸And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" The owner is calling for one thing. But this man is calling for another.

- a. “Ahh,” you say. “Surely, now we are to understand this to be Satan. For Satan always opposes the will of God. He always pushes back on His commands with twist and distortion.”
 - i. But, yet once more, upon closer investigation we realize that such an interpretation will not hold. For, since when would Satan argue against judgment and for mercy? Is he not called “[the accuser of our brothers](#)” in [Rev 12:10](#), where we are told that he “[accuses them day and night before our God.](#)” He is not one to argue for mercy and patience. He is always arguing for swift judgment and destruction. No, this interpretation will not hold. The vinedresser here, as with the owner of the vineyard, is none other than God Himself.
- D. If I could put it bluntly, then, in this parable it seems we have God arguing, as it were, with God.
- 1. O sure we can perhaps understand the two characters here to be differentiated as the Father and the Son, but as the whole of Scripture indicates beyond a doubt, the two are one in essence. They are part of what we refer to in Christian theology as the trinity, the tri-unity of our one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - a. What we have then here in this parable is a dramatic and vivid picture of the tensions that exist within God Himself—between His justice and His mercy, His holiness and His grace, His righteousness and His patience.
- E. Here then we’ve, at last, identified what I am calling divine and holy tensions. “Cut it down!” “Give it more time!”

(2) Tracing the Tensions

- A. Now, let’s trace this idea out biblically for a moment.

Attached to His Name

- A. I suppose, if we’ve been reading our Bibles carefully through the years, such tensions should not come as a surprise to us. For, after all, God seems to attach these tensions to His very name.
- 1. You remember, perhaps, when Moses asked YHWH to show him His glory, and we are told that God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock, descends in the cloud, passes before him, and proclaims His name: “[⁶The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,](#)” [⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation](#)” ([Ex 34:6–7](#)).
- a. Did you hear it? The tensions playing out within God Himself? “I am merciful and gracious, but I will by no means clear the guilty—I am just and holy. I demand justice, but I desire to show mercy.”

Playing Out Again and Again

- A. This is precisely what we see playing out again and again throughout the biblical storyline.
- B. With Adam and Eve He warns them not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil “[for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die](#)” (Gen 2:17).
 - 1. But then they eat of it and it’s as if God says, “Om, okay, well maybe let’s not let you die fully just yet.” And instead of bringing the full weight of His judgment down upon them, He restrains some of it and even offers a promise of a coming child who will stomp the serpent’s head and make things right again. The demand for justice . . . and the desire to show mercy.
- C. In Noah’s day, as I even mentioned last week, God sees the evil of man’s heart and repents, as it were, that He ever made us at all. And His justice and holiness demands that He put an end to us and He purposed to do so with the flood.
 - 1. But then . . . “[Noah found favor \[grace\] in the eyes of the LORD](#)” (Gen 6:8). “I want to put a full end to these wicked people. Om, okay, maybe not a full end. Let’s try again with him.” The demand for justice . . . and the desire to show mercy.

Especially with Moses

- A. Some of my favorite examples of this come, once more, from the stuff we read in the Scriptures concerning God’s dealings with Moses.
- B. Consider [Exo 32:7-14](#). God had just shown incredible mercy to Israel, hearing their cries while in Egypt, bringing them out from under Pharaoh’s thumb. And He leads them straight away to Mount Sinai where He enters into covenant with them and they with Him. “[All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do](#)” they say ([Exo 24:3](#)). But, in a matter of days, they would break it.
- C. In v. 7 we read: “⁷And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”’⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.’” [Pause: Here is the demand for justice. Here is the call to cut the fruitless tree down. “Why should it use up the ground? I will plant something else in its place. Something that will bear fruit. How about you Moses? Let’s make a great nation from you.”]

¹¹ But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?’¹² Why should the Egyptians say, “With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, “I will multiply your offspring as the stars of

heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.”¹⁴ And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.”

1. Psa 106:19-23, recounting this incident says: “¹⁹ They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image.²⁰ They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.²¹ They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt,²² wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.²³ Therefore he said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.”

a. Moses “stood in the breach . . .” What an image. You know what a breach is, right? The dictionary defines it as “**a gap in a wall, barrier, or defense, especially one made by an attacking army.**” Well, let me ask you: In Exo 32 and Psa 106, who’s the attacking army? It’s God, in His holiness, breaking out in wrath against a sinful, idolatrous people. And Moses is standing in the breach for Israel.

D. And he will do it again. Num 14:11-20. They’ve made it through the wilderness now and are standing on the edge of the promised land. They’ve seen God’s faithfulness to provide for and protect them through it all. The spies are sent out into Canaan to get a sense of the enemies they will be facing and strategize a bit.

1. But they come back dejected. The people of Canaan seem too great for them to imagine ever defeating. So all but Caleb and Joshua, begin to grumble. “I knew it, God has brought us out here to kill us. ‘**Let us choose a leader [for ourselves] and go back to Egypt**’ (v. 4).”

E. But while the people were preparing to stone Caleb and Joshua (and perhaps Moses and Aaron as well), the glory of the LORD appeared. And we read this, beginning in v. 11: “¹¹ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?¹² I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.’ [“Moses, for the last time, would you listen to Me! Let’s cut this fruitless tree down once and for all!”]

¹³ But Moses said to the Lord, ‘Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them,¹⁴ and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people. For you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.¹⁵ Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say,¹⁶ “It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.”¹⁷ And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying,¹⁸ “The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.”¹⁹ Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.’²⁰ Then the Lord said, ‘I have pardoned, according to your word.’”

F. Now, we must make one thing clear: In these stories, it is not as if God is losing His cool and Moses is trying to talk some sense into Him. It is not as if God is somehow like that friend you were embarrassed to roll with in college because the moment someone says something down on him, he’s ready to spit back and start a brawl. You’re always having to pull him aside and help him calm

down and regain composure. “Take a deep breath God, and let’s talk about it. It’s going to be okay. Put your guns down. You’re going to regret it in the morning.”

1. No! That’s not what’s happening here. God is still God. He is always in control. He always knows what He is doing. And He is always, not just one step ahead of us, but a trillion steps ahead. He is the alpha and the omega, the first and the last. He is at the finish line before the starting pistol is even fired.
- G. So what, then, is He doing here? Well, it seems to me that, when God vents, as it were, of His wrathful intentions, He is baiting Moses to push back on Him for grace. Truly, He is inviting Moses into the very experience of these divine and holy tensions that we first noticed back in our text in Luke—these tensions that subsist in Him between His demand for justice and His desire to show mercy.
 1. In other words, He is inviting Moses deeper into His heart.

(3) Resolving the Tensions

A Sign-Post towards a Savior

- A. But He is doing more than just this with Moses here, isn’t He? O most assuredly He is! You see, God gives us Moses as a picture, a sign-post pointing us forward to yet another who will come and stand in the breach for the people of God—who, in the face of God’s justice will call for God’s mercy: Jesus.
 1. We see this very thing brought out in our parable, do we not? “Cut it down!” “Give it more time. Let me work the soil. I’m not done. We can get some fruit from this tree yet.”
- B. But, while Jesus is similar to Moses in many ways, here’s what makes Him so superior: Jesus will not only stand in the breach for His people, He will bring resolution to these tensions within God Himself. Now, listen closely.
 1. In some ways, Moses by convincing God again and again to turn away from His wrath and show mercy, was only adding to the tension. “Okay, great Moses, you talked God into turning away from what justice demanded in these moments, but now what? How long can this overlooking things go on before the scales of the universe must be balanced?”
 - a. God cannot be a good and holy and righteous God and continue to pardon the guilty. If a judge here in Santa Clara County were to overlook clear offenses of theft or rape or murder he would swiftly be ousted from the bench. And rightfully so! He desires to show mercy, but He must at some point, in some way, demand justice . . . or He is not God.
- C. This is the sort of thing Paul is talking about in [Rom 3:21-26](#), where he surveys, as it were, the whole history of the OT, and says: “Wait a minute. There’s a huge problem in all of this. How can God just pass over and forgive all of these sins through all of these centuries and still remain God? How can He be both just and the justifier of sinners? How can He both vindicate His name and His glory and

at the same time pardon those who have blasphemed that name and trampled that glory into the dirt?"

1. So what is Paul's answer to this? Or, perhaps better put, what is God's answer? Well, in a word: the cross: "²³ [A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:21–26).
- D. You see here is where Moses and Jesus significantly part ways. Moses could stand in the breach for God's people and convince Him to hold back His wrath. But only Jesus could stand in the breach for God's people and drink it all down on their behalf.
 1. That's what the word "propitiation" means. It refers to a wrath-removing sacrifice. That's what Jesus' death on the cross is. Jesus takes the justice God demands, so I can get the mercy God desires to show me.
 - a. I've heard it said that at the cross "justice and mercy kiss." At the cross any argument between them gives way to sweet resolution. Here is how God can be just and the justifier of the ungodly. Here is how there's hope even for a sinner like me.
 - i. This is the extent to which Jesus will go to see good fruit in my life.

(4) Applying the Tensions

Two Application Points

- A. Now I know, in some ways, I've gone beyond the scope of our text for this morning in all of this. And I actually do plan to return to this parable next week and look more closely at the idea of fruit, especially in light of the verses that follow. But still I hope you found some of these reflections helpful.
- B. I wanted to end by attempting to make just two points of application from all of this. Yes, we did all of this Bible-thumping, heavy-lifting just to get to two quick points of application.

(1) He's in the Dirt for Us

- A. To come at the first, I simply want to ask the question: When you are struggling with sin, feeling fruitless, dry spiritually, where is Jesus?
 1. Do you think He's looking down His nose at you, with His arms crossed, a bit ashamed to be associated with you? Is that your Jesus?
 2. Or do you have more like the drill-sergeant Jesus? He's always barking orders at you, telling you to get up and work harder.

3. Or perhaps it just feel like He's not even on the scene at all. He's given up.
- B. Do you want to know where Jesus is in those moments? Our parable tells us where He is. He's not crossing His arms. He's not barking orders. He's not abandoned you. He's in the dirt.
 1. That's what the text says: "[Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure](#)" ([v. 8](#)). He's rolling up His sleeves. He's digging in the dirt. He's literally dealing with crap for you. "[Manure](#)" is just a euphemism for crap. He's willing to do whatever it takes to help you bear good fruit. Do you get that?! He's in the dirt for us. That's application point number one.

(2) So Let's Get in the Dirt for Others

- A. Application point number two: So let's get in the dirt for others.
- B. Let me ask you: Do you have people in your life that are hard to love? I know you do. So what are you going to do? Just cut them off? "I'm sick of it. I've tried. I put in my time. No longer." Maybe you've already gone axe to root. O sure, if you ever see them out and about, you're still civil. You say, "Hi" or whatever. You're a Christian after all. But in your heart, the deeds been done.
- C. Let me call you back to the heart of Christ and the love that He has shown you. Let me call you back to the dirt. Don't cut off. Don't give up. Get in the dirt with Jesus and beg God for one more year.
- D. I've got to think this is the sort of thing Paul is talking about when he says this of his own ministry: "[28 Him \[Christ\] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.](#) [29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me](#)" ([Col 1:28–29](#)).
 1. Why is Paul toiling and struggling? For what? To see others mature in Christ. To see them bear good fruit for God. May we go and do the same!