

People make bad choices all the time. Sometimes the results are entertaining, like famous people embarrassing themselves. Sometimes the results are troubling, like when someone makes a perfectly reasonable decision that's only bad in hindsight, because it put them in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes the results are tragic, like the world is seeing in the invasion of Ukraine. Sometimes other people shamelessly exploit other people's mistakes, and sometimes people rise to the occasion and respond to them with grace.

Evidently people in Jesus's orbit were concerned about some of the terrible things they had heard about, some of which were human beings being cruel and violent, and some of which were people who suffered a terrible accident. Maybe the general public wanted to make sense of these dark events by convincing themselves that there was some sort of divine order behind them, that the people who suffered must have done something to bring that suffering upon themselves. Or maybe they wanted, in a sense, to exploit the misfortunes of others, and convince themselves that they must have been better people than the ones who suffered.

Jesus responded by assuring them that they were no better or worse than the people who had died, and that in any case, they should be more concerned about pleasing God than avoiding trouble in this life. Which seems simple enough, but this lesson is deeply at odds with human nature. We tend to focus on what we can see, so Jesus continued his lesson with an image, in the parable of the fig tree. But the parable, too, is easy to misinterpret.

Some people will tell you that the vineyard owner "must" represent God, and the gardener represents Jesus, and the tree represents us — or maybe that it represents a person or group we think should be behaving differently. But this interpretation makes no sense, for three reasons.

First, Leviticus 19:23-25 commands that no fruit may be taken from a tree for its first three years, then the fourth year's fruit must be an offering to God, and only in the fifth year is a normal harvest permitted, so the owner is greedy, impatient, and ignorant or dismissive of Biblical law — and God is none of those things.

Second, a disagreement between two Persons of the Trinity is inconsistent with the rest of Luke's theology. If the owner represented God and the gardener represented Jesus, this particular disagreement would be Marcionism, the heresy that said that the God of the Old Testament is bad, and the purpose of Jesus is to overthrow that God. Marcionism makes no sense for a lot of reasons, but the simplest one is that Jesus loved, worshipped, obeyed, and prayed to God faithfully.

And third, trees can't sin. When a tree fails to bear fruit, it is never because of the tree's moral failing or bad decision. The tree could be diseased, or it may have been planted in the wrong place, or improperly tended.

Rather than a metaphor for persons, I think the parable is a metaphor for phenomena. Which is related to the first half of the reading, where Jesus talks about

phenomena that were troubling his audience. They were concerned about the unsettling news of their day, and their concerns were exacerbated by bad theology. The idea that God punished bad people with disasters, and rewarded good people with luck and prosperity, was even more popular then than it is now.

Jesus had no time for that. He points out that in the recent incident when Pontius Pilate brutally murdered faithful Jewish pilgrims from his own homeland of Galilee, sometimes good people suffer precisely because they were good. Pilate committed atrocities like that fairly often. In Luke's narrative, of course, this also functions as foreshadowing, like heroes seeing piles of bones on their way into a cave where a monster is believed to lurk.

Then Jesus points out that sometimes people are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. When people were killed in a building collapse, it was not because God wanted them to die, and manipulated them into standing there or made the stones fall, it was because the tower was structurally unsound. In this broken, material world, sometimes accidents happen, even terrible, unfair accidents. In both cases, the people who suffered never saw it coming; if they had, they wouldn't have been there.

We don't want to think about it, but deep down we know that Jesus is right, that we don't know how much time we have, or whether we will suffer or prosper. That's why we are tempted to rationalize events that challenge our world-view. We can also find it hard to accept that when things are going well for us, it's not because God is so impressed that he's granting us favors; we might simply be in the right place at the right time.

The fig tree in the parable doesn't know that there is an argument going on about whether it should be cut down. If it thought the way we do, it might very well congratulate itself and conclude that the gardener is fertilizing it because he is pleased with its barrenness, and that it should remain barren in order to get more.

In other words, our circumstances are not God. Our luck is not God. Our health and wealth and fear and pain are not God. So do not worship them, and do not put your faith in them. They don't love you, and they won't last. Letting go of those things might not come naturally, but once we do, there are great rewards we can grasp.

Jesus didn't engage in ministry in order to help people accept the inevitable. He proclaimed good news, not fatalism. The good news is that God is love, and God is always with us, through good times and bad, with us to the end, no matter how or when it may come. And while God does not guarantee that this life will be easy or fair, God is with us even in the darkest moments of our lives. And God offers us something better than fairness: a rich, full, and everlasting life, and God sent Jesus to help us choose it.

Unlike trees, we do get a choice, and our choices matter. We can choose to narrow the gap between ourselves and God. Sometimes we get the opportunity to make a great leap, a leap of faith, but more often our spiritual progress takes the form of steady, measured progress. And even when we fail, God does not exploit the

opportunity to punish us. God isn't some monster with a sack full of torment he's just waiting for an excuse to unload on us.

Rather, in our sins, God finds opportunities to strengthen and nourish us. When our mistakes catch up with us, when we reap what we've sown, and recognize that we've done wrong, this humility born of suffering is the manure that nourishes us. God is so gracious that God uses our sins as avenues of blessing. The results of that blessing, the fruit we bear, that is, the good we do for others, and the growth that ensues in us, give glory to God.

So have faith in God, and make the good choice to persist in your efforts to live a more Godly life. The world may or may not reward you, but God is always faithful to us. God loves us, blesses us, and keeps us, now and always.