

A man borrowed a book from an acquaintance. As he read through it, he was intrigued to find parts of the book underlined with **the letters YBH** written in the margin. When he returned the book to the owner, he asked what the YBH meant. The owner replied that the underlined paragraphs were sections of the book that he basically agreed with. They gave him hints on how to improve himself and pointed out truths that he wished to incorporate into his life. **However, the letters YBH stood for "Yes, but how?"**

Those three letters could be written on the margins of our souls: **"I ought to know how to take better care of myself—YES, BUT HOW?" "I know I ought to spend more time in scripture reading and prayer, YES—BUT HOW?" "I know I ought to be more sensitive to others, more loving of my spouse, more understanding of the weaknesses of others, YES, BUT HOW?"** These are all good qualities and we know that, but how can we acquire them? As Christian people we know the kind of life we ought to live, and most of us have the best of intentions to do so, YES, BUT HOW?" **We are afraid because we know where the road paved with only good intentions leads!**

**This morning we hear Jesus' parable of the fig tree, telling us to REPENT AND BEAR GOOD FRUIT.** We know what the Christian life requires of us and yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we also know how far short we fall. So the question that confronts us this morning is: **"Yes, but how?"**

### **"Yes, but how—DO WE BEAR GOOD FRUIT?"**

It's a dilemma that has confronted God's people throughout the ages. Even Saint Paul found himself trapped. In Romans 7 Paul writes: *It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God's will so far as my new (redeemed Christian) nature is concerned; but there is something else deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. In my mind, I want to be God's willing servant, but instead I find myself enslaved to sin. So you see how it is; my new life (the redeemed life in Christ) tells me to do right, but the old nature that is still inside me (my sinful human self) loves to sin. Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from this slavery to sin? Thank God! It has already been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free!*

**The 1<sup>st</sup> lesson we learn from the Fig Tree is to "REPENT."** Jesus says. *"Acknowledge your sinfulness."* None of us is without fault. And yet how difficult it is for us to admit that. We know better than to openly admit our wrongs. If we want to get ahead in this world and be accepted by others, it's generally better to conceal our shortcomings and put on a good front for others.

Who goes into a job interview and declares, "I have to tell you. I have a habit of missing work, of criticizing my supervisors and others, and I enjoy listening to office gossip?" Who goes on a date and confesses to the other person, "Listen. I have to tell you I tend to be difficult to live with and I can be a real bore at times"?

However imperfect we may be, we've learned from life around us that it's better not to parade our imperfections out in public. As the little girl said to her classmate who had to sit in the corner, *"To err is human, but to admit it is just plain stupid!"*

How ironic it is then, that Jesus would tell us to repent. Instead of offering a word of support and understanding for our all-too-human tendency to cover up our wrongdoings, Jesus tells us to disclose the evil within us, to admit that we have failed. The apostle John tells us the same thing very clearly when he writes, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

**Whoever we are, whatever we do, we all share one thing in common and that is that we are SINFUL!** Saint Augustine once wrote, *"Whatever we are, we are not what we ought to be."* Mark Twain, with his

characteristic sense of humor, tells us how he understands that when he wrote, *"Man was made at the end of the week, when God was tired."* **Repent, Jesus says, for that's the first step in the Christian life.**

In Kansas City, there is a tradition simply known as the "Secret Santa." Every Christmas, this "Secret Santa" seeks out people who are down and out, and he quietly slips them an envelope with a crisp, brand new \$100 bill slipped inside. The recipients are usually astonished at this unmerited act of generosity.

A few years ago, someone tracked down this "Secret Santa" and asked him, "Why do you do this?" The man replied how life had blessed him with a very successful business venture. But this was not always the case. In 1971 he was an out-of-work salesman who was reduced to living out of his car. One morning he had not eaten for two days. He was incredibly hungry, so hungry that he walked into a diner in Houston, Mississippi to order breakfast with no intent of paying for it. He couldn't! **He had no money, but he was so hungry.** As he hungrily ate his breakfast, he wondered how he was going to pay for this meal, or how he was going to get out of paying for this meal. When the check came, he fumbled around in his pockets pretending to have lost his wallet. The owner of the diner had already sized him up and knew he didn't have the money. **The owner came around the counter, approached the man, and bent down as if to pick up something. The owner said to the man, "Well, looks like you dropped this \$20 bill."** Now the man had enough to pay for breakfast and a little more to keep for the road. He never forgot this totally undeserved act of generosity and goodness. He now gives to others as someone once gave to him.

**During this Lenten season God is asking us to reflect on the entire Christ event.** Christ came into the world to save us from THE POWER OF SIN. And NOW Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem to make sure it sticks. So REPENT so that you will surely know God's salvation.

**THE 2<sup>nd</sup> STEP WE LEARN THIS MORNING IS WE NEED TO: Confess our sins before God and receive God's forgiveness.** In that sense, confession is good for the soul, true confession, not the kind of glib admission that says, "Sure I've sinned. Who hasn't?" True confession that begins with a heartfelt remorse, a feeling of failure to live up to God's love and a desire to reform. "Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus said, and part of what he was speaking about is those who feel the pain of a guilty conscience and grieve in the awareness that we have failed to live up to the expectations of God and those around us.

**Confession is good for the soul -- yes, we know that -- but how can we develop a true sense of heartfelt remorse for our sinfulness and a real desire to change our ways?** Most of us are willing to confess our sins as long as we don't have to change. We are willing to admit to a blemish or two on our moral complexion but nothing that cannot be cosmetically covered up with a coating of good manners. None of us wants to admit that our sinfulness may require reconstructive surgery! After all, we like to think that God is happy with us the way we are and really only wants to make us happy with ourselves.

We think this because most of us never take seriously the concept of sin. I read recently an article about the difficulty a translator had in rendering the Bible into an African dialect. It seemed that the particular language had no suitable term for "sin." Apparently the people who spoke that dialect lacked the concept. The closest the translator could come up with was a word that meant "something bad to eat."

For a lot of people that's the extent of it. Sin is a matter of taste. So what if "we are what we eat"? Taste is an individual matter and nobody has the right to tell another what to like or not like. And if sin is just a matter of taste, it certainly doesn't require the radical solution of repentance. It's easy for us to conclude that we aren't truly bad when we compare ourselves to others. There are plenty of people worse than us.

But the truth of our moral and spiritual condition becomes evident only when we compare ourselves to Jesus. In the light of his life, our lives look awful! Sure, terrible wrongdoing, grisly crimes, sins of passion and violence may not be part of our personal history -- but what about our neglect of the poor, our passive acceptance of injustice toward others, our silence in the face of hurtful gossip, our failure to reverence God as we ought?

When we look at our lives in the light of Jesus' love, even our best, our righteousness is, as the Scriptures tell us, like "filthy rags."

**Confession is good for the soul, we know that, and it is the first step in beginning to live the Christian life, and the recognition that without God we are incomplete.** Sin is not a matter of taste. It is sampling the forbidden fruit. It is taking poison into our lives, and the only antidote for sin is repentance. We need to repent of our sinfulness, receive God's forgiveness, and produce the fruit that God desires. **We need the spiritual strength and renewal that CONFESSION BEFORE GOD AND OTHERS can give us.**

**Remember, Jesus is not demanding anything that we cannot produce.** He doesn't ask the fig tree to produce bananas. He doesn't expect the fig tree to grow tall as an oak or be fragrant as a cedar.

**THE 3<sup>RD</sup> LESSON OF THE FIG TREE IS: He is only asking it to be what it is, to do what it ought: PRODUCE FIGS.** You and I have differing gifts. Some have wonderful singing voices. Others have graceful bodies. Some are artists, others are good with numbers, and others still are good with people. Each of us has our own unique gifts. And the miracle that happens is that through repentance and forgiveness, those gifts are released for the good of God and others around us.

When we acknowledge our sinfulness and receive God's forgiveness, God releases us from THE POWER OF SIN. **And only when we are free from sin do we have the possibility to BECOME WHO GOD HAS CREATED US TO BE** -- children of God, young and old, each able to produce the fruits of faith. **Remember Saint Paul's words: "What a terrible predicament I am in! Who will free me from this slavery to sin? Thank God! It has already been done by Jesus Christ my Lord. He has set me free."**

**That's the key to our dilemma, the answer to our question, "YES-BUT-HOW?"** How do we live the life of faith we are called to live as followers of Christ? How can we do what we ought to do? The key to living the life "worthy of our calling" as children of God is to remember that God has already set us free! In Christ Jesus I am free! I am free to be who God has made me to be. It is up to me to get on with it. **I only need allow Christ to live in me and take control of my life. "Yes, but how?"**

Sometimes we think that when we give up control of our lives to Christ, we are no longer responsible for them. But just the opposite is true. When we turn our lives over to God, allow Christ to direct us, then we become truly responsible for ourselves.

**Jesus' parable of the fig tree calls us to take responsibility for ourselves, for God gives us the key. REPENT!** Jesus says. **CONFESS** your sins and **ALLOW THE POWER OF GOD TO LIVE WITHIN YOU!!** Allow God to enable us to live as we ought. **Let Jesus take possession of you and you of Him and you will have control over your Sin.**

A story is told of former world chess champion Bobby Fischer when he was a young boy. His mother took him to a museum, and he happened upon a painting that caught his eye. It depicted a bedraggled, exhausted older man slumped over a chessboard. Few of his pieces were left on the board, and he was conceding the game. On the other side of the board was his fresh and snappy opponent, Satan. The painting was entitled Checkmate. Already a chess prodigy, young Bobby Fischer stood looking at the painting for a long time. His mother soon tired of it and moved around the remainder of the gallery, finally returning to find Bobby still entranced by that painting. "Come now, Bobby, we have to go." Bobby Fischer did not stop staring, thinking. One more time his mother insisted, "Bobby, we have to go. Come now!" "But, Mom," he pleaded, "he has one more move!"

What the lay eye could not see the trained eye did. The painter had intentionally left an option open for the old man that he could not see. Fisher did. **There IS always an option open to us, even in the face of our fiercest opponent.** Satan cannot checkmate God! Not even in your life... **"Yes, but how?" JESUS of Course!! Amen!!!**