

*National Fast Day, July 7, 1726.*

UNFRUITFUL PROFESSORS CUT DOWN AS CUMBERERS OF THE GROUND.

SERMON XXVIII.

LUKE xiii. 7.

*Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?*

WE have here the doom of the unfruitful fig tree, and in it the doom of all such as are utterly barren, under the enjoyment of the gospel. And here let us consider, that the fig tree is the Jews, to them it first looks; though no doubt it is designed for hearers of the gospel in all ages. The vineyard is not mankind in general; for the far greater part of mankind were, and yet are, left without the inclosure; but it is the church as having the means of grace. See Isaiah chap. v. The owner of the vineyard is Christ himself. He is the heir of all things, the head of the church in particular, and he came seeking the fruit. The coming and seeking the fruit imports the Lord's taking notice what use sinners make of the means of grace; how they answer the design of the pains and cost bestowed on them. The finding none, imports the barrenness of sinners, particularly of the Jews, under the means of grace; not brought to faith and repentance. The dress of the vineyard is his apostles and ministers. The three years mentioned, may refer to the three years of Christ's ministry: or if that doth not so well agree, since they were after that spared, not one year only, but forty, it may be taken more generally for the whole time of the Jewish church under the prophets, John the Baptist, and Christ himself; fig trees if they are not hopeless, bringing forth in three years' time at least. So it denotes the great patience exercised towards the Jews, and the hopelessness of their case, notwithstanding all the means and time which they have enjoyed. In the text we have,

1. The orders given respecting it, *Cut it down*. The case is hopeless. The pruning knife prevails not, take the axe and hew it down. This was accomplished in the destruction of Jerusalem, when the people were unchurched and destroyed.

2. The reason of this severity. *It cumbereth the ground*. The ground in which it stands is rendered useless. It draws to it the sap that might nourish other plants, and its shade is hurtful to men. So the barren Jews were to be removed.

*Doctrine.* The unfruitful under the means of grace do but cumber the ground in God's vineyard, and therefore however they may be spared a while, they will be cut down at length. Here I shall shew,

I. Who are the unfruitful in God's vineyard to be cut down.

II. How and in what respects do these cumber the ground.

III. Why the cumberers of the ground are so long spared.

IV. The import of cutting down. We are then,

I. To shew who are the unfruitful in God's vineyard, to be cut down.

1. Dead trees. They being still in their natural state, are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. The gospel is the mean of life to a dead world, called therefore the word of life, Phil. ii. 16. It is by it that the Spirit of life is conveyed into the dead soul. This Spirit is received by the hearing of faith. Thereby faith comes whereby the soul is united to Christ the fountain of life. So then faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God. But alas! many continue dead under quickening means, destitute of the Spirit and of faith. So they cannot bring forth the fruits of holiness, they can do nothing that is truly good, more than a dead man can move and act. There is none that doth good, no not one. They are not brought to union with Christ, so death reigns in them. Thus there are dead persons, dead families.

2. Rotten trees. Dead souls are spiritually rotten also. "They are altogether become filthy." This speaks reigning vanity and worthlessness, as the rotten tree is light. How many such are in God's vineyard, whose mind is vain. "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling, have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness." Their conversation is vain, 1 Pet. i. 18. They savour nothing, seek nothing in earnest, but the vain things of a present world. This also speaks vileness. They are loathsome to God, and to good men, and useless. Good for nothing but the fire. These will be cut down.

3. Withered trees. When the tree has lost all sap and is withered away, it cannot bring forth fruit, but must be cut down. Many that sometimes looked green and promising under the means of grace, have lost all now. Their convictions are stifled, their affection to the things of God is gone, and the gospel is become tasteless to them.

4. Barren trees, that have leaves but no fruit. "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees; therefore every tree that beareth not fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire." Many have

the leaves of a profession, but no conversation agreeable thereto. A form of godliness but nothing of the power. As Naphtali, giving goodly words, but not as Joseph, fruitful boughs. But it is fruit, and not leaves that will save from the axe.

Lastly, Degenerate trees bringing forth evil and noxious fruit. To such God says, "Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?" These bring forth the fruits of the flesh in abundance, that are deadly like the wild gourds of the wild vine. For those that are barren to God, are always fruitful to the devil. So may it be said of very many hearers of the gospel. "For their vine is of the vine of Sodom; and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes are grapes of gall; their clusters are bitter. Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps." We are now to shew,

II. How and in what respects do these cumber the ground in the vineyard.

1. They take up room, precious room, that might be better occupied. If Tyre and Sidon had enjoyed the room of Chorazin and Bethsaida, they would have made a profitable use of it, Matth. xi. 21. A place in God's vineyard is very precious. It is more valuable than ten thousand times as much without it. "For says David, a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." But this desirable and valuable situation often falls into the hands of many, who know no more to improve it, than the cock in the fable to improve the Jewel. "Wherefore is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he hath no heart to it." All they do with it at best, is but unprofitably to fill up a space.

2. There is no advantage to the owner from that part of the ground which they occupy. But surely from it as well as from the other parts, he might raise advantage to himself, if they were removed from it. They are together become unprofitable. They are useless for God, they contribute nothing for his declarative glory in the world, they do nothing to advance the Mediator's kingdom. When he cut down the Jews, and planted the Gentiles in their room; he showed what great gain was to be made of that place in his vineyard, which the Jews occupied to no purpose. "From the uttermost part of the earth; have we heard songs, even glory to the righteous: but I said my leanness, my leanness, woe unto me." So God might raise glory to himself, which he hath not from us, by giving to others our places and privileges, if we were turned out.

3. There is no comfort to the vine-dressers from that part of the ground such occupy, though otherwise much might arise from it, if it was planted with other trees. The pains of the labourers is lost upon such trees. In vain is all their toil, sweat, and strength bestowed on them; "for say they, who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of our Lord revealed." They have all the sorrow and pain of disappointment and lost labour: though their labour might have come to a comfortable and profitable account if it had been bestowed on others. Thus said God to Ezekiel, "I have not sent thee to many people of a strange speech, and of an hard language, whose words thou canst not understand: surely had I sent thee to them, they would have harkened unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me; for all the house of Israel are impudent and hard hearted." Thus we see that Jonah's mission to Nineveh was successful.

4. The sap of the ground which barren trees draw to them, of which they are yet nothing the better, might nourish fruitful trees if they had their room. Sodom's ruin might have been prevented by Capernaum's privileges; but they were lost on Capernaum, Matth. xi. 23. Many hungry persons might be refreshed with the meat and drink which the glutton and the drunkard devour, and from which they derive no good but evil to themselves: and many a poor soul would feed sweetly on these means of grace, that others have and despise, having no heart for them. The salvation of many might be advanced by those very means of grace which others having yet got no good of them, but an aggravating of their condemnation.

Lastly, They hinder the fruitfulness of other trees in the vineyard; drawing the sap from them. So they are not only not profitable, but hurtful. Look how a barren tree in a garden spoils the undergrowth, and is hurtful to the fruit trees. So unprofitable hearers of the gospel, scatter their malignant influence to all that are about them. One sinner destroyeth much good. Their example and influence will pull down, what the means of grace are for building up in others. Let us now,

III. Inquire why cumberers of the ground are spared so long.

1. For to try if they will mend. "The Lord is long suffering to us ward, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." A tree that is barren one year may be fruitful another year. The soul that has long refused to obey the call of Christ, may afterwards, with the son in the parable,

repent and obey, Matth. xxi. 29. And therefore the Lord will give them time, exercise patience, and wait on a while.

2. For the prayers of the godly. This barren tree was spared another year, upon the entreaty made for it by the vine-dresser, verse 8. So was the intercession made by Moses prevalent for the sparing of Israel, Exod. xxxii. 10—14. and Lot's intercession for Zoar. The godly are the pillars of the land.

3. For the sake of their seed designed for vessels of mercy. Though a barren tree brings not forth fruit, yet it brings forth seed for propagating its kind. And many a time sinners, vessels of wrath, are spared, for the sake of the vessels of mercy that may be in their loins; as it was with the generation that came out of Egypt, and the remnant of the Jewish unbelievers, Matth. xxiv. 22.

Lastly, That impenitent sinners may be wholly inexcusable. There is a measure of iniquity to be filled up, and so long the Lord will bear with sinners, and no longer, Rom. ii. 5. Gen. xv. 16. It remains,

IV. To consider the import of cutting down. It denotes,

1. Patience at a end. "And the Lord said, my Spirit shall not always strive with men." God may wait long on barren trees in his vineyard, but the time will come that he will wait no longer. He will no longer expect fruit; it must be cut down. I have long time, says he, holden my peace, I have been still and refrained myself, now will I cry like a travailing woman; "I will destroy and devour at once." His honour lies at stake, the honour of his holy and just providence, which suffers by sinners continuing impenitent. But he will retrieve his honour at the sinner's cost.

2. Never fruit more to grow upon them. When our Lord said to the barren tree, "Let not fruit grow upon thee henceforward for ever." It is added, "And presently the fig tree withered away." While the tree stands there is some hope, but when it is cut down all hope of fruit is removed from it for ever. Men delay repentance now, but this stroke will put them out of the reach of repentance, beyond the line of mercy.

3. It denotes the sharpness of the stroke. The stroke of wrath against barren trees in God's vineyard will be very cutting. The dead soul will be made to feel it in the most tender part. Whom the word cannot pierce, the sword of wrath will cut asunder and appoint them their portion with the hypocrites; "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

4. The suddenness of the stroke. "The Lord of the slothful servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour when he is not aware; and shall cut him asunder." Of all

persons those who have most pains taken on them in vain, by the preaching of the gospel, are the most liable to sudden destruction. "He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."

5. The destructiveness of it. "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." The Lord cuts in mercy that he may heal; but his cutting down makes an end of the barren tree. So will death be to impenitent sinners.

6. The casting of it out of the vineyard. The tree being cut down, is next cast over the hedge. They that improve not their room in God's vineyard, will ere long lose their room in it, and their souls at once.

Lastly, That the barren tree is to be cast into the fire. "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and they are cast into the fire, and they are burned." Impenitent sinners cast out of God's vineyard, will be cast into hell, where they will for ever lament their misimproving of the means of grace when it will be out of time.

*Uses.*—1. The unfruitfulness under the gospel prevailing in our land, forbodes a time of hewing and cutting down. Our privileges have been signal ones, our misimprovement signal; so will our stroke be likewise.

2. Impenitent sinners have a dangerous station in God's vineyard. A barren tree may be much safer in the wood than in the garden. Tyre and Sidon will have a cheaper bargain of their lusts, than Chorazin and Bethsaida; and they that never heard the gospel, than we.

3. Take heed what part ye act in God's vineyard. Be concerned to know for what use you are in it. Beware of being cumberers of the ground. Many such there are, but he will at length free his vineyard of the burden of them.

4. Lay no more weight upon external church privileges, than they will bear. Happy are they that dwell in God's house, if they learn the true manners of the house. But if in God's house they live ungodly lives, it had been better for them they never had known it. "The children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Lastly, Consider what fruit ye bring forth under the means of grace; and do not overlook the privileges which you enjoy. Ministers sow the seed, Christ himself will look after the fruit, and will notice who bring forth the fruit of a preached gospel, and who cumber the ground. "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees; therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Amen."