

Using Up The Ground

"... Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?"

Luke 13:7

There are two kinds of people in this world. Some are contributors who are generous and giving. Others are greedy who take more than they give. These people go through life consuming and using, taking from the world and other people all that they possibly can without giving any return.

Jesus describes this problem in a parable. A fig tree on a man's property yielded no fruit. Year after year he looked for it to produce a good harvest, but each time he searched the branches it was barren. He told his vineyard-keeper, "*Cut it down; why cumbereth the ground?*" His servant, pleaded with him to give it another chance. He asked for one more year to cultivate and fertilize it. If it did not bear fruit, he said he would cut it down (Luke 13:9).

The landowner in Jesus' story had a problem. He was receiving no return on his investment. The fig tree occupied space on his land, drained his resources, and depleted the soil. It gave him no fruit in return. As far as he was concerned, it was only using up the ground. In America there are many people like that. They seek out all kinds of government handouts, whether they are qualified or not. At the job they try to get as much pay as possible while doing the least amount of work. They take advantage of all kinds of public services, but they lie and cheat to avoid paying the taxes that finance those services. They look for every free ride and giveaway they can find.

People like this are a burden on society. Everyone else in the workplace or community must work twice as hard and give twice as much to make up for the freeloaders. These people never contribute to the good of society. Many families also have fruitless fig trees for members. While the father and mother work hard and sacrifice to provide for the family, it seems that from some children there is no return on the parent's investment of love. Gone is the era when children were expected to work in the fields on the family farm, or to contribute most if not all of their wages to the support of the family. Instead, an increasing number of young people have the belief that they can spend years taking from their families but owe them nothing in return. They use up the ground but never give back any fruit. Is it any surprise that in later years the aged

parents are cast off and forgotten?

Although these encroachments on society are regrettable, the real tragedy is the presence of fruitless tress in God's vineyard. The world is filled with people who take from God but never give anything in return. They enjoy the abundant bounty of His earth. They go through life squeezing all of the enjoyment out of the world that they can, never stopping to think that they could do something to show their gratitude to God. They could give God the glory, obey the gospel, and commit themselves to serving Him. They could, but instead, day after day, God invests His resources in them, and year after year they give no return -- they just use up the ground!

Even more tragic, however, is the failure of Christians to bear fruit for their Lord. God has bought them with the price of Jesus' blood (1 Peter 1:18-19). How does God consider Christians who come to the congregation wanting only to take and not to give? They want their needs to be met, their feelings to be respected, their whims to be indulged. They criticize, comment, correct, and direct the operation of the church (when they bother to show up), and if anything is said or done that might be taken as offensive in the least, they quit. They contribute almost nothing to the work of the church; they are neither evangelistic nor generous, and one suspects that it is rare for them to offer fervent prayer for the church. They come only to be served and give nothing in return. They are just using up the ground.

Christ concludes His parable with a very serious note. He says, "*And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.*" (Luke 13:9). There is a limit to God's patience. Judgment will come to those who are just using up the ground. Let us not defraud God of the harvest He deserves, but instead let us give Him an honest return on His investment.

Adapted From Calvin Schlabach