



March 23 – Continue with Ads

My daughter Samantha and I love to play various games on our phones. She usually beats me fairly handily, so that is not the question, or the point of this illustration. We do, however, share the same frustration, ads. It isn't that the ads appear. First, I do not want to pay for ad removal. Second, it is how you find other games to try. The frustration is when you try the new game. Quite often, it is nothing like the ad that you just played.

The ads draw you in and the game seems fun to play. Then, after you download it, you discover that it is going to take a very long time to get to the point where the game looks like the ad. You need to go through all of these various levels. You need to build the kingdom, or farm, or business first. You may need to advance through hundreds of simpler levels before you get to the challenge that you hope to conquer. It is frustrating. It takes time.

This text introduces us to a very curious vineyard owner. This owner plants a fig tree in the middle of the vineyard. Jesus does not go into details as to why the owner would plant a fig tree there. The story does not get involved in a lot of details. What we do know is that the vineyard owner is frustrated. He planted a fig tree and now would like to enjoy some figs. That seems simple. The tree, however, is only on level 3.

In the agrarian culture within which Jesus is telling this parable would know that the vineyard owner is being a little ambitious. They would know that it would take several years before a new fig tree would bear any fruit. If you have ever planted a fruit tree, you know this truth as well. The owner had unrealistic expectations, and that led to frustration.

The gardener had a different view. He knew it would take time. He could also see that the tree has been somewhat neglected due to the ambitious expectations. The tree was trying to grow roots and a foundation before it could bear fruit. The gardener asks to give the tree what it needs in order to thrive. The gardener digs around it, fertilizes the soil, and gives it time to grow its roots. That way, when the tree is ready, it will burst forth with fruit.

The truth is, sometimes it is easier to see needs in others. The owner was so caught up in his own expectations that he did not see what was needed. It is easy for any and all of us to get that way. We want to see immediate results. We want to be able to jump right in. If we download the game, we should be able to get to level 200 by, say, tonight. We want to go from "couch to 5k", in a couple weeks. We often dream up unrealistic expectations and then become frustrated when they do not come to fruition.

The truth is we need someone like the gardener in our lives. And, we need to be the gardener for others. It is easier to see what others need than what we need ourselves. Self-evaluation is difficult, and often is not accurate. We need others to point out what we need. We need others to help us see when we are out of balance, when we need rest, or when we need to spring into action.

This parable is a lesson for us. It may also be a lesson Jesus is telling himself. Sometimes we get so caught up in what we want to see happen that we become unrealistic or out of balance in the process. We all need rest, nutrients, and times of growth. Think of those you care about most. Where are they in this continuum? Are they in need of rest? Nutrients, whether physical, emotional, spiritual...? Do they need to step out in a season of growth? How about yourself? Where do you see yourself? Are you worn down? Frustrated? Rested and ready to grow? Needing to be fed?

Whatever the Spirit is paying on your heart, lean into it. Approach it with curiosity. Help others to see what may be needed, especially if it is clear they need rest or to be fed. We will all bear fruit. It does not have to happen all at once. Listen to the Spirit. Take courage. You are loved. Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt