

Lots of Things Can be Medicine

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Luke 13:1-9

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I have been growing vegetables as a hobby for most of my adult life. It is not something I ever went to school for, but I really like to try new methods and pick up little tricks along the way. Sometimes the lessons come from my mistakes and other times they come as tips and hacks that others pass along.

One lesson I learned several years ago was that there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. One year in Minnesota I wanted to boost my yield even more, so, I decided to finally use a liquid fertilizer to spray on the garden. My mistake was that I didn't follow the instructions correctly and applied the solution too often. At first I didn't know anything was wrong. My plants were bursting out with foliage. I was impressed on how well this application worked. But after several weeks I noticed that I had very few blossoms and subsequently very little crop. I didn't understand why? That was until I shared the story with a master gardener friend who pointed out to me that I had basically had too much nitrogen in the ground. Sure, it produced great greenery, but it was out of balance, and it couldn't produce good fruit.

The world seems to demand that we always strive for perfection, always doing better year after year. That expectation can feel like a garden getting too much liquid fertilizer. We may convince ourselves by saying, "well if a little is good then more must be even better". Soon we are more concerned about image and productivity above all else.

This worldly image often puts a high expectation on productivity without seeing the importance in other things such as hobbies or family time. I find myself pushed so much by this demand to always be productive that even on my days off I have a hard

time just resting. By late morning I am itching to do something “productive” I feel guilty for not working down a check list of things I need to do. Fortunately for me I have a wife that is quite forceful in reminding me of the importance of rest. After four years, I am starting to sink in a bit, but I still hear the productivity task master in the back of my head.

Now you may be saying, “But pastor I need to keep working, people depend on me, and I don’t want to appear to not be carrying my own weight.” I know that struggle is real. Now while here in America we expect at least a forty-hour work week, in Europe the current standard is 36 hours and there is a push to follow Denmark and France to lower it to a 28-hour work week. An article in Harvard Business Review from August 5th, 2019 says that, “Many organizations in Europe are cutting workweeks, though not wages, from 36 hours (five days) to 28 hours (four days) to reduce burnout and make workers happier, more productive, and more committed to their employers.” For our American mindset that sounds very counter-intuitive. Work less in order to be more productive, but it appears to be true.¹ For example, Denmark has the lowest average work week and is also ranked as one of the happiest places in the world to work and live.²

In this series we are continuing to emphasize the importance to take a step off of the world’s ladder to success and focus more on growing where we are at. That requires a different mindset. A mindset to focus on health rather than productivity. To pay attention to making deep connections rather than focusing only on appearance of having it all together. We see that in the gospel story today.

The story begins with two terrible events that have happened. One was caused by a human named Pilate and the other was a natural accident that killed some people. The

¹ [www.hbr.org](https://www.hbr.org/2019/08/will-the-4-day-workweek-take-hold-in-europe#:~:text=Many%20organizations%20in%20Europe%20are%20cutting%20workweeks%2C%20though,more%20productive%2C%20and%20more%20committed%20to%20their%20employers.) “Will the 4-Day Workweek Take Hold in Europe?” by Ben Laker and Thomas Roulet August 05, 2019. <https://hbr.org/2019/08/will-the-4-day-workweek-take-hold-in-europe#:~:text=Many%20organizations%20in%20Europe%20are%20cutting%20workweeks%2C%20though,more%20productive%2C%20and%20more%20committed%20to%20their%20employers.>

² <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/average-work-week-by-country>

first one people asked if God was some how responsible for their deaths. Jesus' answer was clearly NO. The demands of a human caused their premature deaths. The second one was also not to be blamed on God. Bad things happen in the real world that impact our daily lives. We need to learn from them, but don't blame God for them either.

Jesus, however, does not dwell on the past, but rather calls the people to look at themselves to see if they may be a down the wrong path already and to make a course correction. Repentance, in its simplest form, means to change course. Life is best lived when we take time to do that self-reflective work. We need to slow down and even stop to create space for times of self-introspection, but in today's world we are often too busy to stop.

The parable that follows is a wonderful example of taking time to focus on correcting course. The fig tree, like my tomato plants, appeared to be healthy from a distance, but there was no fruit. It was all show. The landowner wanted to destroy the tree, but the gardener wanted to give it a second chance. The gardener established a routine of care that changed the environment and direction it was going. If the gardener had not intervened the tree would not have faired any better the next year. When we realize something is wrong we have to take action to course correct - repent.

Jesus, through this parable, reminds us it is God's intent is to see us flourish, not to destroy us. The world is quick to judge us as unworthy and wants to destroy anything that is not productive enough. God, as the master gardener, seeks to heal us through love and nurture. Jesus seeks to redeem us to health, not just make us productive. This is a reminder that we cannot just be fixated on one aspect of life, we need a wholistic approach to our lives.

Religion teaches us to repent in order to avoid God's wrath and condemnation, but I am here to tell you that is a false motivation based in fear not love. God is not the one condemning us, God is inviting us to healing and restoration. I know when you first

read this gospel story you hear that message of “repent or you will face the same fate.” But I encourage you to see it from another point of view.

We know when we see a sick plant we know something is wrong and unless we change the conditions it is living in it will continue down the road of decay. As a gardener, I know that if I refuse to listen to the master gardener about what is out of balance for my plants, - too much water, too much nitrogen, not enough sunlight, maybe rootbound – the plant will continue on the path of death. But if I change course, if I repent of my wrong action, and take the advice and care of the master gardener, over time I will see the plant flourish again. That is always the kind of judgment and call to repentance that God is calling us to – it’s called restorative justice, redemption, not condemnation. While the world uses us and then casts us aside for not being productive enough guilting us for not doing enough, demanding us to live up to an unattainable standard or else something bad will happen. God sees us as whole and precious worthy of love and care. We are good enough just as we are. The repentance is saying “yes I need your love to heal me, help me.”

So I invite all of us to take time to get off of the ladder of success that demands that we constantly strive to do better, chasing after the illusion of perfection. God calls us to be planted in the rich soil of God’s love and allow the Master Gardener to restore us to wholeness and health.

I want to end with one of my favorite verses in the Bible found in the book of Revelation that shows us what it can mean to be planted in God. Revelation 22:1-2 “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”