

## Wesley United Methodist Church

March 24, 2019

“The Greatest Sin.”

Luke 13:1-9

Let’s imagine that everyone in this room today is a follower of Jesus Christ. Let me say that if you are not, it is time you made that decision. But let’s assume we all are. Let me ask a most important question: what is the worst sin any of us can commit as a follower of Christ? Of course, I’m assuming that we are not going to murder someone, or commit adultery, or rob a bank. What then is the worst thing we can do as a follower of Jesus Christ? Think about that for a moment.

Jesus told a parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

Now let me ask you the question again in light of this text. As a follower of Jesus Christ what is the worst sin you can commit? The answer is: the worst sin you can commit is to do nothing. Doing nothing, in this case, not bearing fruit, is the quickest way to disqualify you from the kingdom of God.

You remember the story of the two men who were talking about their friendship. One of them said, “We’ve been friends for 25 years and there is nothing we wouldn’t do for each other.” And the other man said, “And that’s what we’ve been doing for one another for 25 years. Absolutely nothing.”

As a follower of Jesus that’s the worst thing you can do in the light of the parable of the fig tree. Nothing.

Remember Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats? What was the decisive factor between the sheep going into the kingdom of God and the goats being thrown into the lake of fire? What did the goats do that was so terrible? They did nothing. Absolutely nothing. In Matthew 25, the King says to the goats, “I was hungry and you gave me what? You gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me what? Nothing to drink...sick in prison and you did what? You didn’t visit me.” In other words, you had a chance to minister to me when I was at my worst. And you did what? Nothing. Then he speaks those devastating words, “When you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me.” What was the sins of those he called goats who went into the lake of fire? Doing nothing.

In Luke 16, there is another of Jesus’ memorable stories. It was about a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury. At his gate lay a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side in heaven. The rich man also died. But he didn’t go to heaven. Instead he found himself in Hades, where he was in torment. He looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’”

Why did the rich man end up in such a state? There is no evidence that he ever did anything wrong except for one. He did nothing. There was a poor man lying literally at his gate, and he did nothing to help. So often in Jesus’ teaching this is the sin that condemns people...not for something desperately foul they did, but something noble and good that they neglected to do.

In Matthew 25, just before the parable of the sheep and goats, we find another well-known parable of a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. You know the story, to one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five bags of gold put his money to work and gained five more bags. The one with two bags did the same and doubled his wealth. The man with one bag of gold, dug a hole and buried it.

When the master returned, he settled the accounts with his servants. He learned that the first one doubled his money. He praised him with the words: “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness.”

The same scenario played out with the servant who was given two bags and earned two bags more. But then the man who had received one bag of gold came. “Master,” he said, “I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.”

What was his master’s reaction? Not so good. “You wicked, lazy servant!” he said. “So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well, then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. So, take the bag of gold from him and

give it to the one who has ten bags," said the master, "...and throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:14-30).

It's easy to feel sorry for this poor guy. After all, he was probably a pretty nice guy. But being a nice guy or a nice lady isn't nearly as important as making your life count for something. And how do you make your life count? By using what you have done for God's glory and making the world a better place.

I could keep going with this theme right through lunch and beyond. I can see that some of you are worried I'm going to do just that. For example, remember the story of the rich young ruler who turned back rather than giving up his wealth and following Jesus. By his own admission he had kept all the commandments from his youth up. But when the opportunity came for him to make his life count, he turned back. He was a good man, but, pardon the slang, he was good for nothing (Mt. 19:16-30).

Or the priest and the Levite on the Jericho road who passed by on the other side and left the poor man who had been beaten and robbed lying there bleeding on the side of the road. What was their sin? They had an opportunity to help someone in need, and they did nothing (Luke 10:25-37).

I believe it is the most consistent theme in Jesus' teachings. Yes, there are sins of the flesh. Yes, there are sins that fill our lives with guilt and shame. But the sin of which most of us is guilty, the sin that threatens to keep us out of the kingdom of God, is a sin of omission. It is the sin of doing nothing when we have the opportunity for doing something productive, something that will help someone in need, something that will glorify God.

I've titled this message "The Greatest Sin." Someone is going to say that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the greatest sin. Well, what greater blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could there be than to say you are a follower of Jesus and never bear witness to that fact by living a Christ-like life.

You can't love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself and sit idly by when a fellow human being, regardless of who they may be, needs help.

So, Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any, So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'" He was talking about us if we are not bearing fruit. What kind of fruit? In Galatians 5 we read about "the fruit of the Spirit"—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That's a good beginning. But caring for the down-and-out tops the list according to Jesus' teachings. Caring for those who are sick, those who are troubled, those who are lonely, those who are in trouble. All we need is Christ's heart giving us sensitivity to the needs of others and the willingness to serve.

But notice there is a note of grace in this story. The owner of the barren fig tree says to the man who takes care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" The care taker replies, "Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

You know you have a grace period renewing your license plate tap? The county treasurer or State gives you 30 days after your expiration date to purchase your license plate tap. 30 days, that's all, after that time it cost you \$100. God gives us grace periods. Jesus is not interested in cutting us down like a barren fig tree. What he wants is for us to examine our hearts and ask ourselves during our grace period if we are living our best life? Or are we just taking up room on this planet? Christ used his grace period to redeem us from sin and death. Are we using our grace period to reach out to others? Mat God help us to do so.