

Text: Matthew 21:18-22

Title: The Fruitless Fig Tree

Truth: We glean several lessons from the fruitless fig tree.

Date/Location: July 20, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

Jesus went into Jerusalem, looked around, saw the sorry state of things in the temple and city, and went back to Bethany for the evening's rest. He will use a fig tree to teach the disciples about what he (and they) have just experienced.

I. Harmonizing the Matthew and Mark Accounts

A. Here is the Mark passage, in two chunks:

Mark 11:11-14 And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve. 12 Now **the next day** [Monday], when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. 13 And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, **for it was not the season for figs**. 14 In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it.

[In verses 15-18, Jesus cleaned out the temple, taught that the temple was to be a house of prayer and not a den of thieves. The scribes and priests were upset.]

Mark 11:19-24 When evening had come, He went out of the city. **Now in the morning** [Tuesday], as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. 21 And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away." 22 So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. 23 "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. 24 "Therefore I say to you,

whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.”

B. Problem #1: Order of events. In Matthew, it appears that Jesus cleans out the temple on day 1, the same day as the triumphal entry, and then day 2 the fig tree is cursed with instantaneous effect. But in Mark, the triumphal entry is day 1, the fig tree was first observed early on day 2 and received the curse then, the same day the temple was cleansed, and then on day 3 the fig tree was withered and observed by the disciples.

1. Answer... Matthew is shorter and telescopes the events so they are related in a more compressed fashion and without slavish regard to chronology. To the believing mind, this does not make the account inaccurate. Rather, it is simply arranged differently with a different focus. In Matthew we do not have a specific timeline given. Mark clarifies the chronology of what happened. Sometimes chronology is important to the gospel writer and his message, and other times it is not.

2. To the unbelieving mind, this “contradiction” could be used as an excuse for unbelief. But the unbeliever has far more significant reasons for not believing—namely a mind that is captured by sin, a repudiation of God’s judgment for his or her own sin, comfort level with the things of the world, etc.

For us who are believers here today, we need to remember that our faith is not determined or undermined by unbelievers. We *expect* them to doubt and cast stones. Their scholarship should not shake our faith in the least—because someone who does not believe God's word does not understand what he is talking about with regard to it!

C. Problem #2: Cursing a fig tree that was out of season. Why is it OK to curse a tree on which you wrongly expect to find fruit?

1. Answer... Some interpreters suggest that the fruit came out immediately with the leaves, but this does not follow normal tree behavior. In that case, the point would be that if it had leaves, it should also have fruit. Since it did not have fruit, something was wrong with it.

Other sources indicate that the season for fruit started in June. Passover time was in the spring, around April. The tree had fully leafed out, but it was not yet the time for ripe figs.

2. See below for a more complete answer, because the answer is tied up with the context of the gospels at this point.
- D. Focusing on the "problems" must not distract us from the truth. The so-called problems are not the point—and both can be explained. The fruitlessness is a parable or illustration of a spiritual truth.

II. The Meaning of the Fig Tree Illustration

- A. The juxtaposition of the fig tree with the cleansing of a dirty temple and a hard-hearted religious leadership is unmistakable, to this reader at least. The fig tree is very much like the nation of Israel and its capital city, Jerusalem.
- B. Old Testament connection: The fig tree comes up several times in the Old Testament. Sometimes it is used as part of a description of the peaceful and prosperous times in Israel, as when a man would "sit under his vine and fig tree" during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 4:25, Micah 4:4, Zech. 3:10). The ripe falling figs from a fig tree are a picture of judgment (Isaiah 34:4, Rev. 6:13). The lack of figs is a sign of judgment from God (Jer. 8:13). Israel is likened to a grape vine and fig tree (Hosea 9:10) and its condition indicates how well the nation is doing spiritually (Joel 1:7, 12). These OT examples are given to us for our warning and admonition (Romans 15:4, 1 Cor. 10:6, 11).
- C. The lesson is three-fold: a fruitless nation, divine judgment, and the power of believing prayer.
 1. At this point, we must read Luke 13:6-9. In the previous verses of Luke 13, Jesus exhorted the people to repent. They must bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Mark 3:8, Luke 3:8). They were likened to a fig tree. The owner comes for several years, but finds no fruit. He thinks the fig tree is worthless—and it seems to be. His vineyard keeper was patient and asked for another year for the tree to be fertilized and grow before it would be cut down and replaced with something more fruitful. The point is

that Jesus came to Israel looking for fruit, but instead he found nothing. Soon it would be time to cut down the fig tree. The fig tree—even though out of season—was perfect for this illustration. While fig trees only bear fruit once per season, the nation of Israel and her capital city Jerusalem should *always* be in season to bear spiritual fruit. Instead, they persecuted the prophets and were about to kill the premier prophet and Messiah, Jesus.

2. Jesus's saying symbolizes or foreshadows a pronouncement of judgment on Jerusalem. He was coming to a city which, like a leafy tree, may have had a form of godliness, but it had no fruit. The axe was near to chopping it down to the roots, because it was not bearing fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:10). In fact, many of her inhabitants would condemn Jesus to death in just a few days.

In the same way, the life of a person may look good from a distance, but there may be no real fruit, and inside the trunk is all sorts of rottenness.

In the same way, a church may appear to be wonderful on the outside. But is it full of dead men's bones on the inside?

3. The text also gives us another lesson about powerful prayer. See Matt 17:20 which has the same lesson. If you know that it is the will of God for a mountain to be removed and thrown into the sea, you could pray that and it would be done. Believing prayer does not ask God for things that are fantastical or sensational or personal preferences. It asks God for things that are godly and that would honor the Lord.

D. Application: Are you like a fruitless fig tree, facing judgment? Are you right with God and can therefore offer believing, pure prayer to Him to ask him something difficult? Stop right now and pray that way about whatever is heavy on your mind.

III. Prayer and Forgiveness: Mark 11:25

In Mark 11:25, we have additional information that also occurred at the end of the fig tree event. Mark records Jesus speaking about prayer for forgiveness toward others.

- A. Jesus envisions a situation where you are praying to God. If, at that time, you realize that you are holding something against someone, you need to forgive them right away. Once that is done, the "way is clear" for God to offer forgiveness to you. I take it that this means you get the issue straightened out in your heart so your heart is ready to be reconciled to that person. This is your heart's side of forgiveness. Later on, presumably very soon, you will go to that person and speak to them about your disposition toward them, if that is necessary, and be fully reconciled to that person.
- B. But if you do not forgive other people, then God will not forgive you. In other words, if you cannot forgive someone else, how in the world do you expect God to be pleased with you—the God Who has exercised such one-sided, magnanimous forgiveness toward you?
- C. I do not believe we have to get tangled up in a conversation about works-based salvation or non-works-based salvation. For *believers* that stand before God in prayer, if you are being hard hearted and not forgiving someone, then you should already realize in your heart that you cannot ask God to forgive you while you stubbornly hold an attitude of non-forgiveness toward another person. Are we often we are like that—like an unbeliever in our disposition about forgiveness while at the same time hoping for God to forgive us!
- D. If you never have an attitude of forgiveness toward others, then you should be able to figure out where you stand with God—and it is not a good place. If you have a very hard time being forgiving, cannot let things go, always are going back in your mind to events of the past that still bother you...then you too have a major problem. How can you expect your prayers to be heard while you harden your heart about those matters?

Conclusion

A barren tree reminds you to live a fruitful life so as to have a good judgment before God. Our prayers can be powerful, but they have to come from a righteous, forgiving life.

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