

# “The Fig Tree and Faith”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 7/14/19  
Mark 11:12-25, at FBC of Newport, NH

*//12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.//*

—Mark 11:12-14 (NIV)

From Jesus’ grand entry into Jerusalem, right under the noses of the Jewish authorities, Mark says in verse 11 that Jesus proceeded to go to the temple. There he looked around, but because it was late in the day, he left the city and went to stay in Bethany with the Twelve. The next day I think it’s fair to say Jesus rose up in the morning with a plan. He had taken note of the money changers and the obstruction of prayer in the courts of the Gentiles and he was zealously furious. This was his Father’s house and it was being insulted and abused by those who were supposed to be caring for it and caring for the people who sought God there in prayer and worship.

This plan was at least to go and confront what was happening. And it surely involved counting the cost of such a confrontation. It would not just be a disturbance; it would be a serious challenge to the chief priests and teachers of the law, calling them out in a way that would undermine their status in the eyes of the people. Not to mention, in the eyes of God. This plan would not have included his getting immediately arrested and crucified, not here just yet. He still had much teaching to do. Every Gospel in covering Jesus’ three or four year ministry takes extra time to expound on this last week of Jesus’ earthly life. Nearly a third of each Gospel is devoted to it. And that week was just getting started here with these first two days. So, Jesus not only had a plan of what he was going to do in cleaning the temple, he surely had an idea of making a clean get-a-way afterwards. You notice Jesus didn’t sleep in the city. He stayed in the outskirts in Bethany. He was not going to be taken by the authorities until everything God set out to accomplish was accomplished.

But on the way to the city, Jesus came across a fig tree with lots of promising leaves on it. He was hungry, so he went over to eat some of its early figs (called “taqsh” by the Arabs). Mark’s comment about the tree only having green leaves but nothing on it to eat is not revealing Jesus as being impatient and unreasonable. His statement reveals a tree promising fruit with its green leaves, and contradicting that promise with its lack of any taqsh. For if there’s no taqsh in the early season, then there will be no figs in the full season later.

These kinds of details show how familiar the Gospel writers were with the times and places of which they wrote. And they remind us how helpful it can be when others study to find out such things as “taqsh” and share it with readers who might otherwise get a wrong impression of Jesus’ approach to this tree.

Was it truly barren? Or was it going to produce fruit if Jesus had just waited longer? Did he so want to make his point that he cursed a perfectly healthy tree as if it were defying him? He could have done that. He is the maker of the trees and can do with them as he wishes and we could not fault him for it. But that would not be a true revelation of God's heart, as seen through his Anointed One described by Isaiah:

*"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.  
2 He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.  
3 A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
4 he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.  
In his teaching the islands [nations] will put their hope."*  
—Isaiah 42:1-4

We must also mention here that there would be a time when God *would* curse a perfectly healthy and righteous man as if he were a rebellious sinner defying God's desire for fruitfulness. In about five days time. That man would be Jesus. And the sign of his being cursed would be the fact that he was hung on a tree.

And yet, this would be a revelation not of cursing, but of the grace and love of God toward undeserving sinners—spared, forgiven and welcomed into God's presence through the willing sacrifice of God's own Son, this same Jesus.

So, Jesus finds the tree barren and the anger he intends to express toward the abusers of the temple becomes one and the same against this fig tree. He curses it. I'm sure his disciples took note, but said nothing.

From there they go to the temple. Sure enough, it's business as usual and it's not the business of God. Jesus makes a whip, drives out the animals and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. No one dares stand up against him. Would that be because of the Twelve being with him? I doubt it. It's possible. And it may have been a factor. But the only figure recorded here is that of Jesus and the righteous Spirit coming through this man's hands, feet and voice. Even here, though, that voice is teaching the crowd and the ones he's disrupting. Jesus cries out, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

Evidently a lot of that crowd was sympathetic to what Jesus was doing. They knew this moneychanging business was corrupt and that these courtyards were not the place for such business even if it were done properly. So, rather than oppose Jesus, the crowds were amazed by what he did and taught there.

When the chief priests and teachers of the law got the report of this “Breaking News,” they immediately knew how serious a threat Jesus was to them. They feared him. They feared him because the ordinary person in the crowd could sense the truth in him. And that was just not acceptable. It would be impossible for them to carry on with their somewhat comfortable, their very profitable business, and their prestigious way of life if the truth of their corruption were to become public knowledge. And if the champion of that truth, Jesus, was allowed to go unchallenged. So they, too, would have a plan. They desperately looked for a way to kill him.

Next morning, as Jesus and his followers are once again headed into Jerusalem along the same path as before, the Twelve notice that the fig tree Jesus cursed is now withered up and dead. Peter pointed this out to Jesus and Jesus does something interesting here. You would think he would point out the symbolism built into the whole thing. Israel is often portrayed in scripture as a fig tree, even to the point of a cursed fig tree. Listen to these verses in Jeremiah 24 spoken in regard to the impending 70 year exile punishing Israel for her rebellion.

*8 “But like the bad figs, which are so bad they cannot be eaten,” says the Lord, “so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. 9 I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse and an object of ridicule, wherever I banish them. 10 I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their ancestors.”*

—Jeremiah 24:8-10 (NIV)

There God likens the leaders of Jerusalem to bad figs worthy of cursing and sending into exile. Here in our text Jesus curses a fig tree just before confronting the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Surely that should be Jesus’ teaching when Peter and the others notice the very real effect of his words. But it isn’t. He doesn’t do that. The symbolism holds true just the same, but Jesus doesn’t say a word to them about it.

Instead, he speaks to them about having faith and about asking God for seemingly impossible things in prayer, like moving a mountain, and believing you have your answer, provided you are standing before God as a forgiven, and as a forgiving, follower of Jesus.

What is going on here?

One answer is found in the verses that come just before the ones I read to you. Here they are.

*4 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 5 “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. 6 My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. 7 I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.*

—Jeremiah 24:4-7 (NIV)

Clearly God is concerned with the good fruit fit for eating here in Jeremiah. He's not going to let the people it represents undergo the same fate as the bad fruit, even though both are going to experience the 70 year Exile. One will experience it as a curse and the other as a blessing.

So, when Jesus' disciples notice the death of the fig tree he had cursed, he wasn't concerned with teaching them about joining him in God's business of cursing the rebellious. God himself can take care of that. Jesus' main concern was that his disciples be numbered among the good figs, that they know how to be the good figs and how to participate with God by praying for others and forgiving others. That is the work Jesus came here to accomplish. Both the cursing and blessing are works only God can do. But the positively impossible work of blessing is the one Jesus wants his disciples to learn about and join in with him here.

How so?

First, by making sure you are sinner—who is forgiven by the grace of God! The power and proof of God's forgiveness for the world is found at the cross. It is only by him that any of us can be truly forgiven and cleansed of our sins. However, a personal proof for any of us who claim to have been forgiven by God through Christ would be for us to be forgiving toward others. Proof that God's forgiveness has gotten through *to* us is that it also goes *through* us as we relate to others. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." If we don't forgive others, chances are we haven't properly taken in God's forgiveness ourselves.

Secondly, by having faith and being faithful. Having faith that dares to ask God for things. No. Not the Mercedes-Benz and color TV sung about by Janice Joplin in 1970. (I'm showing my age now.) Instead, it would be to pray for the more impossible things in keeping with the priorities and purposes of God's kingdom. Praying for people to come to Christ. Praying for obstacles to be removed, doors to be opened. Praying for people to be healed, by both ordinary and miraculous means, as God sees fit. Both are to be seen as impossible without God.

As far as God's cursing goes, we really don't need to be instructed in that. There is a curse that comes from rejecting the Savior and the grace of God. But that is more of a by-product than anything else. Like figs, and other foods, they're not put on trees to make us hungry or starving. They're given to us as a blessing and source of life. If we reject the offer of such a blessing the only alternative is going to be the curse of hunger, starvation and death.

There will be no neutral ground when it comes to God's offer of Christ on that tree at Calvary.

But when we accept God's offer—in good faith—and when we pray and seek to pass it on to others—in good faith—there is satisfaction, life eternal, and cursing is no where to be found.