

THE PERIL OF FRUITLESSNESS MATTHEW 21:18-22

Jesus made an interesting statement regarding the things He said and did while He was here on earth. He said, "I only do what my Father tells me to do, and I only say what my Father tells me to say." This means that Jesus was never reactive or impulsive in the things He said and did because God directed Him to say and do every one of those things. It means that everything He said and did was choreographed by an infinitely wise and sovereign God; therefore, everything He said and did was thoughtful, deliberate, and purposeful. Every word was said, and every deed was done in order to make a point, teach a lesson, or reveal something about the character and will of God.

Keep that in mind as we read the following story, which took place on Monday and Tuesday morning of Holy Week, just a few days before Jesus was crucified.

Verses 18-19. *¹⁸ In the morning, as He was returning to the city, [Jesus] became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, He went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And He said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.*

This seemingly random story has puzzled Bible students for centuries, and I think you know why. One could easily read this and conclude that Jesus was hungry, wanted to eat some fresh figs, and when He did not find any on a leafy fig tree, He got mad, cursed the tree, and killed it. Which would suggest that Jesus lost His temper, and that He reacted rashly, selfishly, and cruelly because the tree did not meet His needs or expectations. And that conclusion leaves us to wonder about the sinlessness of our Savior, which has tremendous implications for our salvation.

But there *is* another explanation, especially if you consider that Jesus never acted independently of His Father, but only said and did what His Father told Him to say and do.

Before we explore the meaning and significance of this story, you should know that this incident is also recorded in Mark's Gospel, who reveals that it happened in two stages, over a two-day period (Mark 11:12-14; 20-24). This may seem like it contradicts Matthew's account, especially because Matthew tells us that the tree withered "*at once*," which makes it sound like the tree shriveled in seconds right before their eyes. "*At once*," however, can also be translated "*quickly*," and a tree withering in a 24-hour period would certainly qualify as *quickly* by horticultural standards.

In our exposition of this Gospel, you might have figured out by now that Matthew is not particularly interested in giving his readers a precise chronological narrative of Jesus' life and ministry. Instead, He is primarily concerned about the messianic implications of the things Jesus said and did, and often abbreviates, omits details, or combines two or more conversations or interactions into one. So, without contradicting Mark, Matthew tells the story of the fig tree all at once, keeping the focus on Jesus entering Jerusalem as the judging Messiah (Blomberg, NAC).

Thus, the initial encounter with the unfortunate fig tree happened on Monday morning after the triumphal entry on Sunday, as Jesus was making His way to the temple in Jerusalem. Matthew notes that Jesus "became hungry", which has suggested to many that He looked to the fig tree to satisfy His hunger, and that He expected to find fruit. Yet Mark notes that it was not yet the season for figs, so Jesus' subsequent curse has to stem from some reason other than the tree's failure to bear fruit through no fault of its own. Don't forget, Jesus created fruit trees and seasons. He certainly knew when to expect the fruit of a fig

tree to ripen and become edible.

So, what *is* the significance of this event? Jesus is returning to Jerusalem the morning after the triumphal entry. The path on which He and His disciples are walking traverses down the Mount of Olives to the Kidron Valley, and up the other side to Mount Zion, where the temple is located. As they are walking, they have a full, panoramic view of the temple, and can see the hustle and bustle of the Passover festival. They can see the crowded bizarre in the Gentile court. They can see the priests slaughtering animals, and the smoke rising from the altars on which they are being sacrificed.

That temple is Jesus' destination on this Monday morning. As I informed you last week, He is deliberately going there in order to fulfill prophecy, establish His authority, and defend His Father's honor. And as Jesus was descending the Mount of Olives with the Temple in full view, I can imagine Him thinking about the history of this glorious house of God, and all that God had accomplished in the lives of His people through it.

At the same time, Jesus had to be conscious of the fact that in just a few days He would single-handedly render this temple, and all its operations, obsolete. His own death would be the once-for-all sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, making animal sacrifices no longer necessary. During His death that thick curtain in the Holy of holies that was designed to separate a holy God from sinful men would tear from top to bottom, allowing *anyone* who believes in Jesus to enter into God's presence 24/7, not just the high priest once a year.

And yet on this day, Jesus could see all those people in that temple from a distance going through the motions, happily performing their religious duties, zealously conducting their temple business, convinced that these temple procedures and protocols would continue for all time. All of them were oblivious to what Jesus about to do and how it would affect their relationship with God and the temple. Most of them would stubbornly cling to their temple traditions, unwilling to accept this radical change, this new covenant, this completely different way of relating to God.

I don't believe you can understand this incident of the fig tree without understanding Jesus' anticipation of how the Jews would reject the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation through Him, and cling instead to what would become a hollow, empty, lifeless tradition. There is evidence in Scripture to suggest that Jesus was heartbroken all week over the people He had come to save, but who had or would reject Him. Just a day or two later, Jesus would stand on the Mount of Olives, look at Jerusalem, and tearfully cry out, ³⁷ *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing"* (Matt. 23:37).

And so, Jesus' encounter with this fig tree alongside the path should be understood as an *acted* parable. An acted parable is similar to an object lesson when a teacher performs an act to illustrate a greater reality. And so, it has a similar if not identical meaning to a parable Jesus told that is recorded in Luke's Gospel. ⁶ *And He told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?'"* (13:6-7).

In the ancient world fruit trees were not ornamental. The purpose of a fruit tree was to provide food, and if it did not bear fruit, it is good for nothing but firewood. Likewise, God's people are designed to bear spiritual fruit. Spiritual fruit refers to beliefs, attitudes, and behavior that corresponds to God's will and God's character. People who truly belong to God will be on the same page with God—they will (to some degree) understand and do His will,

resemble His character, and follow His leadership. If they do not, it proves that they don't really belong to Him, and, therefore, will be cursed and condemned, just like a barren fig tree was cursed and consigned to firewood. Spiritual fruitfulness is the ultimate test of whether or not someone truly belongs to God.

When Jesus cursed the fig tree (because it was unfruitful) and then it withered, He was illustrating that outward appearances can be misleading. A leafy fig tree in Springtime gives the appearance of fruitfulness from a distance, but a closer inspection proves otherwise. Likewise, people may appear, from their words and actions, to belong to God. They show up at His house and give Him lip service; they participate in His festivities and lend their voices in worship; they read His word and follow His commands. But, as Jeremiah and Isaiah prophesied, their hearts are far from Him. For all practical purposes, the God who wants to be known, is a stranger to them.

And, unfortunately for them, their destiny will be like that of the fig tree. They will perish.

But none of this, I'm afraid, was on the minds of Jesus' disciples. On Monday morning, Mark is careful to let His readers know that the disciples heard Him curse the fig tree. Twenty-four hours later, while again on their way to Jerusalem, they passed by the fig tree and, **verse 20.** ***20** When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?"*

At this point, they have not interpreted this an acted parable. They are not contemplating the spiritual significance of fruitlessness. They are simply and naturally focused on the fig tree's rapid demise. Oh, they had seen plenty of diseased fruit trees wither, but not overnight, and so Matthew tells us that they were astonished. My translation suggests that in their astonishment, they *asked* Jesus how the tree withered so quickly. That is a possible interpretation, but the grammar in the Greek text could also lead one to interpret their remark as an exclamation. "Oh wow! Look how the fig tree withered quickly!" And this interpretation seems much more likely, for in Mark's account we are told that Peter, speaking for the disciples, *"...said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" (Mark 11:21).*

Without explaining the parable, and without telling them why He cursed the fig tree, Jesus responds to the disciples' surprise and exclamation, **verse 21,** ***21** And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. **22** And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."*

It might seem that the natural and simplest way to interpret Jesus' words, here, would be to conclude that Jesus was responding to the disciples' question about how the fig tree withered so quickly, and changed the subject from judgment to prayer. But that is not typical of what Jesus did in conversations, not is it typical of Matthew's writing style. It seems much more likely that Jesus was making a connection between the significance of the cursed fig tree and the power of the disciples' prayer. And I believe the prayer He is talking about here is more focused and specific than merely praying about *anything* and then expecting to receive it if you ask for it in faith. I believe Jesus' promise to the disciples is foreshadowing a very important role they would soon have.

Let me explain: Jesus is essentially telling His disciples that what He has just done, they also would do, if they have faith and do not doubt. What did Jesus just do? Yes, He cursed a fig tree and caused it to wither. But that was only symbolic, for, remember, this is an *acted* parable. What He really did was *prophesy*. He just gave a warning of judgment to those who only appear to belong to God, but do not, because they do not give evidence of belonging to Him by bearing spiritual fruit. So, what Jesus just did, namely produce dramatic,

miraculous, symbolic prophetic acts warning of judgment, the disciples will also do if they have faith and do not doubt (Nolland).

You may remember that earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus responded to the disciples' question about why they were not able to exorcise the demons from a little boy. And He told them they were unable to do it because of their little faith. Then He said, *For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you (17:20).* In that context, the moving of the mountain is an image for doing something humanly impossible in the normal course of events.

But in Matthew 21, throwing this mountain into the sea seems to be linked with the withering of the fig tree. So, what is that connection? Probably the first thing we need to discern is what Jesus meant by "this mountain", and is there something about "this mountain" that is related to judgment, represented by the symbolic act of cursing the fig tree?

It would be natural to understand "this mountain" as the Mount of Olives, upon which Jesus and the disciples were standing. It certainly would not have been lost on Jesus that there was an Old Testament prophecy about the removal of the Mount of Olives that stood in front of Jerusalem? Zechariah states, *⁴ On that day His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. ⁵ And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with Him (14:4-5).*

What Zechariah is describing here is the levelling of the area in front of Jerusalem. The reason for this levelling is to open up an escape route from Jerusalem while it is under attack from its enemies (Nolland). In other words, removing the mountain (the Mount of Olives) is God's provision for a way of escape from death and destruction. Jesus interprets this prophecy eschatologically. If the withering of the fig tree foreshadows eschatological judgment, the removal of the Mount of Olives foreshadows eschatological salvation.

Just a couple of days after Jesus spoke these words, Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives and predicted a time when Jerusalem would come under attack resulting in the destruction of the temple. But He also described a time when Jerusalem's inhabitants would need to flee because of the tribulation (Matt. 24). But in that same discourse Jesus portrays the grand and glorious arrival of the Son of Man, Himself, similar to how Zechariah describes the coming of God and His holy ones in verse 5.

If Jesus had Zechariah's prophecy in mind when using the imagery of disposing of the Mount of Olives, there still remains the question of what this might mean for the disciples. Do they 'remove the mountain' by praying for the end-time coming of the Son of Man? Do they metaphorically 'remove the mountain' by proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and thus opening up for people the place of escape and achieving what God intends before the end will come (Mt. 24:14)? We cannot be sure (Nolland).

Maybe it's both, and maybe it involves something else. But in one way or another, through the exercise of faith, the disciples contribute miraculously not only in their proclamation of judgment, but also to the restoration that represents the culmination of God's purposes. In whatever way the disciples are to contribute, the importance of the coming of the kingdom of heaven throughout Matthew links nicely with Zechariah 14:9, *⁹ And the LORD will be king over all the earth.*" This, of course, is ultimately what removing the mountain is

about (Nolland, NIGTC), and it is ultimately the message of Matthew's Gospel.

Though I understand that this interpretation of this passage is a bit complicated, I think it makes the best sense in light of all that was happening and about to happen during Holy Week. Matthew has already emphasized in both the Triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple that Jesus was fulfilling messianic prophecy, something that was extremely important to His predominately Jewish audience. It seems logical to assume that Jesus was also fulfilling prophecy in this event.

Besides the Zechariah passage, Jesus and Matthew's audience would have also been familiar with Micah 7:1, which states, "*What misery is mine!*

*I am like one who gathers summer fruit
at the gleaning of the vineyard;
there is no cluster of grapes to eat,
none of the early figs that I crave (Micah 7:1).*

Could this have been a prophecy about Messiah's experience of coming to His own, but His own receiving Him not (John 1:11)?

And then, there is Jeremiah's prophecy.

¹³ " *'I will take away their harvest, declares the
LORD. There will be no grapes on the vine.
There will be no figs on the tree,
and their leaves will wither.*

*What I have given them
will be taken from them.'* " (Jer. 8:13)

Again, in the context of the judgment of Israel for rejecting God's provision in Jesus as its Savior and Deliverer, it makes a lot of sense. And it also makes a lot of sense that Jesus would be foreshadowing the very important role His disciples would soon have. Indeed, He had prepared and equipped them for this very role and had given them the keys of the kingdom so that whatever they bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and whatever they loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven.

As I began to study this passage on Monday morning, I admit I was a bit confused and dismayed. I try very hard to be objective and honest in my exegesis of a passage, and I found myself writing down a number of questions that raised some yellow if not red flags in my mind. If I didn't know Jesus better, I could have easily concluded that Jesus got angry because the fig tree failed to satisfy His hunger. Or that He abused His power by cursing and condemning it. When I learned from Mark's Gospel that this was not the season for figs, it was even more troubling. I thought of the farmers I know who would have a hard time putting their faith in a Person who couldn't distinguish between seasons.

But when I learned the things I just shared with you—that this is an acted parable, that Jesus was describing how people can know for sure that they truly belong to God, and that He was foreshadowing a very important role His disciples would have in the near future, I am endeared to Him even more. To know that everything He did was deliberate and had a purpose, and to know that everything He did was ultimately for the good of people, magnifies the love of Jesus to me. It makes me all the more grateful for His Word, which reveals these incredible things about Him, and all the more eager to see Him face to face.

To Him be the praise and glory, forever and ever!

The Peril of Fruitlessness Matthew 21:18-22

Main Idea: *Spiritual fruitfulness is the ultimate test of whether or not someone truly belongs to God.*

A hungry Jesus encounters a leafy fig tree (18-19)

He discovers it has no fruit

He curses it

It “immediately” withers

Interpreting this event

It is an “acted” parable

It is the fulfillment of prophecy (Jer. 8:13; Mic. 7:1)

It is about bearing spiritual fruit

Those who bear spiritual fruit prove they belong to God

Those who do bear no fruit will be condemned

The disciples express astonishment at the withered tree (20)

Jesus makes a bold prediction (21-22)

With unwavering faith they can move “this mountain”

The meaning of “this mountain”

The meaning in this particular context

With faith they can receive whatever they ask in prayer