

“BARREN”

- Matthew 21:18-22

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers Church
in Menomonie, Wisc
on March 4, 2018

Matthew 21:18-22 *Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. And*

when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."



The use of the tree in scripture as an analogy or a metaphor is quite common. No doubt because few pictures so readily and accurately encompass the likeness of who and what we are to be as living, vibrant and producing entities. Firmly connected to Christ, drinking in the water of the Spirit, and producing fruit for the Creator and Master. Christ spoke readily and easily concerning the issue of servanthood, sacrifice, and “fruit” production stemming from the living out of our faithful lives. John chapter 15 goes in deep on the subject in a beautiful picture of our abundance while connected to Christ. The understanding of all of this quite naturally fits into our post-redeemed lives...side by side the call to move beyond the early salvation state of milk and move on to the “meat” of doctrine and understanding.

It has been rightly pointed out that this is the only miracle in which Jesus condemned rather than blessed. The only time He destroyed rather than gave life. Hence we certainly should sit up and take notice to whatever scenario...whatever situation that would generate what quite frankly is a serious “throw down” by Christ himself. This is not a story to ignore or even take lightly! For the ramifications of what is occurring in this story has reverberations down through the history of the church and touches every individual who would believe themselves to be a Christian today.

Truth be told, there are aspects of the person and nature of Jesus Christ that we would often like to pretend do not exist or we would like to replace. After all, Jesus was known to have referred to some folks as dogs, snakes, hypocrites and fools amongst other things. While he did not seem to go out of His way to offend, it did tend to happen on a fairly regular basis. Even the apostles were sometimes uncomfortable by things Jesus said and did. In Matthew 15:12 we read that “...the disciples came to him and asked, ‘Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?’” I don’t know if they thought He was going to go and apologize or something? Certainly we know He did not!

We all tend to cling to a personally comfortable view of Jesus that may or may not be accurate scripturally. Many times that view is one where Jesus is perpetually “meek and mild....gracious and passive.” While often

there are indeed those attributes present, this is not one of those stories. This is not a “keep-a-stiff-upper-lip-because-God-loves-you” story. Rather this is a “get-it-together-or-there-will-be-hell-to-pay” scenario.

Firstly, we need to understand the setting for what occurred: the “context” of the story. Jesus was not acting out of some sort of selfish motivation. I think we can assume that He wasn’t just grouchy because he was hungry or something! After all, he fed 5000 with a couple of loaves of bread and a few fishes, so he could handle providing lunch for the boys if he needed to. And I don’t think He was motivated by some weird hatred for figs! However it does seem that He was exploiting a “teachable moment.” Because as often was the case, Jesus would herein paint a symbolic picture of a quite real spiritual scenario. For this type of fig tree had some special characteristics which made it a great symbol of the state of His ministry at that point, as well as a snapshot of things to come for all of us today. It would represent the supreme litmus test of one’s true spiritual position.

We know that Jesus had just rode into Jerusalem as the long awaited King and Messiah. When He did so, the people praised Him and hailed Him King. But literally within days, those same people would be a part of the masses to cry out "crucify Him, crucify Him." Having myself experienced a small and personal picture of this same phenomena many times in the years of ministry, I can perhaps relate to this event on a more personal note! Everyone who was in attendance and participated in that scene...even those who played a benign part, would now have a roll in His fig tree scenario.

It is understood that this particular type of fig tree seasonally bears an “early fruit.” But it is also a fact that if that early fruit fails for any reason to appear, then it is assured that there would also be no *latter* fruit. Jesus failed to see the early fruit in Israel that would or at least *should* naturally exist in a people that had just experienced the presence of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The picture that was being presented was one reflecting not only Israel *en masse*, but shines the bright light of judgement on each and every one of us throughout the ages who would count ourselves as a true child of God.

Generally speaking, this fig tree would not have leaves apart from the fruit, *at least if the tree was in a healthy state*. So the tree then may have the distant appearance of health, but may very well be quite sickly, languishing and even dying. To the novice and passing individual it might *look* healthy, but in fact it may all be simply “window-dressing.” A tree...*or an individual*, may **look** good but closer scrutiny can expose a very different reality! Because both then and now, there are many of us who are just pretending. Pretending that we are indeed spiritually healthy and producing fruit, but in reality there is nothing but leaves. Pouring our energies into an outward façade that in fact is just for public show.

I wonder how many of us today are simply wearing an *appearance* of a healthy state, but it is in fact just an outward pretense? We **look** good but there is no fruit! For Jesus, it was a country in hypocrisy. For us today, it is churches, and it is the individuals that make them up. It appears that Jesus *made* this tree die, but the fact is, the lack of this early fruit was simply and naturally saying there would be no fruit later on. He was simply stating the created and natural reality of the state of the tree and “how things really were” even if He hurried along the verdict.

With that understanding of the field of play, we then must step back and without prejudice or alteration, see just how Jesus dealt with such a scenario. For all of this is indeed a picture, an *example*, of God's dealing with such individuals of the same stripe. The “players” had effectively been given everything and produced nothing.

What's doubly troubling is that the tree in question did not cease to be a fig tree, it just simply was thereafter a cursed one. A fig tree that would *never* see any fruit!

Naturally, the apostles were amazed. The judgment and its sentence was swift and absolute. There was no delay and no reprieve. Its verdict and its penalty would come in this life, and not merely in some nebulous "hereafter."

Why did Jesus destroy the tree?

- He destroyed it for the same reason that He angrily ran through the temple casting out all who bought and sold.
- He destroyed it for the same reason that He lashed out at the Pharisees for being hypocritical (Matthew 23:13-39).
- He destroyed it for the same reason that He cast the evil spirits into a herd of swine, killing them (Matthew 8:28-34).
- He destroyed it for the same reasons that He became indignant (angry) with the disciples for keeping little children from coming to Him
- He destroyed it for the same reason that He deliberately demanded uncompromising loyalty despite family or personal needs. (Matthew 8:18-22; Matthew 10:34-39).

(Wordsearch)

It is interesting herein that Jesus didn't scold them for their lack of theological expertise, or the absence of religious ritual and practice, or in this case even any shortcoming concerning their personal failures and sin! No it was *one thing* alone. It was the lack of practical, natural, and expected fruit. They weren't *producing* anything! The tree wasn't cursed for being too small or not being pretty, just for the fact it produced nothing.

The underlying story herein was the fact that this is a picture of the absence of real and practical evidence of conversion, as well as the lack of the subsequent "*post-salvation*" faith that is sure to follow such a cataclysmic event as rebirth! True rebirth would naturally *cultivate* kingdom and would finally and surely *produce a harvest* for God and kingdom. There was no demand for a certain amount of fruit to be judged worthy, but rather there was *zero* fruit. Simply nothing! Colossians 1:10 exhorts us to "...walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." Real faith, if it is fact, will be both verifiable, quantifiable, and personally "organic." There would simply be a natural and sure faith and power emanating from our lives. Not through discipline and effort...*although there is indeed a place for that*, but rather by the natural and inherent biology of spiritual regeneration and metamorphosis.

So while the absence of fruit was the overt reason behind this judgment as well as this *story*, the *cause* behind such missing evidence is the deep concern! The reality is that such lack stemmed from the absence of a real and living belief in Jesus Christ. An active and living faith in what He taught, who He is, what is at stake, what He wants from us, and how He wants us to go about it.

Jesus once starkly asked Peter: "**Peter...do you love me?**" In the answer to this question lies the power to move mountains! Please understand that the fruit itself is not immanently critical to Jesus...for God "owns the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalms 50:10) and if He needed anything at all, He wouldn't tell us! (Psalms 50:12) It is however critical to *us*! For in it lies the evidence of our salvation and our true love of Christ and kingdom. It speaks of unity with Him and truth as to what we really are. It is important to serve as a litmus test...a

measuring stick, of the reality of our conversion. Because the empirical truth... verbalized or not, is manifested in our lives. We are not saved by what we do, but what we do says we are saved... *and often says we are not.*

The power to do great things for God does not lay in religious knowledge, busy-work, or outward "leaves" of appearance that make us look healthy and spiritual to the people around us. It does not come from spiritual "bling." Such power comes only from the active presence of the Holy Spirit inside us. And he does not dwell in a being that is unredeemed! The Spirit of God is not lazy or inert! So if He is in you, it is evident! Again, Jesus asked Peter, "Peter... *do you love me?*" And the instruction which came in response to Peter's affirmative reply, was "Ok... *great! If that is a fact, then 'feed my sheep.'*" "Produce some fruit Peter!"

The judgement which was bestowed herein was dramatic and emphatic. There is no missing the point that Jesus was making! Matthew 3:10 supports this position saying "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." In light of such a position, is there any chance for those of us who perhaps stand fruitless in our walk today? Yes... there is a provision for those whose hearts are in the right place but have failed to thus far "walk worthy" of the salvation they have been granted. Jesus is not a 'cut-throat.' While truth and integrity demand there be a finality to this issue, He is still loving, gracious, and ever so patient.

Luke 13: 6-9 tells us another story. "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

That's good news for some of us. For others of us it simply delays the inevitable. But what does that mean? What does it mean to "fertilize?" Well, anyone who knows plants at all, know that the fertilizer is food and thus health. **1 Peter 2:2** says "...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation..." **John 6:51** says "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh." We have all we need here to not just grow but blossom and produce! **Jeremiah 3:15** rightly tells us that "...I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding."

To "fertilize" calls us to consume His presence and His Word. It will require time and investment on our part. All we need has been given to us, but we must be willing and desirous to spend time in His presence and prioritize our lives accordingly. Our stated love for Christ must reach beyond church attendance and a moral façade. We have to actually and passionately *want* to produce for Christ! Such an impassioned desire as this stems from firstly genuine rebirth and then a real thankfulness for life, the gospel cross, and His providential presence in our lives. There must also be a love for others beyond ourselves... a zeal to see those who are eternally lost come to salvation also. This too is an element of rebirth in us.

That day on the lakeshore... the words of the post-resurrected Jesus must have found root in Peter. Because when the question was asked... "Peter, do you love me?" we see a man who went on to move the world in his own right. His ministry is legendary. He later wrote these words in personal testimony: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." (2Peter 3:9)