

## **A Curse Upon Those Who Refuse To Bear Fruit**

**03/24/2024**

### **Scripture 1: (Mk. 11:1-25 ESV)**

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'"

And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields.

And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."

And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

## Sermon:

Today we celebrate “Palm Sunday”, our remembrance of Jesus’ “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem:

- An occasion that was prophesied long ago by the prophet Zechariah, writing “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*”; and
- Commemorating Jesus’ “social coronation” by the swollen Passover crowd, “*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!*”; and
- A welcoming sign act which echoed the earlier separation of the Pascal Lamb during the Passover in Egypt.

This event set in final motion Jesus’ sacrificial death and atoning work upon the cross, His resurrection on the third day, and His triumph over sin and death. Praise the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!

Since the Palm Sunday story should already be very familiar to most of us, I will not be focusing on His entrance today. However, while we all know how busy this coming “Holy Week” is for Christians, including: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil, and Resurrection Sunday; where each unique worship service serves as a memorial and reminder about different and important events in Jesus’ Passion, we often forget or miss how “extra busy” this week was for Jesus Himself.

Here is a trivia question for you. How many chapters within the four Gospels discuss Jesus’ last week of life?

- Matthew chapters 21-27, (7/28) - 25%
- Mark chapters 11-15, (5/16) - 31.25%
- Luke 19-23, (5/24) - 20.23%
- John chapters 12-19, (8/21) - 38.09%
  - Total, (25/89) - 28.09%

More than 25% of the Gospels are given over to describing the last seven days of Jesus’ life {not including the Resurrection story}; actually, it is only His last six days since there was no activity recorded on the Sabbath. A lot went on for Jesus during that week, especially Sunday through Wednesday.

Jesus said and did a lot during the final week of His earthly life, but we do not usually hear about it within its proper and historical context. The Gospel writers recorded Jesus’ strongest and most forceful teachings during that week, such as: clearing the money-changers; His combative dialogs with the Jewish, religious elite; and the Olivet Discourse prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem and the ultimate day of judgment. Yet we either cherry pick much of Jesus’ recorded teaching from during this week, or we gloss over it and ignore the things that we do not like or understand.

- I want to challenge all of us this week by encouraging each of us to read one chapter a day from the Gospel of Matthew: chapter 21 today, through chapter 27 on next Saturday; in preparation for our time of worship next week. I want us to meditate on the things that He taught during that week, all the while knowing that these were going to be His last recorded words and final valediction.

Now today, we will consider one of Jesus' more strange and difficult teachings to accept: the sign of the fig tree (which is also found in Matthew 21:18-21).

*“On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.”*

What in the world is going on here? That does not sound like the “normal” Jesus we know and love does it? It absolutely does not sound like the Jesus which the world and “cultural Christianity” find acceptable to promote:

- The Jesus who is always and only about love;
- Who never judged or condemned anyone;
- Who was always tolerant and accepting of everyone and everything;
- Who never said a harsh, unkind, or mean word to or about anyone.

But **that** is not the Jesus of sacred Scripture, **this is**.

Regardless, the idea of Jesus cursing a fig tree simply because it did not have fruit for Him to eat when He was hungry, does not easily match up with how we think about the Jesus who taught and preached in Galilee.

So again, what in the world is going on here?

- Why does Jesus get mad and act so harshly and in such a drastic way?
- Was Jesus being unreasonable or irrational, looking for figs when He knew they were out of season?

Let us try and discern what is going on in this story.

- “*On the following day...*”, this would be the Monday of Holy Week.
- “*...when they came from Bethany...*”, Bethany was a town over on or just on the other side of the Mount of Olives. It was a “Sabbath’s day walk”<sup>1</sup> to the Temple, which was about three quarters of a mile. Bethany is also the town where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived and with whom we assume Jesus was staying during the festival, because of John 12.
  - Since the average person’s average walking speed is about 3 miles per hour<sup>2</sup>, walking ¾ of a mile should ordinarily take about 15 minutes.
  - So, if we consider the downs and ups which define the Kidron Valley, the area between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem, along with other traffic factors, we reasonably assume that this was at least a 20-30 minute walk for Jesus and His disciples.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199543984.001.0001/acref-9780199543984-e-2168>

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.google.com/url?](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjimqfmwoOFAXXDpLAFHaj8BYAQFnoECAYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.medicalnewstoday.com%2Farticles%2Faverage-walking-speed&usg=AOvVaw0Uc8G7UTFJzaxeVNtHkYV3&opi=89978449)

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- “...*he [Jesus] was hungry.*”, now that I have walked this same general route myself, I can easily imagine Jesus being both hungry and thirsty mid-way through this journey. It is a warm and strenuous hike, even today.

But none of this excuses or justifies Jesus for acting “hangry”<sup>3</sup>.

So then, what is really going on?

*“And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.”*. Mark clearly assumes here that we {his audience} know something about agriculture and the growth cycle of fig trees.

The most common varieties of figs grown in Israel have two growth seasons each year. The first batch ripens around June, while the second batch ripens around September; neither of which are ever near the time of Passover. However, when and just before fig trees begin to produce their fruit, they grow these large, wide leaves (which also makes them excellent shade trees). So, then this story can be understood very simply:

- Jesus saw a fig tree.
- Jesus saw a fig tree with leaves, a sign that figs are (or soon will be) growing.
- Since Jesus did not find any figs, He cursed the tree for “false advertising” and because it was not fulfilling its’ intended and natural function or purpose (growing figs).

Jesus did not act unjustly, nor did He act in an unrighteous manner. Jesus condemned the tree because He judged it and found it wanting. Its’ leaves suggested figs, but it did not deliver them. The tree did not meet Jesus’ expectation.

- The fig tree, in that moment, was being a “fake”. A fig tree without figs can hardly be said to be a “fig tree”, can it?
- The fig tree, in that moment, was being a “hypocritical”. It wore a mask of fruitfulness when it was empty and fruitless.

Thus, Jesus condemned the tree for its’ falsity, and its’ failure, pronouncing judgment against it. Jesus was not acting unreasonable or being unfair to the fig tree, despite it not being in season, because the tree presented itself as if it were bearing fruit.

One thing which Jesus always condemned was hypocrisy (Matt 6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13-29; Mark 7:6; Luke 12:56; 13:15) and in that moment, that particular fig tree, which was often used as a symbol of Israel’s peace and prosperity (1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10), represented the Jewish people, their religion, and their spiritual hypocrisy. They put on a great show of faith through all of their grand religious rites and rules and practices; they bore all the signs to suggest that they were bearing good fruit for the LORD but, generally speaking, they were lacking internal and consequential spiritual fruit.

Yet what Jesus did and said here, is not really all that strange when we compare Him with the Old Testament prophets. Prophets did not just speak God’s word to the people, many times they also did symbolic things. They

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<sup>3</sup>[https://www.google.com/url?](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiMmP7MxIOFAxWjRTABHZEbDbUQFnoECCIQAAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.merriam-webster.com%2Fdictionary%2Fhangry&usq=AOvVaw3A8Hth7fAnOSY0_SMwhKSz&opi=89978449)

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performed specific, unique actions visibly demonstrate and proclaim God's Holy Word. Some famous examples would be when Jeremiah went down to the potter's house (Jeremiah 18), Hosea's marriage to Gomer (the whole of Hosea), or Ezekiel lying upon his side (Ezekiel 4); this is what was often meant by "signs" (as in "signs and wonders"), since they were pointing us towards something greater than themselves.

Jesus: after examining the fig tree, finding it empty, and cursing it; He and His disciples continued on their way up into Jerusalem. They next went up into the Temple where Jesus drove out the moneychangers and the other merchants who were extorting and exploiting the Jewish pilgrims and defiling the outer courts of the LORD's Temple. Meanwhile, through all of this, Jesus continued to teach the people. He taught everyone who would listen to Him and heed His words. This was sorely upsetting to the chief priests and other religious leaders because He made them feel afraid, while the ordinary people were astonished and impressed by Jesus. Then, after all the excitement had died down, after this busy and angry day, *"...when evening came they went out of the city."*

*As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."*

The next morning (this would be on Tuesday of Holy Week), they discovered the consequence of Jesus' curse: the fig tree had withered and died. The Creator of the Universe had withdrawn the grace of His favor and providence, causing this fruitless tree to dry up and become a worthless husk. A clear sign of judgment and the wrath of God: a judgment against the Jew's hypocrisy and a judgment against their lack of faith. This was also an affirmation and validation of Jesus' word and His divine authority.

Now although this sign of the fig tree might seem to be unnecessarily harsh to us, it is not unique nor is it out of character for Jesus. This interpretation cannot be considered radical, extreme, or unfair because the same message is repeated clearly in the other Gospels and in many of Jesus' other parables and signs also given during this week.

Two points of context which we must remember when we consider these stories from Jesus' last week on earth are:

- First, the Jews of Jesus' time were looking for their Messiah to come; they were looking for the LORD to appear and set everything right for them again.
- Second, as God's chosen, Elect people; as a people "holy to the LORD", possessing God's Holy Law; as a "kingdom of priests" (Ex 19:6); they should never have been "out of season" for spiritual fruit!

Understanding this, we then recognize this same or a similar theme within Jesus' parable about the ten virgins, where only the five who kept their lamps lit and ready for the bridegroom to appear were welcomed in, while the others were condemned to darkness (Matthew 25); the parable about the tenants and the vineyard, who beat and murdered the messengers and the son of the property owner, yet still did not inherit his property (Matthew 21:33-43; Mark 12); or in the story of the *"faithful and wise servant"* (Matt 24:45-51; Mark 13:32-37) who was prepared for his master's arrival, even at an unexpected hour and was gladly praised and rewarded. We also see it in Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees, as He calls them *"whitewashed tombs"*; clean and perfect on the outside, but were filled inside with corruption, hypocrisy, death, and lawlessness (Matt 23:26-28).

Whether read alone or taken together with these others, the message of the fig tree is clear: "Be Ready", "Be Real", and "Do What You Are Meant To Do". We must bear the fruit which our God and King expects us to bear and we must be bearing it when He expects us to bear it; which is all of the time.

However, this message was not just intended, not only intended, for the Jews worshiping in the Jerusalem Temple. It is also pointed directed towards us, as Christians.

Just as the fig tree withered immediately and was dead by the next morning because of Jesus' curse and condemnation, the Jewish religion withered and all the glories of the Temples façade collapsed into total ruin in 70 AD. Their just judgment came swiftly because they were the ethnic "people of God"; so, should we think that the judgment we may be due would or should come more slowly?

Perhaps having this fig tree in mind, the Apostle Peter reminds us, *"For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?"* (1 Peter 4:17).

Do we, are we bearing fruit for Jesus Christ and His Kingdom as we ought? Do we still fear His judgment and condemnation (Romans 8:34) because we, above all others, are without excuse and should be judged the most severely even as we expect His mercy and grace.

These stories, parables, and signs which speak of judgment against the Jews are also reminders and warnings for us, because now as then, Jesus has expectations of His people, very high expectations; the highest.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *"...every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."* (Matt 7:17-19) and a tree which stubbornly refuses to bear fruit, must necessarily be considered diseased because it fails to produce good fruit. So while Jesus was specifically talking about His prophets, His pastors, and His leaders, He was also talking about the whole of His Elect people.

If we truly belong to Christ, then we will certainly bear good fruit. But if we bear bad fruit, or if we bear no fruit at all, then we cannot rightly claim to belong to Him.

American Christianity and Christians in America alike (because those two expressions are not synonymous) need to take note of this warning because 1<sup>st</sup> Century, Second Temple Judaism showed all of the signs of being thriving and vibrant expression religious faith, just like we do (if we are willing to admit it). Back then:

- People studied their Scripture and engaged in vigorous theological debates {Hillel and Shammai} which led to rival schools of interpretation, the: Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes (and eventually "the Way" of Jesus Christ or Christians).
  - Compare that to modern denominationalism, are Baptists and Presbyterians really so different in this sense {we are **significantly** and **fundamentally** different in our sacramentology}?
- The Jewish people were "religious" because it was a social and cultural requirement. Visibly obeying the purity laws, regularly attending Temple and synagogue services was all part of their Jewish identity, and intentionally separating themselves from other people's and cultures (namely the Romans) that were viewed as "the enemy".
  - Compare that to our modern social "virtue signaling", with the different "religious" displays by individuals of pro-religion (Christian, Jew, Muslim), anti-religion (atheist or secularist), or non-obvious religion (Republican, Democrat, XYZ Activist, or Sexuality-based) identities; or of our "cancel culture" mindset, our division into Red and Blue States, of citizen versus alien migrant, or Ohio State and Michigan fans.

- Religion provided the foundation for their legal system (for the Romans and the Jews alike), but political expediency and the quest for individual power and influence easily overrode personal ethics and morality which resulted in a disparate environment of “Not for Me, but for Thee”, based upon an individual’s social position or personal power.
  - Can we compare that to our present world? Yes, there are just too many examples for me to choose from.
- I would say that 1<sup>st</sup> Century Israel was less of a Jewish nation (even discounting their occupied and oppressed status) and more of a nation comprised of Jews.
  - Compare that to the US, which has never been a “Christian Nation” but was founded as a nation of Christians, and is now a nation which proudly includes many other opposing, anti-Christian religions.
- It is safe to say that during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, there were many people who simply participated in all the outward forms of Jewish religion because it was what was expected of them, being ethnic Jews and not because of their sincerity of faith.
  - Compare that to our present day, where many people still participate in all the outward forms of religion (or irreligion) because that is what is expected of them socially and not because of any kind of sincerity of faith.
    - Personally, I expect that if you ask most people what they believe about any number of matters or subjects, few will be able to formulate any definitive answer.
  - However, then as now, there always remains a faithful remnant of true believers, God’s Elect: the “wheat” which has grown up among the “tares” (Matt 13:24-30 KJV); therefore, we may still have hope for the future. God always preserves His Church.

When we look at ourselves with such a perspective, it is not difficult to recognize how similar we are to them, further demonstrating that people do not change. We cannot and will not change, apart from the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

So, if Jesus’ judgment upon the fig tree symbolized His judgment upon the Jewish people for their lack of faith and their failure to bring forth the good fruit which He expected of them, and their whole way of life was soon destroyed; how much more does it symbolize the church (the little “c” church) and might it lead us to wonder what form our judgment will appear as?

Jesus certainly could have spoken a word and caused that fig tree to immediately bring forth fruit instead of cursing it, just as Jesus could speak a word and cause His people to always be faithful, obedient, and loving (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8), but that has never been God’s plan or purpose. He wants us to respond out of our love for Him and bear good fruit according to our new, regenerate nature.

Perhaps this will give us a different understanding and better appreciation for Paul’s admonition to Timothy, to {Be ready, in season and out.} (2 Tim 4:2); no longer limiting it to preaching or to defending the Gospel with our words but expanding it to also include our deeds done out of our faith. Yes, and while Paul describes the “fruit of the Spirit” as being, “...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (Gal 5:22-23), those are each internal “fruit” and internal benefits given for us; for our enjoyment and our use for Christ and His Kingdom, to transform these gifts into the “fruit” that He is expecting from us.

The honest question for us is not, “Do we have these “fruit of the Spirit?”” but instead, it is “What are we doing with them?” and “How are we loving others in the Name of Jesus Christ by using them?”.

This is where the missional rubber truly meets the road. What are we doing with them and how are we loving others through them? How are you doing and loving?

- Our recent cereal collection was one example. Thank you to everyone that brought some in!
- Another example was eating at Chipotle because it was our Preschool’s fundraiser night. Thank you to everyone who participated.

We also support a lot of different missions and charities as a congregation, but what and how are you doing these sorts of things yourself and as a part of your family?

Yes, we need and get to do a lot of these things corporately as part of the capital “C” Church within the little “c” church; but we are also supposed to be doing them ourselves, as individuals.

- While giving is often a part of doing, giving is not doing and there are very few of us who cannot be doing more, me included.

So, are we displaying the broad and wide leaves of personal piety, but lacking the true spiritual fruit?

I would challenge all of us to examine our own fruit, because when Jesus comes up to our tree expecting to find our fruit, we do not want to disappoint Him and be found lacking.

- Is our yield as bountiful as it could and should be, or is our crop withering and dying?
- What more can each of us do and what more can we do as a church?
  - If you need or want help finding and generating ideas, then please come see me and I will help you or get you connected with someone else who can.

I cannot answer these questions about you. We must each act as we are convicted by the Holy Spirit, but we all can and should be helping one another with this, because that is a part of the purpose for us congregating together as a church, as the author of Hebrews tells us, “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*” (Heb 10:24-26 ESV).

So, remember the sign and lesson of the fig tree. Bearing good fruit is just one way in which we get to bring God glory, a way in which we give God glory, and a way in which He enjoys us, and we may enjoy Him. So, bear the good fruit which comes from our faith in Jesus Christ because you do not want to be found wanting on the day of His appearing. Always be ready, because the fruit of Jesus Christ is always in season.

Hosanna in the highest!

**AMEN**