

Fruitless In Jerusalem

Matthew 21:17-22

Introduction

In this chapter in Matthew Jesus has come to Jerusalem riding on a donkey—fulfilling prophecy and receiving praise from the people (vv.1-11). Next Jesus goes into the Temple and drives out the money-changers reminding all about the need for purification and cleansing in God’s Temple (vv.12-17). Now Jesus will return to Bethany—spend the night and return to the Temple—but along the way pause for a light breakfast of figs.

For many this passage is shocking or bewildering. Why in the world would Jesus cause a fruitless fig tree to wither and die?

Jesus is using the tree as an illustration of the spiritual condition of Israel and the future of false and hypocritical nations, people and false religions! The fig tree was often used in the Bible to illustrate the spiritual condition of the nation Israel. When the nation prospers—the fig trees are full—when the nation lapses into sin, the fig tree does not bear its fruit. **Fruitfulness or fruitlessness** becomes a picture of our own spiritual condition before the Lord. Jeremiah 8:13; “When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered and what I gave them has passed away from them.”

The Lord Jesus desires His followers to be fruitful and faithful.

The Need For Fruitfulness (vv.17-19a)

Matthew 21:17-19a (NKJV) 17 Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there.

The religious leaders were plotting to kill Jesus. Jerusalem was not safe. Jesus had friends in Bethany. This suburb was about two miles from Jerusalem proper.

18 Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.

Tuesday. Not just any Tuesday. This is the last Tuesday in His earthly body. **In three days Jesus will be killed by unfruitful men.**

The word used for morning means early morning—the fourth or last watch of the night. Jesus begins His day—at O Dark—thirty—by Jewish reckoning—it is still the last hours of the previous day. In the passage Jesus was hungry. His hunger was both literal (expressing His real humanity) and symbolic (expressing His real desire for fruit in the lives of people).

Figs were popular and plentiful. They were an inexpensive source of food. The Jewish people had fresh figs, dried figs and would even use figs to make fig cakes.

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19 And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves,

With the presence of the fig tree came the expectation of fruit. In March fig trees have small edible buds; in April come large green leaves. This tree with leaves had no buds or fruit. Fig trees typically require three years from the time they are planted to mature—and become fruitful.

In Luke's gospel (13:6-9) Jesus told the parable of a certain man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. In the parable Jesus says; "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.'"

The Lord Jesus ministered among the people and the nation for three years. The Lord provided three years for Israel to produce fruit.

Israel like the tree had 'leaves' but no fruit. **The leaves served as cover to mask its true condition—barren. It is interesting to me that the first mention of leaves in the Bible are those fig leaves sown in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve fabricated this make shift garment to hide their nakedness. So it has ever been. Human beings fabricate human religion to mask their barren condition.**

Plenty of leaves. No fruit. **Like all human religion—making promises it cannot keep. Confession without conduct. Outward show—inward emptiness. Show and no go.**

The nation professed fruit yet bore no fruit. A nation blind, corrupt, fruitless.

Imagine you drove past a MacDonald's or Starbuck's at 6:00 in the morning. The lights are on, people inside, and what looks like business as usual. But when you come to the door—and walk in—there is no food—or no coffee!

In the chapter Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey fulfilling prophecy but the religious leaders ignore the signs, ignore the prophecies revealing their own spiritual blindness (vv.1-11). Jesus goes to the temple, overturns the tables and drives out the money-changers revealing the nations utter spiritual corruption (vv.12-16). Now Jesus will curse the fig tree—revealing Israel's outward fruitlessness (vv.17-22).

Does Jesus have the right to expect fruitfulness from His followers?

Paul tells Timothy (2 Timothy 3:5) in the last days men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful unholy (3:1)—there will be people who "having a form of godliness but denying its power". And warn "from such turn away."

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What does it mean they have a form of godliness but deny its power? They have external religious trappings—but they deny the power of God to **change a life**.

What kind of a gospel—leaves it's host spiritually blind, inwardly corrupt and **fruitless**?

The evidence of union with the Lord Jesus Christ is fruitfulness or the bearing of fruit. **No fruit means no union and no union means no life.**

In John 15:8 Jesus said, “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.” The context “By this” is prayer—Jesus is the true vine. The context is fruit trees—produce fruit—at first fruit—pruning—more fruit—through God’s Word and by God’s Spirit—much fruit. Bearing fruit means we have the character of Christ by the Holy Spirit. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy peace” (Gal.5:22). We produce the fruit of righteousness—or uprightness “filled with fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ” (Phil.1:11). We produce the fruit of holiness—separation to God—“being made free from sin, and become servants unto God, ye have *fruit* unto holiness.” The Bible speaks of the fruit of our lips—thanksgiving “Let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the *fruit* of our lips” (Hebrews 8:15). There is the fruit of integrity and consistency “Walk worthy of the Lord, being *fruitful* in every good work” (Romans 1:13). There is the fruit of generosity and ministering to others “I desire *fruit* that may abound to your account” (Phil. 4:17). Fruit becomes the very object of God’s salvation—“Bring forth *fruit* unto God” (Rom. 7:4).

The fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal.5:22) and love is the source of a changed life—and an obedient life. “If a man love Me, he will keep My words” (John 14:23).

Christian are you a tree with leaves but no fruit?

John Bunyan wrote; “It is said that in some countries trees will grow, but will bear no fruit because there is no winter there.”

There are make-believers—counterfeit christians who will one day hear Jesus say, “Depart from me your cursed” (Matt.25:41) because they had nothing but leaves (see Wiersbe; New Testament Outlines; p.78).

There are several curses in the Bible; the Serpent is cursed in the book of Genesis (3:14-15); God cursed the ground, nature, Cain, Canaan, the enemies of Israel, disobedient Israel, unbelievers, false preachers and surprisingly upon those who choose or attempt to remain under the law (Galatians 3:10); “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”

The Curse Of Fruitlessness (vv.19b-20)

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(19b) . . .and said to it, “Let no fruit grow on you ever again.” Immediately the fig tree withered away.

Why did Jesus curse the fig tree?

Jesus does not kill the tree because he was tired, angry and hungry.
Why did Jesus curse the fig tree?

In part to tell a story. How the nation’s unbelief would bring judgment.

In part to reveal His power.

In part to show His anger and disappointment with religion **that offers a pretense of nourishment but fails to deliver true satisfaction.**

Jesus would never kill a tree just to make a point—or would he?

Why in the world would Jesus cleanse the temple and cast out those who bought and sold?

Why would Jesus send evil spirits into a herd of swine killing the swine (Matt.8:28-34)?

Why would Jesus be angry when the disciples keep the children from Him (Mk 10:14)?

The curse of Jesus did not make the tree barren. Instead it simply sealed what the tree—really was! Just like Israel. Fruitful in appearance but spiritually barren in substance. Just like the fig tree—it appeared good at a distance—but upon close inspection barren.

“ . . .the temple looked impressive at first glance, but its sacrifices and other activities were hollow because they were not done to worship God sincerely (see Jeremiah 8:13; 24:1-8; Hosea 9:10,16; Micah 7:1). The temple displayed beautiful architecture, but contained barren ritual; it was ripe for destruction. Most likely, Jesus was not limiting his condemnation of fruitlessness to the temple or Judaism of that day. This action displays his stand against all hypocrisy—any religious people who make a show of bearing fruit but are spiritually barren” (*Life Application Bible Commentary: Matthew pp.416-417*).

Spurgeon challenged his congregation; “I would put it to you, my dear hearer, have you been fruitful? Have you been fruitful with your wealth? Have you been fruitful with your talent? Have you been fruitful with your time? What are you doing for Jesus now?”

20And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither away so soon?”

In the original language we might read this passage; “And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree *immediately* wither away?”

Mark’s gospel tells the story in two stages. Jesus cursed the tree on Monday—and the next morning Tuesday—Jesus and his disciples pass the same fig tree in the morning light and could see that the tree wasn’t mostly dead—but completely dead!

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The parable of judgment on a spiritually dead people revealed a severe judgment. The early church had no problem applying this parable to the utter destruction of Jerusalem that would take place between 66-70 AD (see *Life Application Bible Commentary* p. 417).

You know the answer. Jesus has power over the physical universe. Unfruitful human beings—have a certain measure of power—to do harm—to do evil—but not this kind of power. Jesus has the power to determine who is fruitful and who is not—Jesus is the only one who laid down His life—and had the power to raise it from the dead!

Does Jesus have the power to prevent His death? The answer is yes. Jesus did not die because He was weak or because He wasn't really the Messiah or because of the plots and intrigue's of wicked fruitless men! Jesus is going to die because this was God's way of salvation and to make unfruitful people—fruitful. He will dig a trench around the tree and fertilize it with His own blood!

The nation Israel judged Jesus—to be unfruitful and unworthy of life. **However the day is coming when Jesus will judge the unfruitful just as He judged the fig tree. But that day is still future. In this present day Jesus wants to save human beings.**

The Prayer Of Faithfulness (vv.21-22)

21 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.

What is the source of this great power? Where does it come from? And is Jesus willing to share this power? Jesus explains in the first person—"I say to you". Three things;

1. Faith.
2. Do not doubt.
3. God's authority.

What does Jesus mean by faith? In Mark's gospel in the parallel passage (11:22-23) Jesus says—"Have faith in God. "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 come to pass, he will have whatever he says."

Faith in God is different from faith in faith.

What is the mountain Jesus references? It almost certainly is the Mount of Olives. At the very top of the Mount of Olives on a clear day you can see the Salt Sea or the Dead Sea.

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The kind of prayer that moves mountains is the kind of prayer that includes personal fruitfulness for Jesus and faithfulness to the gospel.

Jesus is teaching about answers to prayer.

Is Jesus literally speaking of a stone mountain? Does He desire dirt and debris to be removed and placed into the lifeless water? Or is Jesus anticipating something else in the future? Opposition to the gospel. Will the disciples have much to pray about—and much to believe? God's work—God's will—God's gospel.

Do you think that Jesus is offering this parable as some kind of magic formula to get whatever you want? Do you think Jesus would condemn fruitlessness and then promote selfishness?

What is your mountain? What is it that you need God to move? Unbelief? Doubt? Addiction? Persistent sin? Fruitlessness in your life?

What might contribute to doubt? Perhaps unconfessed sin (Psalm 66:18); or insincerity (Matt. 6:5); or carnal motives (James 4:3); or unbelief (James 1:5-6); or Satan's attacks (Dan.10:10-13); or trouble in your marriage (1 Peter 3:7) or pride (Luke 18:10-14).

22 And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

The promise of power comes through prayer and faith. Pray and ask.

We pray personally.

We pray believing.

We pray in sincerity, simplicity and persistence.

We pray in humility—and boldly!

When Jesus taught the disciples to pray he emphasized a personal relationship with God; 'Our Father'! He emphasized faith (you are in Heaven); worship (hallowed by thy name); expectation 'thy kingdom come; submission 'thy will be done on earth, as is in heaven.' Petition—give us this day our daily bread; confession 'and forgive us our debts'; compassion 'as we forgive our debtors, dependence 'and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'. Acknowledgement—'for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.'

God's power is available. Supernatural. Conditional. In what sense? We do not—I repeat—do not have supernatural power within ourselves. God's power comes through prayer and faith. "Prayer is the vehicle, faith is the energy—it takes both to reach the desired destination" (See *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible; Matthew p. 115*).

It makes perfect sense to me that the spiritually blind; the inwardly corrupt and those with little or no spiritual fruit can find in this passage—a reason to remain blind—and feed—selfishness.

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The passage does not guarantee you can have whatever want by simply asking in the name of Jesus and believing. God does not grant requests to satisfy selfishness—or promote wickedness. God isn't interested in hurting people just because you prayed in Jesus' name.

Faithful prayer requires a faith. A personal relationship with God in Christ.

God will not act in a way that is inconsistent with His character or His Word. Does it really shock you that God answers prayer—consistent with His character—and in harmony with His plans and His principles? God is talking about prayers consistent with His will.

Conclusion

There is a judgment that awaits those who are spiritually dead. There is a judgment that awaits both unbeliever and make-believer.

In the laundry list of things cursed there was one I left out. In Galatians 3:113 Paul writes; “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”).

Jesus became a curse to release you from your curse!

Will you come to Jesus by faith? Will you pray in faith for power?

God desires Christians to be fruitful and faithful.