

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA, PCA

The Faith Lesson of the Barren Fig Tree

Preached at Villa Rica 2/16/03

Mark 11:11 through Mark 11:14 ¹¹Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.

¹²On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. ¹³Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴He said to it, **"May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"** And His disciples were listening.

Christ is in the final week of his public ministry, before his arrest and crucifixion; certain things were uppermost in his mind. For one thing, the knowledge of his rejection by the favored nation of Israel would have weighed heavily on his heart. Much of what he had to say was about the judgment that would befall that nation after his rejection and death at Calvary.

This does not mean that God was taken off guard by what the Jews did, for God knew exactly how all things would turn out. He told his disciples on several occasions that he would be delivered into the hands of men and be killed and on the third day rise again. But that did not lessen his sorrow nor mitigate his hurt.

We all have had difficulty in harmonizing the will of God and the will of man. We know that God is sovereign and can soften whom he will and harden whom he will. The difficulty in trying to understand the hardening of Israel at this crucial time in their history when the Messiah comes to be their Savior is compounded by the fact that there is a mixture of emotions in Christ regarding their fate. He said **Matt. 23:37-39** **"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. ³⁸"Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! ³⁹"For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'"**

On the one hand he wept tears as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday because he truly loved this nation and desired its salvation.

On the other hand he pronounces judgment on them for not knowing the day of their visitation. How do we reconcile these emotions? Jesus was God in the flesh and what he felt God felt. The only answer I can offer is that God is loving and merciful but also just and righteous in all his ways. Mercy rejected brings hardness of heart and eventually justice is meted out for sins committed.

We can also see this in God's Word when he says that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He would rather that the wicked turn from his wicked way and live. (Eze. 33:11) I am sure that his judgment pronouncement on Israel has much to do with the light that is given and how it is received or rejected. The Jews had had much light and now the very God of heaven has come to them performing miracles that had never been seen before since the world began, and yet the religious leaders refused him and plotted his crucifixion.

I want to emphasize two things we learn from the episode of the cursed fig tree: First, that there is an object lesson given in what Christ does to the fruitless fig tree, and secondly we are taught how the word of faith will cause things to happen.

I. The Fig Tree As An Object Lesson

A. It is the day after Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, the day of his appearing to Israel as their promised Messiah King. He had not spent the night in Jerusalem but in Bethany. His intention was to celebrate the Passover with his disciples, the last Passover he would ever celebrate because after that last supper he would go to the garden of Gethsemane and Judas would come with soldiers and place him under arrest. He knew that all these things lay before him.

Time was running out. He must have left Bethany early in the morning without breakfast. So he was hungry. Off in the distance he spies a fig tree in leaf and he goes to it to see if there is any fruit on it that he might eat of it. But there is none. It is at this point that he says to the tree, **"May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"** And his disciples were listening. Strange, that the Lord should speak to a tree. A tree does not have ears. A tree is just a tree. What point is there in talking to a tree? Obviously, there are no faculties in the tree to hear a word spoken directly to it as though it were able to comprehend. But Jesus speaks as God speaks. His Word is with the authority of the Almighty. And he is able to kill or make alive by His word.

To rightly understand this event we need to look up other passages having to do with fig trees. The fig tree is a fruit tree that was first found in the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve, after they had sinned, tried to cover their nakedness with fig leaves. And throughout the Bible the fig tree is a tree of nourishment and strength. Figs even had medicinal qualities. In Isaiah 38 Isaiah told Hezekiah to apply a cake of figs to a boil and that he would recover.

But the Lord used the fig tree in a parable he told to represent Israel. Turn to Luke 13:6-9. In that parable Christ is teaching that a fig tree that does not bear fruit is good for nothing but is just taking up space. If after it has been fertilized and the soil is loosened up around it it still bears no fruit, cut it down.

Christ must have had that in mind when he cursed the barren fig tree. What good is it? It has leaves. It looks like a healthy tree. But the thing required of it by the Lord at that moment was fruit, and there was no fruit on it. So he uses the tree's lack of fruit as a teaching tool. He will glorify God by this tree being rendered useless **"May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"** And the disciples were listening.

Since the scriptures pointedly tell us that the disciples were listening, that means that Christ purposely used this tree as a teaching tool.

B. When a tree is fruitless it is useless. God expects fruit from His church. What sort of fruit does God look for from His chosen people? Galatians 5:22, 23 lists for us the fruits of the Spirit...Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control.

The Church at Jerusalem did not manifest these fruits. Nor did they rightly teach the Word of God so that souls would come to faith. He had just told those in the temple that they had made his temple a robber's den, a place of extortion and merchandise. There were no fruits there at all. On top of that the custodians of the vineyard had stoned and killed the prophets sent to obtain the fruit of the vineyard and even now the chief priests and scribes were plotting the death of the Son of the vineyard owner.

Three of the gospels record the parable of the wicked vine growers. In that parable the Lord tells about a man planting a vineyard and putting a wall around it to protect it. He built a tower to serve as a lookout post. He dug a vat under the wine press and then rented it out to vine growers. Then he went on a journey. At harvest time he sent a slave to receive some of the produce of the vineyard. But the vineyard growers took him and beat him and sent him away empty handed. He sent another slave and they wounded him in the head and treated him shamefully. And then he sent another and they killed him. And so they did with many others he sent. Finally he decides to send his beloved Son. He expected that they would respect

him. But the vine growers had a conference and decided that what they would do was kill the Son and cast him out of the Vineyard and then the inheritance would be theirs. Then Jesus asks the obvious question. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He answers by saying, **He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others.** (Mark 12:9)

The object lesson of the fig tree that had no fruit when Jesus came to it is clear. The Son has come to Israel and they are about to kill him. So the fig tree is an object lesson to show that Israel is going to be removed as the nation entrusted with the keys to the kingdom. The winegrowers by their wicked ministry forfeited their stewardship of the vineyard. The nation in 70 AD was brought to ruin by the armies of Rome and was scattered and peeled among all the nations. Wrath came upon them to the uttermost and the vineyard was transferred to the Gentiles. The true Israel has a mission to accomplish. The faithful preaching and teaching of the Gospel will bear fruit and God will get the glory. It is his vineyard and it is his elect who are being gathered and built up in the faith of Christ. Romans 11:12 tells us that a time will come when the Jewish remnant will greatly increase and that when that happens it will be a great blessing to the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is true Israel.

II. The Power Of Faith

A. But Christ does not only use the fig tree to teach that Israel has forfeited its stewardship of the vineyard it is also the lesson that by our faith words we can accomplish tremendous changes. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. When we believe the Word and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord we embark on a life of faith in him. The outflow of that faith is prayer. Prayer is the vocalizing or articulating of our inmost desires. This is what our Lord did with the fig tree. His speaking to the fig tree was a prayer addressed to His heavenly Father. It was both an outflow of those deepest feelings he was experiencing at that time, and a prayer for something to happen to the tree.

Very rarely do we have an instance of Christ speaking a word that was not a word of blessing and comfort and healing. Study his words and you will see that his word to the fig tree was most unusual in that it was a word of disapproval and disappointment. Just as his word that brought healing and renewal and life, so now his word of faith is to remove something that offended him.

He shows by this that there is tremendous power in faith. He tells his disciples that faith can literally move mountains. When the disciples saw the tree the next

morning it had withered from the roots up. For a tree to wither from the roots up would be to wither from the heart. It draws its water and strength from the roots. The disciples were amazed when they saw what had happened. Peter said to him, **Mark 11:21-26** “**Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.**”

²²**And Jesus answered* saying to them, “Have faith in God.** ²³**“Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.** ²⁴**“Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.**

²⁵**“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.**

²⁶**“But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”**

There is power in God's Word and the children of God who have faith in Him have words of power too. Through faith in God there comes prayer power, we can even say word power.

B. Let me set forth from this passage four steps that you and I must include in acting on Christ's Word. I am merely breaking down his statement into a formula for you to use.

(1) Have faith in God. There is no point in trying this without faith in God. That means believing in Jesus Christ. He said: you believe in God believe also in me. We accept His Word as authoritative. This very scripture must be a controlling scripture that we believe comes from God Himself in order for this prayer power to become active.

(2) Speak forth your faith. Put your desire into words. Christ actually spoke out loud because his disciples heard him say what he did to the fig tree. Prayer is an act of faith. We can pray at all times. We can adopt an attitude of prayer so that what we say invokes our faith to bring to pass what we really want.

At this point we have to be careful that we do not speak foolishly or contrary to what we really want to see happen. We should weigh our words. We should think of what we say as a reflection of that which we really want to happen. If you get up in the morning and say, it's going to be a bad day then it probably will be a bad day for you. We need to speak good things and positive things or we may find that those negative things we express will come to pass just as this fig tree was withered by the Word of Christ.

(3) Entertain no inner doubts. Believe what you are saying will happen. The prayer you offer is dependent on your assurance that God is the source of your life and strength. He is the One who works all things according to his own will and he is pleased to work that will through the prayers of his people. What an amazing thing. God makes things happen by my prayers and your prayers, my faith and your faith.

(4) Lastly, forgive your brother his trespasses. Do not hold any grievance against anyone. There is no possibility of success in the life of faith unless you avoid holding grudges and resentments. This short-circuits your prayers. This negates your prayers. Peter remembered the Lord's words and gives counsel in 1 Pet. 3:7 **You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.**

Can you follow these steps? Are you a believer today? Do you know the Lord Jesus who spoke these words? Come to him today and begin living the life of faith.

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