

The Fig Tree and the Temple

Our focus today comes in two parts: the dramatic parable of the fig tree *and* the clearing of the temple. To me this is one of those really fascinating passages that I did not realize was so interconnected. Understanding the events surrounding the cursing of the fig tree cannot be understood without looking at the events of the clearing of the Temple. The first explains the reasons behind the second. The symbolism of the fig tree illuminates the judgment against the temple and its leaders. And the judgment against the temple leaders reveals the purpose behind the curse on the fig tree. The event of the fig tree, if viewed by solely on its own, comes off as a glimpse into an irritated Messiah venting frustration on a fig tree. In reality the fig tree episode is an enacted parable that explains Jesus' motive in clearing the temple.



Read Mark 11: 12-19

Let's turn in our Bibles to Mark 11:12. According to Mark these events take place on the day after the triumphal entry. If we go up just a bit in Mark to verse 9-10 we see Jesus being greeted with Hosannas as he enters Jerusalem. Verse 11 tells us that it is late in the day. He goes to the Temple and looks around, but then leaves and goes to Bethany with the Twelve. We know that Jesus has come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. Figs mature and are ripe in mid-summer. But at this time of year, approximately April, there should have been evidence of fruit. Small, hard, and edible green figs should have covered the tree, but they were certainly not at their peak. This tree had nothing. According to the scriptures, all that Jesus found were leaves. He cursed the fig tree for not bearing fruit.

The scriptures also make a point of telling us that the disciples heard Jesus curse the tree. The fact that it mentions that they heard him do this means that this event is significant. If Jesus was irritated with the tree because he was just hungry and the tree had no fruit, wouldn't he just curse it silently, if at all? But it says "*the disciples heard him say it.*" What is the possible point of Jesus doing this? Let's take a closer look.

First we'll consider the fig tree:

The fig tree symbolizes Israel the nation, the people of God. This symbol is used in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 8:13; 29:17; Hosea 9:10, 16-17; Joel 1:6-7; and Micah 7:1. The fig tree as an object of judgment is found in Isaiah 34:4 and Hosea 2:12.¹

Hosea 9:10 At first the Lord is pleased with Israel, as pleased as finding grapes flourishing in the desert or the delicious early figs on the fig tree:

*"When I found Israel,
it was like finding grapes in the desert;*

¹ New American Commentary (NAC)

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*when I saw your ancestors,
it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree.*

In Micah 7:1-2 the prophet Micah lamented his position in the midst of a people who were godless having turned to the idols of the Canaanites amongst them. He grieved over the evil times in which he lived. He felt like a person who goes into the orchards or vineyards to pick fruit but finds it all gone. Nograpes or early figs were left for him to gather and eat. This is an image of a nation devoid of godly and upright people.

*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.
2 The faithful have been swept from the land;
not one upright person remains.
Everyone lies in wait to shed blood;
they hunt each other with nets.*

Jeremiah 24:1-10 is an image of baskets of figs representing Israel. We have a basket of good fruit – those of Israel obedient to the Lord, and a basket of bad figs – those of Israel who disobeyed and rejected the Lord.

Jeremiah announced God's plan for Israel. Those who had been exiled were destined for the sword, famine, and plague that would ravage the land of Israel in the coming years. Those remaining in Jerusalem were like poor figs that had to be thrown out. God would judge them for refusing to obey His words of warning. Those who had been taken into exile would be watched over and protected by God, eventually to return to the land of Israel and planted again to thrive and produce good fruit.

Jeremiah 8:8-13 God's Word translation:

8 "How can you say that you are wise and that you have the LORD'S teachings? The scribes have used their pens to turn these teachings into lies. 9 Wise people are put to shame, confused, and trapped. They have rejected the word of the LORD. They don't really have any wisdom. 10 That is why I will give their wives to other men and their fields to new owners. All of them, from the least important to the most important, are eager to make money dishonestly. All of them, from prophets to priests, act deceitfully. 11 They treat my dear people's wounds as though they were not serious, saying, "Everything is alright! Everything is alright!" But it's not alright. 12 Are they ashamed that they do disgusting things? No, they're not ashamed. They don't even know how to blush. So they will die with those who die. They will be brought down when I punish them," says the LORD. 13 "I would have gathered their harvest," declares the LORD, "but there are no grapes on the vine.

There are no figs on the tree, and the leaves have dried up. What I have given them will be taken away."

This passage, originally prophesied by Jeremiah prior to the Babylonian Exile, parallels the state of Israel and its religious leaders in the time of Jesus. Jeremiah's words were just as true for Israel in the 1st Century as it was in the 6th Century. The religious leaders in Jerusalem were not doing their job, they were not drawing the people of Israel closer to God. Instead they relied on their heritage, their birthright as God's chosen people, rather than recognizing that faith is what guarantees salvation, not birthright. The religious leaders – at the time of the Babylonian Exile, had rejected the word of the Lord, and perverted it with their lies. They led the people of Israel in the worship of foreign gods and rejected their own. They treated the sins of the people as if they were insignificant when in fact the sin was an infection running rampant throughout Israel and was leading the nation into destruction. They refused to hear the warnings of the prophets sent to them, revealing their lack of wisdom. Jeremiah charges them with failing to care for the flock of Israel, and they show no shame or regret in what they have done. In verse 13, God says he will take away their harvest and the coming famine reflects the famine of faith throughout Israel. Israel itself bears no fruit because Israel has no faith. Israel has no fruit to bear because the Word of God was not taught, the Word of God was perverted by the religious leaders who "*used their pens to turn these teaching into lies*" (v.8).

Again the image of the fig tree is found in Isaiah 34:4 describing a judgment against Israel:

*All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved
and the sky rolled up like a scroll;
all the starry host will fall
like withered leaves from the vine,
like shriveled figs from the fig tree.*

Israel's faith is described as having the appearance of shriveled figs on the fig tree. The fruit is inedible, it is useless. It may as well not even be there for the use it is or the glory of God it reveals. The fig tree symbolizes faithless Israel.

Returning to our passage in Mark, the tree appeared to be thriving, but all Jesus found were leaves. Looks can be deceiving. Despite the lush foliage, Jesus found no fruit. Now that we have seen the metaphoric usage of the fig tree in the Old Testament, this passage with the fig tree starts to make more sense. Just as in the days prior to the Babylonian Exile, Israel again is bearing no fruit; the religious leaders have failed to bring the people of Israel closer to God. They have produced no harvest of faithful, godly people. The religious leaders have done nothing to draw Israel back to God because they too have no faith. Jesus curses the fig tree for its failure to produce good fruit, and continues on to the Temple.

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In the temple he finds all sorts of commerce being transacted, commerce that is corrupt and designed to extort money and goods from the people of Israel to the benefit of the religious leaders. What was going on at the Temple? Money changing – at exorbitant fees. Monetary fees and temple taxes had to be paid in the “Temple shekel”, not the money of everyday usage throughout the Roman Empire. The money changers at the temple charged a fee to exchange the money. Sacrifices had to be purchased with temple money. If someone tried to bring their own animal for sacrifice it would not pass inspection by the priest or Levite inspecting animals, and so an “acceptable” animal could be purchased at the temple – at an exorbitant fee. Then the original animal would be resold by the Levites as an “acceptable” sacrifice. The Levites at the temple were using the temple to make money at the expense of the rest of Israel. The Chief Priests and the teachers of the Law (or scribes) profited most from these transactions. They were lining their pockets and fleecing Israel. Here the religious leaders resemble those of the Jeremiah 8 passage, in particular 8:10 and 13. The temple was judged for “not being a house of prayer for all nations”. Despite the temple’s outward appearance, inwardly it was corrupt.

Verse 18 tells us that the priests and scribes began looking for a way to kill Jesus because they feared him. Their wealth, privilege, position were being threatened. Jesus’ was threatening their financial situation at the temple. He was drawing more and more followers. He was upsetting the peace in Jerusalem. Jesus was a threat to all they held dear. Notice that none of what they held dear related to their privileged position of serving God. Their blindness to God leads them into further sin, plotting murder of the Lord’s Anointed.

When Jesus and the disciples return to the temple in the morning the fig tree is now withered from the roots -- not just a few branches that can be pruned away. The tree is withered from its roots, it cannot be saved. Judgment is against the fig tree is complete and total. Israel will stand and face this same final judgment in time to come. Israel resembles here those who were symbolized by the basket of rotten figs in Jeremiah 24. They were so thoroughly corrupt that destruction was brought upon them before the “good figs” could be replanted.

The New American Commentary draws the connection between the fig tree and the temple. “The cursing of the fig tree and the expulsion of the merchants from the temple are prophetic actions that symbolize the same thing, the coming judgment on unfaithful Israel by the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Israel, like the fig tree, appeared to be thriving; but the appearances were deceiving because Israel and the fig tree were bearing no fruit. The magnificence of the temple masked the corruption and false security associated with it. Just as the fig tree was cursed and withered, so Israel was about to be condemned and decline in importance. Just as the merchants were expelled from the temple, so the religious establishment that authorized the merchants was about to be expelled from its favored place.”

The rejection continues when Jesus enters the temple in verse 27. A delegation from the Sanhedrin is sent to interrogate Jesus. They ask him by what authority does he the things he does² and says the things he says³. Their goal was to get him to admit he had no authority

² For example, healing the blind man, healing on the Sabbath, clearing the temple, and the public entry into Jerusalem.

because they believed that the Sanhedrin was the ultimate authority of religious matters. Jesus, in his reply to the delegation, uses a counterquestion to turn the table back onto his opponents. "The use of counterquestions was common in rabbinic discussions, but the one of Jesus here is unusual in that he made his answer depend on the answer of his opponents. Jesus' use of a counterquestion was not an evasion but a means of establishing the source of his own authority and all authority in the spiritual realm. The clear implication of the question is that John's ministry was divinely authorized. If John's message had God's approval, then Jesus and his message also had to have divine authority because of John's inspired attestation.⁴

The religious leaders found themselves in a dilemma. They did not recognize that John was a prophet from God, but the people of Israel held John in high esteem as a prophet. To publicly denounce John would anger the people. If they acknowledged John's baptism as being from heaven to prevent such outrage, then Jesus would chastise them for failing to repent and be baptized as John called everyone to do. The only way out of Jesus' question was to say they didn't know from where John's authority came. If they couldn't determine the origin of John's authority, then they revealed they didn't have the knowledge or understanding to be authorities on the subject of spiritual matters. In claiming that they did not know where Jesus' authority came from, they abdicated their own authority. If they could not recognize Jesus' authority was from God, they could have no place in serving God. Their own authority is nullified.

Yet again we have the Religious Authorities, the Sanhedrin refusing to acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah. The steadfastly refuse to yield to the Truth before them and instead fiercely hold on to their own lies. They put their faith in their lies because to do otherwise would rock their world to its foundations. They prefer the world they have created for themselves to the Kingdom of God. The judgment they would receive was just. They made their choice.

³ Recall his teaching in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles when he proclaimed to be the light of the world (John 8:12) and his offer of "streams of living water" (John 7:37-41).

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