

The Strange Story of the Fig Tree

Matthew 21:18-22

All of this seems just a little bit strange, a strange story to be included in the gospels of both Matthew and Mark. This just doesn't seem right. Jesus seems a little bit unhinged, maybe some would say deranged. In his hunger, he takes out his frustrations on a poor fig tree, condemning it to wither away and die. It seems so illogical, almost nonsensical; after all, what did the fig tree do to deserve such harsh words from Jesus? And how is a fig tree responsible for whether or not it has any fruit?

So what is the point of this little exchange? What does it mean? How is this story that seems strange to us become a foundation for the promise of the gospel that Jesus proclaims as he begins what we call the New Testament church? Let's look at it more closely. What we see, first of all, is a warning. Specifically,

I. A WARNING TO ISRAEL.

Let's set the stage a bit. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, one week before his resurrection. That was Sunday. He entered upon a donkey, an expression of his own humility even as he was praised by the crowds as a king.

Mat. 21:1 "Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. 3 And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them."

Mat. 21:6 "So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt, laid

their clothes on them, and set Him on them. 8 And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' Hosanna in the highest!"

He then spent Sunday night in Bethany, we are told in verse 18, presumably with his friends there, and on Monday morning we read that he was hungry. We're not told why he was hungry, but the obvious emphasis is upon his full humanity. He was a man with natural needs and desires for food.

v.19

What's the point? The simple answer is that this is a warning, and from the context, it is not hard to reach the conclusion that it is,

I. A WARNING TO ISRAEL.

Remember, the day before we read that he "drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." And he is confronted in the temple again, beginning in verse 23, challenging the Jewish leaders of his day. And if you skip all the way down to verse 43, we read this concluding judgment upon the nation of Israel to all these events,

v.43 "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."

So, it's a warning. But a warning against what? Consider again what Jesus saw in the fig tree.

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

I'm told by one of my commentaries that with the fig tree, the fruit actually precedes the leaves. This was early in the season, around the time of the passover, so April is a good estimate. At that time the fig tree shouldn't have any any leaves or figs. But this particular tree had leaves. Perhaps there is a natural explanation, such as unusually heat, and it isn't strange for us to see some plants and trees bloom with leaves early on that account. But whatever the cause, what Jesus observes is a plan whose leaves imply the presence of fruit, since the fruit would have come first. So its a pretense. If you are looking for food, expecting to find some because you see the leaves, you have been deceived! And the fig tree becomes a symbol for that deception, that hypocrisy.

The fig tree didn't sin—it's a plant, nor a creature created in the image of God. But it is an illustration of those whom God rightly judges and condemns—deceivers and hypocrites. Those who pretend to be healthy and wholesome in their relationship with the Lord, but who are empty when it comes to fruit. Thus we have,

A. A warning against an empty pretense of religion.

An empty show. A symbol of the person who pretends to be religious, who pretends to be a servant of God, but who has no fruit to demonstrated the reality of such pretense. So Jesus' cursing of this fig tree is a symbolic judgment such people. And the nation of Israel as a whole, a nation who, as a whole, has rejected Jesus their Messiah. As one commentator puts it, "The cursing of the fig tree has always been regarded as of symbolic import, the tree being in Christ's mind an emblem of the Jewish people, with a great show of religion and no fruit of real godliness."

As Calvin writes, "He intended, however, to present in this tree

an outward sign of the end which awaits hypocrites, and at the same time to expose the emptiness and folly of their ostentation." So he cursed the tree itself. Because of an empty pretense of religion. An empty display of religious devotion, merely outward actions, a mere performance for the pleasure and approval of men, not for the honor and glory of God."

That would be a common theme for Jesus, and not at all hard to understand why he would address that issue here at the end of this ministry. Remember what he said earlier to those hypocrites so common among the Pharisees,

Mat. 23:25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

That's the meaning of this curse,

B. A warning of condemnation to those whose religion is barren.

No fruit! That's why the fig tree was cursed. There was, in the words of another commentator, "Plenty of leaves but no fruit. Bustling religious activity, but no sincerity and truth." No evidence of faith. No works. Just the outward show of leaves. That's the warning. The nation of Israel would no longer be the nation of God's people.

v.43 "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."

That's a warning we need to hear, and heed, on a personal level also, isn't it? James' condemnation is certainly clear,

James 2:14 "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!...26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

So the broad and general warning for the whole nation is well applied to our own lives,

Mat. 3:7 "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 9 and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 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."

With that warning comes a challenge.

II. A CHALLENGE TO EXERCISE TRUE FAITH.

Jesus's disciples questions his actions here, "marveled" at it, we read. They were astonished, wondering about the meaning of what they just observed. They questioned Jesus directly.

v.20

His answer is interesting. Actually, it seems a little bit off topic.
v.21-22

OK...but what does that have to do with the fig tree? Jesus uses the occasion, his cursing of that fig tree, a curse upon the whole nation of Israel, in order to express this challenge. He is challenging his disciples to exercise their faith, unlike the symbolic fig tree that was barren. And the challenge is to warn his disciples about,

A. The danger of doubting the word of God's promise.

And that promise was the his disciples would be united with Jesus in his power and authority to condemn the wicked. But even more broadly, to move mountains! Again,

v.21 "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."

The point is, God has promised greatness for his people, the nation of his people, his church. The image is a hyperbole, that is, an intentional overstatement to make the simple point, for the Mount of Olives stood some 4000 feet above the Dead Sea. So one extreme to the other, the mountain is cast into the sea. Nothing great is possible, no greater scope of miraculous power is possible.

That's what it will be for the New Testament church of Jesus to take the place of the nation of Israel upon the earth. That's the promise. The temple will be destroyed. The nation will come to an end. And what will rise up out of that destruction—the kingdom of God on earth made evident by Jesus' own church. That's the promise. That's the hope of all of God's people from that day when Jesus was still on the earth until this present day.

That will be our hope until the future day when Jesus returns in triumph and glory. And Jesus declares to us, in this very passage, that we are to have such faith without doubting this word of God's promise.

With that faith to believe that promise comes,

B. The need to believe in the spiritual power and authority of God.

v.21 “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 it will be done because God has the power to do it! God has the authority to do it! Thus Jesus' very last words, after his resurrection and prior to his ascension were words of similar though. The Great Commission given to his church, given with the promise of spiritual power and authority. And that is what must believe.

Mat. 28:18 “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.”

That's what we must believe! “All authority has been given to [Jesus] in heaven and on earth.” That's the point of his cursing of the fig tree, to show forth just that—the power and authority of Jesus.

Do you remember Paul's words about this power?

Eph. 1:19. “...the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated

Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

That's the challenge to us—to believe in that spiritual power, and not to doubt God's promise to bring about such a judgement as is represented by this fig tree. Then, Jesus speaks about prayer in general terms, not that his words can be used carelessly for some sort of name-it-and-claim-it prosperity gospel, where God literally gives us every single thing we request. But clearly he gives us,

III. AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO EXPRESS YOUR TRUST IN GOD AS YOU PRAY.

Let me emphasize, Jesus isn't giving some sort of blanket promise that you will get everything you want, everything for which you ask, because prayer also must be in submission to his will. Pray isn't a magical formula or incantation, that if you could just say the right words and believe hard enough, you'll get what you want. The “getting” is not up to us. There is no “power” merely in positive thinking. But still we have this obvious encouragement,

v.22

What does that mean and why is it here? It is that second question that actually answers the first. It is here, in this place, to emphasize that challenge I just stressed, the challenge to exercise true faith, to believe God's promise, to believe in his power and authority. That's what these words mean, “whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.” That means, God's word is true. God's power is real. God's authority is

legitimate. And that is the frame of mind, that is the extent of your faith with which you are to pray.

A. The foundation of prayer is the willingness to trust in the power of God.

Again, I don't want to misuse these words to emphasize the power of your faith, as if just by believing strong enough you can bring about a positive result to anything and everything you pray for. It is not that faith is some mysterious or even magical power that you have to cause God to give you whatever you want. But faith does mean this, the willingness to trust in the power which God has! And in that context, let me read verse 22 again, "whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

That is the same idea as some of the other familiar passages on prayer, such as,

Mat. 7:7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? 11 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

The emphasis there, again, is not on your power. Not on your strength or your diligence. But upon the power and authority of "your Father who is in heaven." He will "give good things to those who ask Him!" So ask...that's really the challenge, the encouragement.

B. The expression of prayer is to ask.

Our goal is not to figure out the will of God. Our goal is not to change God's mind or someone influence him or compel him to

give us whatever we ask. Our goal is not to be selfish in our desires to meet our own needs and requests. Instead, the goal of all prayer is to come to God with the willingness to trust him, to trust and rely upon his power not your own, to believe his word, and then, to ask.

James says so simply,

James 4:2. "Yet you do not have because you do not ask."

So remember the warning of this strange story of the fig tree, it is a warning of condemnation to those whose religious devotion is barren, without fruit, bearing no evidence of sincerity and truth. To the contrary, however, is this encouragement in Jesus' own words,

John 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. 8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."