

April 7, 2019

“The Cursing of the Fig Tree”
Matthew 21:18-22

FCF: A relationship with God that is all show

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus is determined to bring deep change in His people.
(magnet) We should want that ourselves.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Many of you have heard of Patti’s 1880’s Settlement in western Kentucky, north of Land Between the Lakes. It’s an interesting place to visit. At least it was until it was hit by a fire early last year (though I hear that they are reopening sometime this Spring). One of the things Patti’s has been known for are their meringue pies - six to eight inches of coconut, lemon, or chocolate. Of course, most of that is the meringue - that light airy mixture of egg whites and sugar on top.

Again, those pies are huge. But there’s not much to meringue. Not to sound harsh, but it’s really all show. The reason I bring this up is the tragedy of “meringue spirituality” - a hollow emptiness, a relationship with God that is all show. And Jesus will have nothing to do with this.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 21:18-22](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

This headline got my attention: “Airbnb Lists Converted Cold War Nuclear Missile Silo as Rental.” What was once the home of a nuclear warhead during the 1960’s and left abandoned for decades has been remade into an underground mansion. The structure was built in 1959 and stored an intercontinental missile with a warhead 32 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Now it has a full kitchen, private bath, laundry services, and a fireplace which gives a “nice, cozy, feeling in the fall and winter months.” Quite a change. You could say a deep transformation. It may look the same on the outside but has been radically changed from within.

And this is what Jesus is determined to do with us. This passage is really the third part of one event. It’s the third in a series of unusual actions that seem out of character for Jesus. First, He rides into Jerusalem. Then He cleanses the Temple. And now He curses this fig tree. But the question for us to ask is not, “Did Matthew get this wrong?” The question is, “What’s going on here? What have I missed about Jesus that makes these things seem so out of character to me?”

Here’s what’s going on. Jesus is determined to bring deep change, deep change in His people. And, as His people, as His disciples, we should want that ourselves. Consider these two things. First, the fruit for which He longs. And then, second, the things for which we pray.

I. THE FRUIT FOR WHICH HE LONGS

First, let’s look at the fruit for which Jesus longs. This is the “what” - what does Jesus long to see in us? ([READ Matthew 21:18-19](#)) Again, this is unusual. What’s going on here?

A) The Promise of the Leaves

To get at this, we have to understand some things about the growth of fig trees.

1. Reasonable expectation

In the ANE, fig trees were valued for their fruit and shade. Each spring, they would put out their leaves. With the leaves would come taksh - small immature figs, unpleasant but edible if you were hungry. The leaves were a promise of fruit, of taksh and mature figs in the weeks to come.

2. Reasonable disappointment

So with these leaves there was the reasonable expectation of fruit. What did Jesus find? Lots of leaves but no fruit, the promise of fruit but none to be found. So then reasonable disappointment.

B) The Curse upon the Tree

So the false promise of the leaves leads then to this curse pronounced upon the tree.

1. Not a temper tantrum

This was no temper tantrum on Jesus' part. Again, it seems strange. Yes, in the Old Testament we read of judgment miracles like the flood, the tower of Babel, and the plagues in Egypt. But with Jesus, all His miracles thus far have brought healing and deliverance. So what's going on? Has He finally snapped? No. He is in total control, both of His circumstances and of Himself.

2. But an acted parable

This is an object lesson for His disciples, an acted parable. The context is vital to grasp. All of this is tied to the cleansing of the temple the day before. This fig-less fig tree, all leaves and no fruit, points to the temple. Much activity and no substance. And its withering points to the end of temple worship as the Jewish people knew it. This was an object lesson, an acted parable.

Jesus longs to see faith and repentance, trust and obedience, word and deed, orthodoxy and orthodoxy - true worship. That's the fruit for which He longs. And we should too.

Application:

What then of us? Are we all leaf and no fruit? Fig-less fig trees? What do others see when they look at us? Our lives might have been marked by anger and bitterness, anxiety and fear. We might even have a reputation for being selfish and slanderous. That all may be true. But as disciples of Jesus, there should be fruit beginning to bloom, inner flourishing that shows itself - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

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II. THE THINGS FOR WHICH WE PRAY

That then takes us to the things for which we pray, from the what Jesus longs to see to how it comes about. (**READ Matthew 21:20-22**) This is quite a promise. What could it mean?

A) A Clarification of the Promise

We need to start with a clarification. Such words can be and have been terribly misread, misunderstood, and misapplied. Which then brings deep disappointment and disillusionment.

1. Not just a blank check

This is not a blank check. Jesus is not saying that we can have whatever we want, no matter what it is. And, considering how "off" our desires can be, we should be deeply thankful for that.

2. But a particular concern

This promise is about a particular concern. Again, the context is vital. Jesus has ridden into the city, cleansed the temple, and cursed this tree. When He speaks of “this mountain,” He surely means the Temple Mount. This is not a promise of “faith moving mountains” but “faith moving *this* mountain.” And “*this* mountain” is the mountain of dead religion, lives of all show and no substance. Jesus is longing for true worship and opposed to anything that would stand in its way.

B) *The Assurance of the Promise*

But how can we know? How can we be sure God will hear such prayers? Two things.

1. The greatness of God

First, the greatness of God. Not the greatness of our faith but the greatness of God. When Jesus says we must “have faith and not doubt,” He is not calling for a super-faith but an abiding in the living God. The issue is not in any way the strength of our faith but the object of our faith.

2. The heartbeat of God

So we can know these prayers are heard because of the greatness of God. And the heartbeat of God. The removal of all obstacles and obstructions to true worship is His passion. When we pray this way, we are speaking His language. And He will answer in just the right time and way.

True worship is the fruit for which Jesus longs. And the thing for which we must pray.

Application:

And, in case we would have any doubt of Jesus’ desire here, that all dissipates a few days later when He took away the worst obstacle and obstruction between us and God by His finished work upon the cross. This is always His work. And His heart. So we can know we are heard.

Which means that when we see a mountain of obstacles and obstruction to true worship, we can pray with boldness it will be removed. All the false religions of this world. All the idols of our culture. All the corruption of our churches. And all the waywardness of our hearts.

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CONCLUSION:

That’s what the cursing of the fig tree is all about - what Jesus wants to see in us and how this comes about. But all of that raises a question. Why? Why does He want to see this in us?

And there’s really only one answer to that. He loves us. Jesus loves us. And that’s why He wants to bring this deep change in us. C. S. Lewis alludes to this determined love, this persistent passion, in a section from his classic book, *The Problem of Pain* ([READ excerpt](#)):

We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character. Here again we come up against what I have called the “intolerable compliment.” Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble: he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life—the work which he loves, though in a different fashion, as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother a child — he will take endless trouble — and would, doubtless, thereby, *give* endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed and scraped and re-commenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were

only a thumb-nail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less.

That's why we find ourselves feeling roughly handled at times, why we go through such rubbing.

His love is the "intolerable compliment." But don't lose sight of this. It may at times feel intolerable. But it's still a compliment. He loves us. There is such wonder to that. That rubbing is because of His love. It's the only explanation for it. That's what's behind His work to renew us. And think of this. The One doing the renewing is the One who made us. He knows exactly what the temple was for, what a fig tree was for, and what we are for. He knows.

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