

The Barren Fig Tree Cursed and Withered – Mark 11:12-25

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Introduction

When Jesus cursed the fig tree on the way to Jerusalem from Bethany it appears that his principal intent was to demonstrate God's judgment upon fruitlessness and hypocrisy, especially as they were exemplified by official Judaism. By the sending forth of luxurious foliage the fig tree gave an implied promise of fruit, but there was no fruit to be found. The tree was cursed so that it withered and died, never bearing fruit again, nor deceiving others again. Both the Humanity and the Deity of Christ are demonstrated in this event – the former in His hunger for food and the latter in His destruction of the tree by His very command.

Applications

The Jews had been God's people for 15 centuries. Their place was one of peculiar favor and privilege. They could have produced bountiful and blessed fruit to benefit all of the nations, had they obeyed God. Instead, they turned out to be a "tree" bearing no good fruit, but still piously boasting the "foliage" of being God's chosen people. The rapidly developing events, resulting in the murder of God's Son by the Jews, would be the final chapter of barrenness and hypocrisy in their history of spiritual treason. They brought the final curse of God down upon them that meant the withering and death of their nation and of their favored status. Although Jesus did not make this specific application, it does no violence to the Biblical context (either immediate or remote) and it harmonizes with the rapidly developing events of the narrative. Jesus' parable about a barren fig tree also seems to apply to Israel's repeated impositions on God's patience and her impending judgment at His hand (Luke 13:6-9).

The condemnation of fruitlessness and hypocrisy in the Bible are not directed at the ancient Jews alone. The servant with one talent was condemned as "wicked and slothful," not because he was a murderer, an adulterer, or even a thief; but because he was "unprofitable" (Mat. 25:14-30). Jesus' disciples must bear fruit for Him or they will be cut off (John 15:1-8). Furthermore, there is no character trait more consistently proscribed in the New Testament than that of pretense, guile, or hypocrisy (Mat. 6:1-7; 23:1-36; 24:51; 1 Tim. 4:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 3:18; et al.). These lessons from the curse upon the fig tree are ever applicable.

The Christ also used the cursing of the fig tree and its immediate response to His curse as an occasion to teach the apostles (and us) a lesson on faith and prayer. Modern readers must

remember that this was spoken originally to the apostles who were already endowed with some miraculous gifts (Mat. 10:1) and who would later be given more (John 14:26; 16:13; Mark 16:17-18). Jesus told them they could cast the Mount of Olives into the sea with sufficient faith in God (cf. Luke 17:6). Doubtless, the power to heal the sick and cast out demons that was available to them was sufficient to literally remove Olivet to the sea, had the need arisen. For sure, the commission the Lord would soon give the apostles would loom as a task as gargantuan as moving the mountain into the sea, but the Lord promised them the power to equip them for the responsibility. This lesson on faith is coupled with a promise concerning prayer – faith in God is the very spirit of acceptable and availing prayer. The caution concerning forgiveness may be intended to teach the apostles not to use their spiritual gifts to avenge themselves.

We dare not superimpose every promise made to the apostles in this (or any other) context upon our post-miraculous era. However, some broad principles remain for our profit. We need to deliberately strive to increase our faith, ever remembering that the great source of faith is the inspired Word (Rom. 10:17). We need to be more prayerful, and we need to “pray in faith, nothing doubting” (Jam. 1:6). Atheists do not pray and saints who pray in unbelief are hypocrites. Of course, all of the other Scriptural promises and limitations of acceptable prayer must also be harmonized with the promise of this passage. While we have not the supernatural powers promised to the apostles, in God’s own Providential way, he is still known to move what seem to be impossible “mountains” for His people, enabling us to do more and to suffer more than we dreamed possible. As we with our sins approach God in prayer, we must do so with a forgiving spirit toward enemies and offenders (cf. Mat. 5:23-24; 6:12-15).

Conclusion

Let us all cultivate sincere and guileless hearts that delight in bearing good fruit for our Master. If we do not, we may expect the just judgment of Christ upon us, causing us to wither and die eternally. It is our responsibility to increase our faith by deepening our knowledge of the Truth and then to apply that strong faith as we pray. May we be ever ready to forgive even our enemies, as our blessed Lord was before us (Luke 23:34).

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and it was published in the July 1987 edition of *Spiritual Sword*, ed. Thomas B. Warren.]

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