

"The Fig Tree"
 Mark 11:12-14; 20-21
 (Preached at Trinity, Wed. August 21, 2013)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we come to this account of the cursing of the fig tree we need to be reminded again that the Gospel writers were independent authors describing certain events from their own particular perspective. Matthew may focus on one particular aspect while Mark or Luke may choose to focus on another aspect. Each reliably and infallibly convey the truth and as we compare the details we gain a fuller understanding of the event. The first thing we must do is examine the two records of this event. See the parallel account in **Matthew 21:8-20**
2. There are two ways to handle the telling of these various stories: *a.* Chronologically or *b.* Topically. Matthew usually seemed to prefer the latter. For Matthew the specifics of the chronologically are not as important as the details of the event itself. He often inserted events out of the actual order of their occurrence. In his account of the fig tree he told the whole story at once in one uninterrupted account. Mark, on the other hand, placed a higher focus upon the chronology.
3. The chronology of these events are as follows:
 Sunday – the triumphal entry; Jesus enters into the Temple and makes an observation of the circumstances in the Temple, returns to Bethany for the night
 Monday – He curses the fig tree and then enters into Jerusalem for the cleansing of the Temple
 Tuesday – the second part of the fig tree story.
4. **The story: Verse 12** – He left Bethany and, being hungry, came to a fig tree expecting to find figs. We are immediately reminded of our Lord's humanity – He was hungry.
 - A. Going up to the fig tree he found nothing but leaves. Fig trees bear figs twice. Small figs from the previous year's growth appear in March and are ripe in May or June. Larger figs develop from the new shoots and are gathered from August to October. The early figs begin to appear simultaneously with the leaves and sometimes even precede the leaves.
 - B. The month was around April since the Passover was at hand. This means that it was not yet the season for either the early or the later figs.
Mark 11:13 NAU - "Seeing 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."
 - C. But since the leaves were in full foliage Jesus expected the tree to have fruit.
5. **Verse 14** – Finding no figs, Jesus curses the tree. Immediately the tree began to wither. By the next morning it had completely withered away (**Verses 20-21**).
 - A. This account has often caused confusion for some commentators and preachers. This act appears to have no meaning or purpose.

1. It seems to be a destructive act motivated purely by our Lord's disappointment over not finding figs upon the tree. Mark even tells us that this was not the time of year one might expect figs. It seems unusual that Jesus would use His powers in such a selfish, vindictive manner. In fact, this might be the reaction of a sinful man, but not Jesus.
 2. If this was a selfish act without purpose it also seems unusual that both Matthew and Mark record it for us.
- B. The truth is rather than a selfish act of anger our Lord's behavior was designed to teach a much deeper truth. This miracle of our Lord was meant as a living parable to teach His disciples. Of the 18 miracles recorded in the Gospel of Mark this is the last.
6. We must never seek to understand a passage of Scripture apart from the context in which we find it. On Sunday evening after His entrance into Jerusalem Jesus enters the Temple. He doesn't take any action; He simply walks about observing the actions of those within the Temple and then leaves.
Mark 11:11 NAU - "Jesus 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."
7. But looking at **Verse 15** we see clearly what Jesus observed. He saw the Jews making a mockery of the sacred meeting place of God. Although they were going through the outward ritual of preparing for the Passover their hearts were cold. Mark described their condition in **Chapter 7**
Mark 7:6 NAS - "And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.'"
8. Having observed in the Temple their outward display of religion but the fruitlessness of their profession Jesus departed from the Temple, but the next day He taught His disciples a visual parabolic lesson.
- I. The meaning of the Parable
- A. The Fig Tree was a type of what Israel had become
1. The fig tree had every outward sign of being fruitful – but no fruit. Leaves were a claim of fruit – but it was a false claim, an empty profession
 2. Again, the best demonstration was taking place that very day in the Temple
 - a. Multitudes had gathered into Jerusalem for the religious holiday Lively business was taking place so that sacrifices could be made **BUT NO ONE WAS SEEKING GOD**
 - b. At the same time the priests were plotting to kill Jesus – the One apart from whom the sacrifices had no meaning
 - c. While they professed to be the people of God, they were plotting to kill the Son of God
 3. In cleansing the Temple and cursing the fig tree Jesus performed two acts with one meaning – the cursing of hypocritical Israel
- B. Jesus revealed the meaning fully in **Matthew 21**
Matthew 21:43 NAS - "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it."

1. Israel had been created for one purpose – to point to Christ. They existed to point the nations to the Messiah.
2. They had abandoned their reason for existence – Like the fig tree they had failed in their function and like the fig tree they soon withered. They were hardened and undone. All of their glory - the Temple, priesthood, sacrifices, festivals – ALL withered and died
3. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus told a parable describing God’s great patience with Israel.
Luke 13:6-9 NAU - "And He *began* telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. ⁷ "And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' ⁸ "And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; ⁹ and if it bears fruit next year, *fine*; but if not, cut it down."
4. God gave Israel every advantage. He provided for them and blessed them richly. He sent them prophets to warn them but they would not hear. Stephen preached of their condemnation.
Acts 7:51-53 NAU - "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. ⁵² "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³ you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

II. God expects usefulness of all men

- A. Every human being has but one primary function - the reason for existence
 - - "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever"
1. Our purpose is to shine forth the excellence of God’s holy character. Sin has made this impossible
Romans 1:21-23 NAU - "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."
2. Those who are unfruitful are cursed – they will be cast away
3. Christians especially should devote their life to the reason for their existence
1 Corinthians 10:31 NAU - " Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."
 - a. Jesus fully expects fruit from those who claim to follow Him
 The hypocritical profession will soon wither

- b. No Christian has the right to be useless – the one who is useless is heading for disaster
Luke 12:47-48 NAU - "And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, ⁴⁸ but the one who did not know *it*, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more."
- B. This should also be a warning to churches
- 1. Many have all the outward signs of being a church – stained glass, a steeple and a cross, an organ and a choir, high ceilings and padded pews. But they are filled with dead men.
 - 2. There is a story from the autobiography of Ghandi where he describes during his early days in South Africa he attended a Christian church for several Sundays. He said of his experience, “the congregation did not strike me as being particularly religious; they were not an assembly of devout souls, but appeared rather to be worldly minded people going to Church for recreation and in conformity to custom.” He concluded that there was nothing in the Christian church that he did not already possess.
 - 3. What do people see when they enter into our church? What do people see when they observe your life?
What is our greatest witness to this lost world?