

*The Greatest Stories Never Told:*  
***A Bad Day for Fig Trees***

*Part two of a three part sermon series on lesser told stories of the Bible.*

**A Sermon Preached by  
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**September 19, 2010**

*Woe is me! For I have become like one who, after the summer fruit has been gathered, after the vintage has been gleaned, finds no cluster to eat; there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger. The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets. Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of their sentinels, of their punishment, has come; now their confusion is at hand. Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household. But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.*

*Micah 7:1-7 NRSV*

*Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, [Jesus] went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.*

*Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.*

*And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.*

*Mark 11:13-23 NRSV*

What did Jesus have against fig trees? This story is one of many scripture passages that are so strange that some people use them to argue that the Bible makes little sense and you can't trust it. At first glance it seems like Jesus is being petty and irrational; he's behaving much more like one of us than the perfect Son of God. What gives?

The answer matters. If Jesus can be caught in a less than godly moment, if he sinned even once, then much of our theology falls apart; Jesus becomes something less than a savior – a pretty good teacher maybe, but not someone who can atone for all humanity because of his sinless nature. We have to make sense of passages like these if we are going to trust Jesus with our lives.

When we're dealing with "head-scratching" passages in the Bible, sometimes it is really helpful to learn about the cultural context of the passage. Think of it this way. If a person from 2000 years in the future were studying the Pennsylvania Dutch in our day he or she might wonder why there are no Dutch windmills here, but there are a lot of old German

expressions. We know the answer, don't we? The Pennsylvania Dutch aren't Dutch at all – they're Deutsch, or German, descendants. But a person from the future wouldn't know that unless they learned a little something about our cultural context. It's the same with the Bible and looking into the past. There are some Biblical events that make sense only when you know a little about the time and place in which they took place.

Anybody here grow up tending an orchard of fig trees? Me neither. I don't know the first thing about 'em – at least not from firsthand experience. The Bible, of course, can teach us something. If we look through it for times when figs are mentioned we learn that they were a sweet staple in an otherwise bland Jewish diet. They are one of the seven essential fruits of the Promised Land; they were part of what made it a land flowing with milk (e.g. dairy animals like sheep and goats) and honey (fruit bearing plants like figs, grapes, and dates) [Dt 8:8] From the fig leaf fashions in Genesis to one of the signs of the apocalypse in Revelation [Rev 6:13], figs are part of salvation history from beginning to end. They are the most often mentioned fruit in the Bible. *Having* them is a metaphor for being blessed by God; *lacking* them is a metaphor for being cursed. [Song of Sol 2:13; Jer 8:13] Think of having figs as a universally recognized symbol of abundance, God's blessing, and good things to come.

The second thing we need to know to make sense of this passage is how fig trees grow. I bet some of you are experts with tomatoes. You can look at a young tomato plant and predict pretty accurately what kind of crop it will yield later that season. You can "read" a plant, just like trout fishermen can "read" a stream, or a sailor can "read" the sky. If we were 1<sup>st</sup> century people like Jesus and his followers we would know how to "read" a fig tree. In Israel, according to W.M. Christie, "'Toward the end of March leaves begin to appear [on the trees], and in about a week the [tree is completely covered]. [At the same times as this] and sometimes even before, there appears quite a crop of small edible knobs, not the real figs, but a kind of early forerunner of them. They grow to the size of green almonds, about 1-2 inches at most; these are picked and eaten by peasants and other passersby when hungry. When these early fruit completely ripen they drop off.' These forerunners of the true fig are called *taqsh* in Arabic. Their appearance is a sign that the fully formed true fig will appear some six weeks later.'" So, as Mark says, when Jesus encountered the tree, the time for *figs* had not yet come. But Jesus wasn't looking for *figs*; he was looking for *taqsh*. Since Jesus found "nothing but leaves" - leaves without any *taqsh*-

he knew that "it was an absolutely hopeless, fruitless fig tree" and said as much. [From *Hard Sayings of the Bible* by F. F. Bruce, based on "The Barren Fig Tree" published many years earlier by W. M. Christie, a Church of Scotland minister in Palestine under the British mandatory regime.]

Question: If you are a fruit grower, what do you do call trees that don't produce? Firewood. That's not judgmental; that's practical. As the people at Peters Orchards told me when I called them yesterday, fruit trees aren't pets; if they aren't producing for any reason they have to be replaced.

Is the passage beginning to make sense? The tree wasn't bearing fruit and wasn't going to. The time had come for it to be replaced with a tree that would produce fruit season after season.

But why does Jesus "give a fig" about fig trees at all? He doesn't. It's a metaphor. Take a closer look at the full passage. It's not just about fig trees, is it? There's that little passage about turning the tables in the Temple. The fig tree story is like two slices of bread with the Temple story the grilled cheese in the middle. The Gospel writer, Mark, loves to do this: he intentionally sticks one story inside the other to help us understand both of them.

So if the fig tree story is about a tree *appearing* to be productive, but just taking up space instead, and therefore ready for the wood pile, then what might the turning of the tables in the Temple mean? It means that if Jesus wasn't going to put up with a fig tree that didn't produce fruit—he wasn't going to put up with a temple that was meant to be a blessing for the people, but it was no longer bearing fruit -- no matter how productive all the sacrifices and other activity made it appear to be. It was time for the Temple to give way to something that would be more fruitful.

Now that we have an idea about what the passage *might* mean we have to check our hypothesis by seeing if this meaning is consistent with other passages in the Bible. A passage can't just make sense on its own; it needs to fit with the rest of the Bible too. So let's look at other passages that seem to relate to this one. At the end of this sermon we've included many of them, verses with common words or themes, so you can follow along quickly and study them for yourself.

Mark 13:28 tells us that, sure enough, people used to see the leaves on the fig tree as a sign that something better was coming, a sign “that summer is near.” Luke 21:29-31 tells us a little more: just like the leaves on the tree predict a crop of figs, so the events around Jesus, predicted the coming of the Kingdom of God. And in Luke 13, we find Jesus talking about the practice of cutting down fig trees when they aren’t producing fruit. [Luke 13:6-9] We’re beginning to see that for Jesus, the life cycle of the fig tree is a metaphor for what is happening in his ministry. An unproductive kingdom is being replaced by something new and fruitful.

Our Old Testament lesson sheds even more light. The story of Jesus and the fig tree isn’t a random act of fruit-i-cide at all: it is prophecy fulfilled. Listen again to those opening words of Micah the Prophet, in Chapter 7:

*Woe is me! For I have become like one who, after the summer fruit has been gathered, after the vintage has been gleaned, finds no cluster to eat; there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger. .. The faithful have disappeared from the land... They lie in wait for blood...*

Doesn’t that sound like how Jesus must have felt when he saw that barren fig tree outside Jerusalem—like it Micah’s prediction was coming true? His disciples were about to leave him. The Temple leaders were plotting to kill him.

Micah goes on to say that a savior will come:

*But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.*

*Micah 7:7*

In the last days before his death Jesus lived out Micah’s words; Jesus is the salvation, the Savior, that Micah longed for.

We see the same happening with a verse in Jeremiah; he is speaking of the people of Israel:

*When I wanted to gather them, says the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, ...*

*Jeremiah 8:13 NRSV*

When Jesus walks up to the tree in our story, he is acting out Jeremiah's Biblical prophecy – he finds no figs. Then remember how in Luke's Gospel, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem, he says to the people [Luke 13],

*How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:34 NRSV)*

In Mathew's version of the same passage, Jesus adds one more line: "See, your house is left to you, desolate." (Mt 23:38) The desolate or barren house that Jesus is talking about, of course, is the Temple.

Take all these passages together and we find a connection between gathering the people, barren fig trees, grieving for Jerusalem, and the Temple's destruction. The fig tree promised fruit with its leaves, but it wasn't producing any. The Temple appeared to be fruitful with all its activity, but it wasn't producing people fit for the Kingdom. When Jesus overturned the tables in the Temple he wanted people to interpret his act like they would a farmer chopping down an unproductive fruit tree. When you are a farmer with a hungry family to feed, replacing the tree is an act of necessity and compassion. Likewise, if the people were to be saved, the Temple had to be replaced with something new. That "new thing," that new Way, was Jesus himself.

So in the end, this strange story isn't about figs at all; it is about replacing Temple practices that had once been productive with something infinitely more fruitful.

I think the story is about us, too. Aren't we supposed to be bearing fruit, too? John the Baptist called us to bear fruit of repentance. [Mt 3:8] Paul's letters speak of bearing fruit of the light [Eph 5:9], fruit of righteousness [Heb 12:11], and fruit of the spirit [Gal 5:22-23]. And Jesus says in John 15:

*You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, ... (John 15:16 NRSV)*

If Jesus were to take a close look at us and our lives, what would he find? Lots of green leaves, of course. We look the part of God's children and know the "right" things to say. But in the midst of the leaves would he find fruit, or even the stuff that comes before the fruit? Would he find repentance? Patience? Generosity? Kindness?

If not, I don't think Jesus is going to strike us down. Here's where the metaphor breaks down. Jesus treats *people* differently from *trees* and *temples*. But shouldn't we be concerned anyway? If we're not producing fruit, if our lives don't look any different than that of most of the people on the street, than we are not making what we were made for.

I asked the people at Peters Orchard what they do before they chop down an unproductive apple tree. The experts there told me that they subject it to a battery of tests. They check the soil, check the roots for fungus, check all kinds of things and do everything they can to make it productive. They have so much invested in that tree that it would be a tragedy for it to go to waste. They want to save the tree if they can. It's the same with us. God has too much invested in us to let us go to waste. He wants us to bear fruit, fruit that will last, and he will help us to do it.

Let us pray,

*O Lord, you promised that if we have even a little faith we can move mountains. All we want to do is bear fruit for you. Send our roots deep into your grace. Nourish our leaves with the light of your justice. Shower us daily with hope. Bless us with all that we need so that we might produce blessings for others. Amen.*

## ***Fig Trees in the Bible***

*For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, ....*

*Deuteronomy 8:7-8*

*When I wanted to gather them, says the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.*

*Jeremiah 8:13*

*Woe is me! For I have become like one who, after the summer fruit has been gathered, after the vintage has been gleaned, finds no cluster to eat; there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger. The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets. Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of their sentinels, of their punishment, has come; now their confusion is at hand. Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household. But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.*

*Micah 7:1-7*

*"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.*

*Matthew 23:37-38*

*Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves,*

*for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.*

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*Mark 11:13-20*

*"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.*

*Mark 13:28*

*Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

*Luke 13:6-9*

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

*Luke 13:34*

*Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.*

*Luke 21:29-31*

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