

It's Amazing What You Can Learn From a Fig Tree!

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[0 : 00] Thank you, singers, and thank you all for coming today. It's good to see you all out. You're a great encouragement to each other when as many of us get together as can. It's amazing what you can learn from a fig tree.

Matthew chapter 21, verses 18 through 22. In what, or in who, do we place our faith?

In whom do we trust? I'm sure if we're Christians here, we'll automatically answer, I believe in Jesus Christ. I have faith in Jesus Christ.

I trust in Jesus Christ. And yet, to what extent is this really true of us that all our trust in Christ is founded?

All our trust in Christ is founded. As a young Christian, I was blessed to have a wonderful minister. He taught me both by word and example how to live and to grow as a Christian.

[1 : 08] So much so that for years afterwards, I said to myself, when I grow up, I want to be just like him. It was through his ministry that my grandfather became a Christian in the last week of his life.

Over a decade later, having applied to enter the Free Church College and studied to become a minister just like him, I learned that this man, whom I had loved, respected, and modeled myself upon, had both left the ministry and his wife.

His faith had grown cold, and even though he denied it, he was falling away from Christ. I can't tell you how much his fall hurt me.

It really challenged my own faith that if he, the strongest Christian I knew, could fall away from Christ, then perhaps all this talk of faith in Christ is just that, talk, and not reality.

Since then, we've had similar tragedies, shall we say, in our own denomination, which I know have challenged many others. By the grace of God, I'm persevering.

[2 : 23] By the grace of God, I've even grown through his fall as a Christian. However, what it taught me was that it's all too easy for us as Christians to trust in things other than Jesus Christ.

To trust in great Christian men and women. To trust in great Christian institutions. And church organizations. To trust in Christian culture.

Or as sacred buildings. And all these things are but an early morning mist. Compared to the burning sun of Christ's love and reliability.

And so once again, I ask the question. In what, or in who, do we place our trust and faith? Is all our trust founded in Christ?

What on earth does all this talk of faith have to do with fig trees, mountains, and prayers? On the surface of things, nothing at all.

[3 : 25] But as you dig deeper into this text and ask it the right questions, you begin to realize that from beginning to end, this passage is gently probing us, where is your faith?

The key to this passage is to understand that Matthew, the writer, was a Jewish Christian. And that he is writing this gospel to Jewish Christians. In other words, we have to understand this passage from a Jewish perspective, and therefore use an Old Testament Jewish key to open it up.

Knowing the context of this passage, the Old Testament scriptures, and the history and geography of Israel are all the tools we need to engage with a Jesus who withers a fig tree and then teaches his disciples how to pray a mountain down into the sea.

Remember from last week. The previous passage from verse 12 to 17 concerns Jesus' cleansing of the temple. Jesus establishes himself as the new temple.

The heart of God's presence in the world. The savior and salvation of his people. The one through whom his people pray. By whom they are healed.

[4 : 40] And in whom they worship. And we saw that by so doing, Jesus emptied the temple of its purpose. It should have been a house of prayer. But it had become a den of thieves.

And so when we get to Matthew chapter 21 verses 18 through 22, we're doing so in the context of a corrupt temple, which Jesus had rendered redundant, because he is the new temple of his people.

The context has not changed. The context has not moved on. So how does our passage tie into this context? How does it advance Jesus' argument? Remembering that the ultimate, the question this passage is ultimately answering is this, where is your faith?

And bearing in mind the context of verses 18 through 22, we need to consider two things about this solemn tale of the withered fig and the mountain moved by prayer.

First of all, future. And secondly, fruit. Future and fruit. First of all, future.

[5 : 54] Future. It's not quite so clear from Matthew's gospel, but it becomes clearer when you read Mark's account of this episode, that these verses take place over two days.

Remember, it's Passover week in Jerusalem. Matthew 21 verses 1 through 17 take place on the Sunday of that week. Matthew 21 verses 18 and 19 take place on the Monday of that week.

Matthew 21 verses 20 through 22 take place on the Tuesday of that week. And both take place as Jesus and his disciples are making their way into Jerusalem in the morning from their lodgings in Bethany.

So our passage neatly divides into two events. The withering of the fig tree in verses 18 and 19, and Jesus' discussion on prayer in verses 20 to 22.

The central plank I want to suggest to you is when Jesus says, you can say to this mountain, go throw yourself in the sea. And both, I want to argue, point to the future of Jerusalem and especially of its temple.

[7 : 09] That temple Jesus cleansed and emptied of its purpose. So in verses 18 and 19, Jesus, on his way into Jerusalem on the Monday morning, is hungry.

And isn't that amazing as an aside in verse 18, that Jesus, the Son of God, was hungry. Whenever we're hungry, know this, that's how Jesus felt on this morning.

He notices a fig tree beside the road. Such a thing was not uncommon in the Israel of the day. When travelers ate figs, they would spit out the stones beside the road, and a new fig tree would grow.

But when Jesus looked closer, he saw that although the fig tree had plenty of leaves, it had no figs, it had no fruit. What use is that to a hungry man?

And so we read, Then he said to it, May you never bear fruit again, and immediately the tree withered. Why did Jesus do that? I don't want to be irreverent in any way, but was he just plain angry at this fig tree?

[8 : 29] Was he in a temper? I don't think so. This is an enacted parable. An enacted parable. The kind of parable Jewish disciples would have expected their rabbis to use as teaching tools.

The fig tree here represents all the religious ceremonies, the nationalistic politics, and the rabbinic traditions associated with the temple in Jerusalem.

This fig tree, standing on the way into Jerusalem as it does, is a picture of the Israel of Jesus' day. All leaf, no fruit. Looks good, does nothing.

Talks a good religion, but has no genuine faith in God. And by using this enacted parable, a parable which at the time perhaps the disciples did not understand, but later they did, Jesus is showing what lies in the future for all the religious ceremonies, the nationalistic politics, and the rabbinic traditions of the temple.

They will wither and die like this fig tree. God has found them wanting. The temple has become a den of thieves, and God's judgment shall be that the temple shall wither.

[9 : 48] Now the withering of a fig tree is a picture of Old Testament judgment. For example, in Jeremiah 8 verse 13, we read these words together. The judgment of God is declared as being.

I will take away their harvest. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. By contrast, the flourishing of the fig tree is a sign of God's blessing in the Old Testament.

For example, in Micah chapter 4 verse 4, the blessing of God is declared as being. Every man will sit under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid.

By withering this fig tree, Jesus is demonstrating God's judgment upon Israel. The future looks bleak for Israel because in this enacted parable, Jesus has announced that Israel and its temple is under divine judgment.

Okay. We're in verses 20 through 22 now, and it's the next day. Jesus and his disciples are, once again, journeying from their nighttime lodgings in Bethany along the same road going to Jerusalem.

[11 : 08] The disciples noticed that the fig tree Jesus had cursed had now withered, and so they asked him, how did the fig tree wither so quickly? To which Jesus replied, truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, go, throw yourself into the sea, and it will be done.

On first inspection, we miss the most important word in this sentence and replace it with the word prayer. The most important word in this sentence is the word this.

this mountain. Not a mountain. Not the mountain. Not any mountain.

But this particular mountain. And what particular mountain is the this to which Jesus is referring?

Remember, Jesus and his disciples are traveling from Bethany to Jerusalem. To do so required them to walk uphill, for after all, Jerusalem was built on the top of a range of hills, and the temple itself was built on the tallest of them, Mount Zion.

[12 : 24] At the very bottom of this range of hills upon which Jerusalem was built is the Dead Sea, the lowest point in Israel, which some of you perhaps have visited.

But at the very top of the range of hills is Jerusalem. And tallest of all is the Temple Mount. So I want to suggest to you that by talking about this mountain, given that Jesus and his disciples would have been facing toward Jerusalem as they're walking to Jerusalem, he is speaking about the hills on which Jerusalem is built and especially the Temple Mount, Mount Zion.

And he's talking about this mountain being thrown into the sea. A reference, it seems clear to me, to how the Temple Mount Zion will be cast into the depths of the Dead Sea.

I'd like to think we're getting the message here. Jesus is prophesying future judgment. In his cleansing of the Temple, with the overturning of the tables, Jesus has already begun to demonstrate what that Temple's going to look like when it's being judged and is beginning to be destroyed.

At the time Matthew wrote this Gospel, the Temple in Jerusalem, with all its religious ceremonies, was still standing. But very soon after, in response to Jewish rebellions, the future Roman Emperor, Titus, besieged Jerusalem with four Roman legions.

[13 : 56] In AD 70, he marched into the city. It's estimated he killed 1.1 million Jews, enslaved the rest, and most importantly, destroyed the Temple with fire.

So just a few short decades ahead of Jesus' prediction of God's judgment, of the religious ceremonies, the nationalistic politics, and rabbinic traditions of the Temple, the Roman legions destroyed it with fire.

With hindsight, we can now see exactly what Jesus was saying and doing here in Matthew 2, 18 through 22. He is prophesying the Temple's destruction. All the time, he's making these prophecies as he's walking from Bethany to Jerusalem with his eyes fixed steadily on that temple which will be destroyed.

What lies in the future for this temple is not bright, it's dark, it's judgment, it's fire, it's destruction, it's slaughter, it's terrifying, it's the stuff of nightmares. Can you imagine the utter carnage when not one stone is left on top of another and Jewish blood is running in rivulets down the streets?

In Matthew 21 verses 18 through 22, Jesus is prophesying that this mountain will be thrown into the sea, the fig tree will wither, and you know that's what always happens when you place your faith somewhere other than, or in someone other than, God himself.

[15 : 35] the object of your faith fails, it is destroyed, it proves to be worthless. You've depended and relied upon it just as the Jews did, Jerusalem and its temple, but when God takes it away, you're left wondering, what does the future hold for me?

Jesus here is prophesying future judgment. Now this is the kind of prophetic judgment you'd expect from Jeremiah, surely, not from Jesus. It puts pay to those who say that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New are different.

They say that the God of the Old Testament is judgmental whereas the God of the New Testament is loving. How then do we deal with a Jesus who is so full of love for a sinful humanity that he's willing to die for them, but who also makes prophecies of judgment?

Perhaps we need to get up to speed more with who Jesus really is. Like a great Old Testament prophet, Jesus is telling us, God will take away everything you might put your trust in, yes, even ministers you rely upon, until you're left with him and him alone, until we no longer put our trust in institutions, people or culture, until all we're left with is him.

That's the future. Secondly, fruit, fruit. I want to go back to the beginning of our passage and ask the question, why did Jesus curse this fig tree?

[17 : 17] Well, simple answer on the service of things, it had leaves, but no fruit. A fig tree is one of the few species of plant which produces fruit before it throws out its leaves.

And so this heavy-leafed plant should by rights be loaded with fruit, but it's not. There's no fruit. It did not have what by rights it should have, it promised much because it was heavy-leafed, but it produced nothing.

Now, we've seen that this action of cursing the fig tree is an enacted parable by Jesus, prophesying the future judgment of Jerusalem, a judgment confirmed in the second part of our passage with the phrase, this mountain.

But the question is this, why will Jerusalem be judged? What is God's motive behind it? Is it because for all their show, there is no fruit?

There are sacrifices, there are ceremonies, but there's so little genuine devotion to God. God, it all looks so good, but behind it all are seething webs of nationalism, insurrection, and hypocrisy.

[18 : 32] When all the time the fruit God is looking for is genuine faith and devotion. King David, whose city Jerusalem was, knew this only too well.

In Psalm 51, verse 16, he writes, and we sung these words together, you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it to you. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. In other words, the fruit God seeks rests not in sacrifices or ceremonies, but in broken and contrite hearts.

The fruit God seeks is genuine faith in him. only then will these sacrifices and ceremonies be acceptable to God, only then when they're being made from faithful and devoted hearts.

Now let me prove this from the text itself. And trust me, this took me ages to work out. I was honest with the Kirk session on Monday night and said that I was really struggling with this passage, and I woke up half past two on Tuesday morning, it clicked.

[19 : 42] Let me translate verses 21 and 22 literally from the original. Truly I am saying to you, if you may have faith and may not doubt, not only to this fig tree but to this mountain you may say be taken away and be cast into the sea and it will be done.

And all these things whatsoever you may ask in prayer, having faith you shall receive. When trying to interpret this passage we instantly focus on the power of prayer, that it's through prayer we can move mountains, right?

But that it's not Jesus' point at all. Listen again. Truly I am saying to you, if you may have faith, dot, dot, dot, whatever you may ask in prayer, having faith you may receive.

This is not a passage about prayer as much as it's a passage about faith. Yes, faith in God is expressed in prayer but the chief fruit Jesus is seeking from his disciples isn't an improvement in their prayer lives but faith.

The only reasons Jesus mentions prayer here are first because the temple whose destruction Jesus is prophesying was meant to be a place of prayer and secondly because genuine faith in God is expressed in believing prayer.

[21 : 09] but it's about faith. So when we read in verse 21 and 22 focus on the fact that Jesus deliberately places the having of faith at both the beginning and the end of his statement.

Faith is the bookends of a life pleasing to God. What is the fruit Jesus is seeking but did not find in the temple in Jerusalem? Answer, genuine faith faith in him.

The religious elite and those in authority at the temple grasp every opportunity as we'll see next week to show themselves religious, to do all the right things but their hearts are very far from God.

There is no genuine faith expressed in believing prayer. So you see this is a passage in which with the surgical precision of an Old Testament prophet Jesus is challenging us concerning where our faith lies.

For many of the Jews in Jesus' day their faith rested in their religious ceremonies in their rabbinic traditions in the sacrifices of Judaism in being an ethnic Jew.

[22 : 21] for some even the physical temple with all its religious and social and political activities that was the object of their faith.

What then shall they do when the object of their faith is taken away and burned with fire? Where then shall they place their faith? As I said at the beginning all the way through this passage Matthew is gently probing us with the question when is your faith?

Is it in what you do for Christ? In your service for Him your prayers to Him your worship of Him? Or is it in who Christ is and in what He has done for you?

Is it in the trappings of the church of God the institution the culture the history the great men and women or is it the God whose church this is?

Ah but these are deep questions and only as individuals can we answer them and sometimes yes most times it takes God to answer them for us but this I know by painful experience to be true as someone else has so rightly said we only realize that Jesus is all we need when Jesus is all we have we only realize that Jesus is all we need when Jesus is all we have sometimes it takes God to engage in drastic spiritual surgery before we realize all we need is faith in Jesus Christ so when I use the word my here I'm not talking about me I'm just trying to individualize this if all my religious finally was taken away if all my Christian friends were taken away if all that was left was me and God would that be enough that's the question Jesus is asking in this passage and that's the question which soberly before God we must answer so yes it hurts us when our mentors and our examples fall into sin and we bleed when those people we trusted proved to be false so we weep when the church we love does things against the revealed will of

[24 : 55] God but even here we can use such situations for good if we will but view it as God's spiritual surgery stripping back the layers of our faith until we're left with him and him only and it's only really when it's just God we begin to realize that all we've ever needed is just God it's amazing the lessons you can learn from a fig tree you know you can learn a bigger Jesus than before you ever knew you can learn about his radical distaste for and judgment of sin you can learn about the primacy of the fruit of faith you can learn about you can learn that when everything else is stripped away Christ is all you need we don't need temples or buildings when Jesus is God's new temple for us we don't need sacrifices when he is our once for all sacrifice for sin we don't need nationalism when he is our lord and he is our king let me ask us just once more and I'll leave a moment after I finish for each of us to pray through this question where is my faith lord we thank you that it's so true that it's only when

Jesus is all we have that we recognize Jesus is all we need so lord we pray that whatever spiritual surgery needs to take place in our lives to bring us to a realization of the all sufficient grace of Christ that you would bring it on however painful that might be for us or for others that you bring it on because we genuinely want to answer this question where is my faith by saying all my trust in Christ is founded amen