



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 21:18-22

Topic

The disciples marvel that Jesus causes
a fruitless fig tree to wither

Title

"Jesus is a Fig-Wither Friend"

Introduction

Before his 19th birthday, Frank Abagnale successfully performed cons worth millions of dollars by posing as a Pan American World Airways pilot, a Georgia doctor, and a Louisiana parish prosecutor.

His life was made famous in the 2002 Steven Spielberg film, *Catch Me if You Can*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Abagnale, and Tom Hanks as Carl Hanratty, a bumbling but persistent FBI agent.

We have a tendency to revere those who can pull off a con; we even call them artists. Think Paul Newman and Robert Redford in *The Sting*. They were the handsome heroes, making right the wrongs of their mark.

If there's one place where you never want to fake it, never want to try to con others, it's in the church. Too much is at stake - not the least of which is the eternal destinies of the folks you come into contact with.

We are warned that there will be frauds among God's people. In his book, Jude describes some of them as "late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots" (v12).

Those guys are apostates; they're not saved. When Jude says they are "twice dead," he means they never had eternal life in the first place, and that they are headed for eternal damnation in the end.

Jesus is going to encounter a fig tree that is without fruit. He will curse the tree so that it withers. It was symbolic of the true condition of the leaders of Israel. They were trees without fruit.

He uses the occasion to teach His disciples - which includes us - a lesson about fruit and faith.

We are not the fig tree; we are not going to be cursed; we are not twice dead apostates.

But there **is** something to be said about *fruit* and *faith* as we walk with The Lord.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Jesus Is Going To Walk With You Inspecting For Fruit, and #2 Jesus Is Going To Work With You Expecting Faith.

#1 Jesus Is Going To Walk With You Inspecting For Fruit

(v18-19)

The fig is the first fruit mentioned by name in the Bible. It has the sad distinction of being the tree from which Adam and Eve took leaves to sew together coverings for their nakedness immediately after they had sinned - plunging God's creation into its current state of ruin.

God came to fellowship with Adam and Eve that afternoon, as He always did each day. They were hiding, wearing fig leaves.

It was the first case of camouflage as they tried to blend in with the fig tree.

Fig trees produce early and late fruit, and one thing that is true of their cycle is that, if they have leaves, they should have fruit underneath.

Mat 21:18 Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.

Mat 21:19 And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away.

If you compare Matthew's account with the one in Mark's Gospel, you learn that Jesus came across the fig tree on Monday morning and, finding it fruitless, He cursed it. Then, on Tuesday morning, the disciples noticed it had withered from the roots.

Skeptics like to find apparent discrepancies in the Bible. They want to prove it has errors - so that they don't have to feel its conviction that they are sinners in need of the Savior presented on its pages.

There is no discrepancy or contradiction in these two accounts. The writers are simply telling the same story from two different perspectives:

- Mark is telling the story *chronologically*.
- Matthew is telling the same story *topically*.

Just the other day, one of the sisters asked me to tell someone a story I've told many times before. I did - then she said, "You left out the best part!" I told it properly, but not completely; and that is what happens in the Gospels.

There are no insurmountable contradictions in God's Word. It is trustworthy through-and-through.

Matthew notes that Jesus "was hungry." It's been suggested that He was hungry because He had missed breakfast spending time instead in prayer talking to His Father.

Makes sense that Jesus, who often retreated for prayer, sacrificing both sleep and food, would be hungry on His way into town. He always spent time alone with the Father; how much more might He this last week on earth leading to the Cross.

You might go so far as to say that Jesus' physical hunger was evidence of His spiritual hunger to spend time alone with God. He would be hungry, and tired, precisely because He felt the need to first satisfy His spiritual hunger to be with the Father to the exclusion of material things and physical comforts.

When I was first a Christian, I came across this saying in a devotional: "No Bible, No breakfast." It was a solid reminder that, if I didn't have time to feed the inner man, what good would feeding my body do for me.

Jesus was a "No Bible, No breakfast" kind of guy. Finding Himself hungry, He was probably, as we used to say to sound like surfers, 'stoked' to come across a fig tree in leaf.

The Gospel of Mark says it wasn't the season for figs, so why would Jesus expect to find any?

Figs may not have been in season, but a leafy fig tree meant you should nevertheless find fruit underneath its outward growth.

Besides, this fig tree wasn't in an orchard. It didn't seem to belong to anyone. It was growing all by itself, along the path they were walking. It was an altogether unusual fig tree.

Jesus "said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away."

This was the only so-called 'destructive' miracle Jesus ever performed. For three and one-half years He had gone around doing only good: healing the sick, delivering the oppressed, raising the dead.

It certainly marked a change in His ministry, but not a change in Him. Here's what I mean.

When Jesus first came on the scene, when He first began His ministry to the nation of Israel, He went into the synagogue at Nazareth and this is what happened:

Luk 4:17 And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

Luk 4:18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR; HE HAS SENT ME TO HEAL THE BROKENHEARTED, TO PROCLAIM LIBERTY TO THE CAPTIVES AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET AT LIBERTY THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED;

Luk 4:19 TO PROCLAIM THE ACCEPTABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."

Luk 4:20 Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him.

Luk 4:21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus had been doing exactly what Isaiah said the Messiah would.

What is fascinating is that, when Jesus read from Isaiah, He stopped reading in mid-verse. Here is how Isaiah 61:1-2 reads:

Isa 61:1 "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; Isa 61:2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn,

Jesus had been "proclaim[ing] the acceptable year of The Lord." He had been offering to establish the kingdom on earth, inviting the Jews to accept Him.

They would not, and this was the final few days on earth before they would see to it He was killed.

Thus "the day of vengeance of our God" was something the nation of Israel must experience.

In just a few short years after His crucifixion, around 70AD, Titus and the Roman legions would surround, then destroy, Jerusalem and its Temple. For the next almost two thousand years, the Jews would be dispelled from their promised land; they would not be a nation geographically - although God would preserve them miraculously to return to their land in our lifetime.

The fig tree illustrates Israel - the nation of Israel as it was officially represented by its leaders. Israel's Messiah had come. He had proven Himself over-and-over again, fulfilling all the signs of the Messiah, showing all the credentials that were predicted.

He had taught them for three and one-half years, showing them the way out of their self-righteousness back to the righteousness that comes by faith in God when you simply believe and are justified by God - declared righteous by faith in Jesus.

But for a handful of followers - one hundred twenty on the Day of Pentecost, huddled in an upper room - Jesus was totally rejected.

The Jews, represented by their leaders, preferred to attempt to meticulously keep the outward Law of Moses while ignoring the more important issues of the heart.

Thus they were like a leafy fig tree. They gave the impression, by their much religious activity, that they were bearing fruit. But underneath, they were fruitless.

Another time, Jesus had made this same point using a different illustration. Passing by a grave, He said that the self-righteous religious leaders of the nation were like that grave: outwardly, well-kept, but inwardly, full of dead man's bones.

Jesus said, "let no fruit grow on you ever again." We know, from reading the rest of the New Testament, and especially Romans chapters eight, nine, and ten, that God has an ongoing plan for the nation of Israel. So we need to be careful when we say, "the fig tree is Israel."

If that were the case, Jesus would have just condemned Israel - as a nation, as a people - out of God's plan.

He didn't, so we understand that, at least here, the fig tree represented the Jewish leadership that would shortly condemn Him to death.

In the next verse, in verse twenty, the disciples ask about the withering of the fig tree, and Jesus applies it to them.

Thus, while we've seen the context of the incident is to discuss and describe Israel's fruitlessness even after her Messiah had been cultivating her, there is an application beyond Israel and her leaders that we can appreciate.

Jesus expects to find fruit in our lives as believers.

By "fruit," we mean, of course, the fruit of the Spirit, listed in Galatians chapter five: "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (5:22-23).

But beyond those specific traits, fruitfulness is a catch-all for a solid, grounded, growing Christian life that is offered as a living sacrifice to The Lord, looking forward to His coming and to hearing Him say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Salvation means we have spiritual life. Our spirit is alive, and God the Holy Spirit indwells us. You could say we are, as Christians, rooted and grounded in Jesus. If His life courses through us, of course He'd expect to find fruit.

Not only do we have life that can produce fruit, Jesus is constantly at work cultivating fruit in our lives.

In a few days, Jesus would have a final supper with His disciples, and He would tell them the following:

Joh 15:1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

Joh 15:2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Joh 15:3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

Joh 15:4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

Joh 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

The vinedresser repositions under-producing vines. He prunes others to get a greater yield. He removes dead growth.

The Lord is telling us, in these figures, that He is constantly at work, through the Word of God and the issues and circumstances of our lives, to produce spiritual fruit in abundance.

We know all this. Knowing it, we can sit before The Lord and ask Him to inspect us for fruitfulness.

It's all too possible to be leafy on the outside, but lack real fruit - spiritual fruit - underneath. We can leave our first love; we can go through the motions, lacking the emotion.

I can't tell if you are a fruitless fig tree; and you can't tell if I am. Time might reveal some things. But only God can discern whether or not I am abiding in Him, yielding to Him.

When we get to our reflection on the message today, give The Lord freedom to look beneath the leaves and tell you what He finds.

It might surprise you in a good way!

#2 Jesus Is Going To Work With You Expecting Faith

(v20-22)

As we get back to the text, it's good to remember that part of what Jesus was doing was preparing His boys for their mission after He was crucified, raised, and had ascended into Heaven.

Jesus' answer to their amazement at the withering of the fig tree is about their future, and the need to walk by faith if they had any thought of accomplishing their task.

Mat 21:20 And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?"

After everything Jesus had done, *they marveled at a withered tree?*

I see that as a good thing. Or, at least, we can apply it in a good way.

In our walk with The Lord, the things He does (or doesn't do) - for us and others - ought to cause us to marvel.

If you are an older Christian - and by that I mean your spiritual age, not your physical age - you should marvel with younger believers when they are all excited about something that you experienced, or realized, years ago. It's a marvel to them - and it still ought to be for us, as well.

Mat 21:21 So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done.

Mat 21:22 And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

I think the scenery is important. They were walking along the road, had encountered a fig tree, and were in the vicinity of the Mount of Olives and the Dead Sea.

I'm going to suggest that The Lord meant to illustrate for them, and for us, that as we walk with Him during His absence, there is work to be done, but that obstacles will present themselves. We must therefore walk and work by faith - believing that our mission cannot fail and that obstacles can and be removed.

I think Jesus' teaching here is like what we read in Zechariah 4:6-7:

Zec 4:6 So he answered and said to me: "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' Says the LORD of hosts.

Zec 4:7 'Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone With shouts of "Grace, grace to it!" ' "

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, Zerubbabel led the first band of Jews who returned from the Babylonian captivity at the close of the seventy years. In the second year after the return, he erected an altar and laid the foundation of the Temple on the ruins of that which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

He was overwhelmed with obstacles in the path of completing the task. The obstacles are compared to a great mountain in the path of his progress, needing to be leveled before he could go forward.

It seemed as though the Himalaya's were standing in his way, needing not just to be climbed and crossed, but removed. Impossible.

But not impossible with God - not by the power of God the Holy Spirit to complete the task through him as he walked and worked by faith.

We usually backpeddle on these verses, trying to defend them, since they seem too good to be true. Certainly "whatever things [we] ask in prayer" don't always come to pass. So we say Jesus meant, "whatever things we ask that are in God's will."

That's, of course, true. We really wouldn't want anything that wasn't in God's will, would we? You'd have to be really out there to want something that was outside of the will of God.

Come to think about it, a lot of Christians **do** seem to be "out there." I hate to pick at spiritual scabs, but marriage and divorce are examples we can all relate to. Too many believers are living in sin, or pursuing unbiblical divorces. They are definitely, obviously out of God's will - but they pray for Him to bless them.

What Jesus might have been going for here is a potent promise regarding the disciples' future mission.

They were on the road to Jerusalem. The nation of Israel - officially - was a fruitless fig tree. It called for a change of plan in terms of reaching the world with the message of salvation.

The mission of spreading the Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, would fall first to the apostles, then to all their future converts, until the church age ends with the resurrection and rapture of the church.

Think of it. Eleven guys were tasked with spreading the greatest message of all time, but in the shadow of the national rejection of, and the violent killing of, their Leader; and the suicide of one of them, who had been a traitor.

It was like putting the Sierra mountain range on top of the Himalaya's, and putting them right in the path of the apostles, and having them climb it in sandals with no mountain climbing gear.

Or asking them to level it with only their bare hands as tools.

And, if they could somehow struggle over the mountains, or remove them, they'd be faced with crossing an ocean on the other side, but without the use of a boat, or even a raft.

It was an impossible task. At least, humanly speaking.

Supernaturally speaking, Jesus let them know that they could not fail, if they simply believed in Him, and worked by faith.

Any mountain, or ocean, or obstacle of any kind, *could* and *would* be removed as they simply pressed forward sharing Christ, one person or one home or one village at a time.

You see it in the Book of Acts. Guess what? It's still happening!

But it only happens by faith - walking by faith, working by faith. It's not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of God.

Are we trusting in might and power? It happens as God blesses us with resources and tools.

Let's be sure that we are working yielded to Him - doing those things He has called us to, the way He has gifted us to do them.

Let us continue - always - in the Spirit.