

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 11:12-14 & 20-26

Topic

Jesus encounters a fig tree full of leaves
having no figs growing underneath them

Title

"Fig No Grow! Fig No Grow! Fig No Grow!"

Introduction

They were "off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz."

Dorothy was following the yellow brick road so that the Wizard would send her home. She met the Scarecrow, who wanted a brain, the Tin Woodman, who desired a heart, and the Cowardly Lion, who was in need of courage.

They were each convinced the Wizard could help them.

They made it to Emerald City where they were initially rejected by the Wizard. They finally got in to see him, only to quickly discover that everything was a facade.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," he urged them; but it was too late. He has been exposed as all show with no substance.

In our verses, Jesus encounters a fig tree that is all show and no substance. It has put out its leaves, indicating there will be abundant fruit underneath, but, upon inspection, no figs are to be found.

In what seems to be a bizarre, out-of-character, destructive miracle, Jesus condemned the fig tree, and it withers from the roots and dies.

If that isn't weird enough, Jesus uses the occasion to say that if you have enough faith, you can toss a mountain into the sea.

It all sounds like some kind of environmental disaster.

Obviously there is a lot going on here. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Check For Fruit Under Your Leaves, and #2 Check For Faith Behind Your Labor.

#1 Check For Fruit Under Your Leaves

(v12-14)

It was revenge for all battered vending machines. In the film, *The Sum of All Fears*, the terrorist bomb that exploded was hidden in a cigarette vending machine at a professional sporting event in Baltimore.

Admit it - You've severely beaten a vending machine at one time or another. It started out innocently enough, with you thinking that a little bump or nudge would somehow cause it to either dispense your selected item, or return your money.

When that didn't work, the violence escalated.

Debra Johnson was caught on a surveillance camera shoving newspaper into a 7-Up vending machine outside a Piggly Wiggly in New Bern, NC. She then lit the newspaper on fire, grabbed a soda from a different vending machine and walked away. The fire melted the vending machine, destroying its contents and about \$35 in change.

I want to assure you, that was **not** what Jesus was doing to the fruitless fig tree. In fact, His actions are deeply symbolic and significant - both for the nation of Israel, and to individuals like ourselves.

Mar 11:12 Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry.

Jesus was hungry. Any description of His physical condition always reminds me of the wonder of His uniqueness as the God-man.

- Jesus was eternally God. He never ceased to be God.
- In His incarnation, born of a virgin, Jesus was fully human. He rose from the dead in a glorified human body, in which He will remain eternally.

While He was on the earth He chose to not use the prerogatives of His deity. Instead He depended upon the leading of God the Holy Spirit.

Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest writes,

Our Lord lived His life on earth usually as the Man Christ Jesus. He was revealing Deity to humanity, and how else could He do that except in human terms, a human body, human limitations, and a human life lived among men.

On this occasion He was led by something as common as hunger, to see a fig tree. The Holy Spirit would use it to teach an incredibly powerful lesson.

Be aware of even the smallest things and expect God to use them to minister to you, and to others.

Mar 11:13 And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.

I can't believe how much is written by Bible commentators regarding the growth cycle of the Mediterranean fig tree. *None of them agree as to when the fruit forms, or for how long it can remain.*

The growth cycle isn't important; only the observable fact that the "fig tree [had] leaves."

What about Mark's comment, "it was not the season for figs?" If figs were not in season, why would Jesus expect to find any?

More importantly, if figs were not in season, what had the fig tree done wrong?

The solution seems to be that the tree was prematurely in leaf, growing in some sheltered spot, and it was therefore reasonable to expect a premature crop of figs.

Mar 11:14 In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it.

The Lord condemned the tree, not just because of its fruitlessness, but because of its fruitlessness in the midst of a leafy display which promised fruit.

Let's get right to the point. The fig tree represents Israel. The prophet Hosea said, quoting God, "I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstfruits on the fig tree in its first season" (9:10).

The fig doesn't simply represent Israel as a symbol. It tells the spiritual condition of Israel. An entire chapter of the Book of Jeremiah - chapter twenty-four - tells of two baskets of figs. One is "very good," and the other "very bad." God explained to Jeremiah that they represented the spiritual condition of the Jews:

- Those who were "good" He would protect and keep.
- Those who were "bad" were headed to judgment.

BTW: The fig tree isn't the only fruit-bearing plant that represents Israel. We also read of the vine and the olive tree representing Israel. We are used to picking one national tree, or one state flower. Why there can only be one, I don't know. Israel is represented by all three.

The fig tree Jesus encountered was leafy, with the promise of finding abundant fruit under its leaves. Upon inspection, it was fruitless.

It is a perfect illustration of the nation of Israel as Jesus encountered her during His earthly ministry. Israel was all leaf, with no fruit.

Outwardly, there was the magnificent Temple, built-up for the Jews by King Herod. There was the priesthood, and the sacrificial system. They had the Scriptures. They had leaves.

Jesus shows us beneath the leaves, under the facade. The men most powerful among the Jews, and the ones recognized as the most spiritual, were plotting to kill Jesus.

In the Temple, the priests were running scams on the people by selling their pre-approved animals for sacrifice, and by charging exorbitant rates to exchange their provincial coins for the required Temple currency.

Leading up to this, Jesus had been exposing first century Judaism as an outward attempt at being righteous that had no effect on the inward person. It was a system of self-righteousness that promised salvation by outward works, but could not deliver on its promise.

At one point Jesus made the same observation by calling the religious leaders white-washed tombs. Outwardly they looked good, but inwardly they were full of dead men's bones. It was all a facade, masking their spiritual failure.

We are not the fig tree; and by "we," I mean the church, and the individual believers who comprise the church. We are, however, disciples, and are therefore expected to bear fruit.

- Jesus said, "My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to my Father" (John 15:8 NLT).
- Jesus also said, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20 NKJV).

Most of us have memorized the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Scholars like to point out that there is really only *one* "fruit of the Spirit," and that one is "love." The other words describe love.

Having said that, there are other things besides love that are considered spiritual fruit in our lives. For example:

- The apostle Paul regarded those he had helped lead to Christ as fruit. He wrote to the Christians at Rome: "I purposed to come unto you... that I might have some **fruit** among you also, even as among other Gentiles" (Romans 1:13).
- Paul thought of financial support as fruit. He commended Philippi as the only church that had sent an offering to help defray his expenses on his missionary trips. He calls such gifts "fruit" that would abound to their "account" (4:17).
- Genuine traits of godly character are also called fruits: "For the **fruit** of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth" (Ephesians 5:9).

I conclude that there is no complete list we can make of the fruit that can be produced in our lives. It might be better to describe what we are looking for as **fruitfulness** in general.

Pastor Chuck Smith put it this way:

THE WHOLE IDEA IS THAT OF BEING FRUITFUL. The primary desire of my life is to bear good fruit for my Lord. No other accomplishments that I may achieve are as important as this. One day when I stand before Him to give an account of my life, this is all that will really matter.

How do you become fruitful? Fruit is a by-product of a plant existing in healthy conditions. Spiritual fruit a by-product of your healthy relationship with the Lord. As you abide in Christ, it just develops naturally.

- It is not something that is forced.
- You do not have to struggle to produce it.

It is still possible to have a lush and leafy exterior, but no fruit underneath. All false religions can be described that way, to a certain extent, because they present only outward requirements for pleasing God. They are leafy with works of righteousness, but none of those works can save you.

Then there are the groups that flat-out say you must do certain things to be saved, e.g., be water baptized, or speak in tongues.

Nope. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, *plus nothing*. Water baptism and speaking in tongues are added human works.

On an individual basis, Christians can emphasize how spiritual they are based on their outward works. Indeed, some of the people who are most admired in churches are esteemed for the wrong reasons. They seem successful, well-to-do, well-spoken. They promote certain standards that you must achieve in order to be like them. You get the impression that, somehow, they are better than you, more spiritual. But it's all for show.

Check to see if there is genuine and juicy spiritual fruit being produced as you abide with the Lord.

#2 Check For Faith Behind Your Labor

(v20-26)

We are deliberately skipping verses fifteen through nineteen. We'll get to them next time. Mark is giving us events in *chronological* order, and I want to take them in their *logical* order.

- Mark introduces us to the fruitless fig tree, then Jesus visits the Temple. He finishes the story of the fig tree in verses twenty through twenty-six. Those verses go together logically with what we've just studied.
- In verses fifteen through nineteen, Mark shows us Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple. He finishes that story in verses twenty-seven through thirty-three. Those verses go together logically.

Mar 11:20 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots.

They could not see the roots, but from what they could see, it was evident that the fig tree was "dried up from the roots," never to recover.

We often use the expression, "the root of the problem." We also speak of being "dry" in our relationship with Jesus. If you're feeling dry, get to the root of the problem. It's usually sin, or that you've given up abiding in the Lord in terms of having a devotional time.

Mar 11:21 And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."

Have you ever sent a text message that was misunderstood? One time, while we were babysitting Geno, I texted to a group, "I have the baby!" which, by the way, is a line of dialog from the film *Willow*.

One of the folks who received my text thought it was the kidnapper trying to make contact with me to arrange for ransom!

I'm not sure what to make of Peter's statement. I can't tell what his intent was. At the very least he was making note of the power Jesus had wielded to so completely kill the tree so quickly.

Like it or not, the withering of the fig tree was a miracle. An odd miracle; but a display of immense power over nature nonetheless.

Mar 11:22 So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God.

Wait a minute. What does having faith in God have to do with this dead tree?

Jesus was letting them know that the nation was headed into a time of judgment. In the mean time, the disciples would be sent into the world to preach the Gospel to all nations. They would need power to accomplish their task. Jesus thus launched into a talk about the power of God that would be available to them, and how to pray to receive it.

Think of it this way: If Jesus displayed such mighty power to make a tree fruitless, imagine what He could do to make His disciples fruitful.

Mar 11:23 For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.

Excuse me? Can I change the topography of the earth through prayer if I have faith in God? I've often wanted to level-out Hwy 395 between Four Corners and Adelanto; except that some of the dips make you feel like you're riding Screamin' Over California.

If you travel to Israel, you can visit the Mount of Olives. It's the mountain Jesus was referring to when He said, "this mountain." In the many centuries since Jesus first said, "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,'" **no one has ever done it.**

For over two-thousand years, either no saint has had that kind of faith, OR Jesus meant something entirely different.

I know there have been great men, and women, of faith. He must have meant something entirely different.

At this point we mostly back peddle and explain what Jesus did *not* mean, launching into some general thoughts about praying in the will of God. We make excuses for why we don't see powerful results as we pray.

I got to thinking, "What did the guys who originally heard these words think they meant?" We can determine what they thought Jesus meant by listening to them pray.

Peter was involved in a group prayer in The Book of Acts. In chapter three Peter and John healed the lame man who sat in the Temple.

They were taken into custody by the Jewish authorities for preaching the Gospel after the healing. It was the time they declared, "we must obey God rather than men."

After being threatened and released, they prayed. Here is a snippet of their prayer, from Acts chapter four: "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus" (v29-30).

What I found fascinating is what happened immediately after they prayed:

Act 4:31 And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was **shaken**; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

Think about it. In our verses in Mark, Jesus coupled prayer with casting a mountain into the sea. In Acts, Peter prayed, and an earthquake ensued.

He didn't pray for the earth to shake. He prayed for boldness and the earth shook as a token the prayer had been answered.

Jesus wasn't telling us to pray for mountains to be cast into the sea. The promise of Jesus was that they could have power to share the Gospel that was greater than the power it takes to cast a mountain into the sea.

Listen to this, from the Old Testament. It is a confirmation of this same principle. It may even have been on Jesus' mind.

Zec 4:6 ... "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!..'"

Zerubbabel was tasked with rebuilding the Temple after the Babylonian captivity. It was tough going. God promised Him the power to accomplish the task. It was a power greater than that which would be needed to level a high mountain.

Let's read verse twenty-three again:

Mar 11:23 For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.

Jesus wasn't giving His followers a blank check to alter the topography of the earth. He was telling them, as He had told Zerubbabel, that we are assured power from Heaven for our mission.

Peter and company prayed for boldness. If we pray like they did, for boldness, *then* "you will have whatever [you] say."

Boldness is produced in you by God the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised His followers we could ask, seek, and knock, and receive more-and-more of the Holy Spirit.

Luk 11:9 "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Luk 11:10 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Luk 11:11 If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish?

Luk 11:12 Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?

Luk 11:13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"**

God promises to give you the Holy Spirit. Since you are already indwelt by Him, He must mean *more* of the Holy Spirit, coming upon you with boldness. If you ask, and seek, and knock - **if you pray** - you can believe He *will* give you the Holy Spirit.

I'm strongly suggesting that the Holy Spirit is the "whatever" you can have if you pray and believe God by faith.

Instead of being apologetic about not receiving answers to our prayers, we ought to get excited that Jesus **will** answer our prayers for boldness by the Holy Spirit.

Mar 11:24 Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.

This second "whatever" seems to be more inclusive of other "things" beyond the Holy Spirit. What are these "whatever's?"

I think we should look at how a real man of faith prayed. The apostle Paul records many of the things he prayed for. They are mostly related to furthering the Gospel, or to the growth of the Christians he encountered.

When Peter heard these words Jesus spoke, and when Paul became aware of them after he was saved, they evidently thought Jesus meant "whatever things you ask" **was intended for mission critical stuff for furthering the Gospel and for building the church.**

Israel was going to be disciplined. The Kingdom of God on the earth would be postponed, awaiting the Second Coming of Jesus after the seven-year Tribulation on earth. After Jesus' Ascension into Heaven, and before the Tribulation, followers of Jesus are tasked with going into all the world preaching the Gospel and making disciples.

Does that sound like a daunting task? Does that seem overwhelming? Isn't it a lot like a giant mountain peak in your way, that seems impossible to climb?

It does seem insurmountable - except for the power of God, by His Holy Spirit, to level mountains or cast them into the sea.

We have two-thousand years of the history of the church obliterating mountains around the world as the Gospel was preached with Holy Spirit boldness. Iron Curtains, Great Walls, Third Reichs - none of what evil men, inspired by Satan, attempted could halt the building of the church.

Indeed, the gates of Hell cannot prevail against it - let alone some puny mountain.

Mar 11:25 "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

Mar 11:26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

You know what I get out of these two verses? Jesus is telling us to quit *playing* church and *be* the church.

We are on a mission deep behind enemy lines. Satan is the god of this world. Most of the kingdoms of men are post-Christian, or anti-Christian. People are perishing without hearing the Gospel. Christians are being persecuted, and martyred, for their faith.

Do we really have time to argue about the color of the carpet? Of course not. There should be no friendly fire casualties in the church. We should be focused on the greater mission.

Seriously, we need to dial back our personal sensitivities, and be a little more tough-skinned, for the sake of the Gospel.

What about this matter of God not forgiving our trespasses? William MacDonald, in *The Believer's Bible Commentary*, explains it well:

This does not refer to the judicial forgiveness of sins at the time of conversion; that is strictly a matter of grace through faith. This refers to God's parental dealings with His children. An unforgiving spirit in a believer breaks fellowship with the Father in Heaven and hinders the flow of blessing.

You will hinder your reception of the Holy Spirit for boldness if you are harboring unforgiveness. Rise above pettiness, and be about the mission of the Gospel.

Jesus is telling us to have faith - telling us to believe - that we will be empowered by the Holy Spirit for our labor in the Gospel.

Are you? If not, ask, seek, and knock, and then have faith to believe that your Heavenly Father will give you the Holy Spirit.