



All Leaves, No Fruit

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 21:18-22

April 14, 2013

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The text that we're looking at this morning details one of the oddest of Christ's miracles that He accomplished while He was on the earth, but also one of the most pointed. Jesus, in this last week of His life, used every opportunity, every moment, it seems, to clearly and decisively demonstrate the difference, the division, between those who believed and received His declaration that He is the Son of the Living God and those who either refused to believe those claims or who responded with apathy and lack of interest. And that is what we are seeing with this text this morning – another demonstration, a symbolic act of Christ followed with instruction to His disciples, that pronounces the terrifying prospects for the rebellious and the insincere, the defiant and the fake.

Let me summarize what we have seen so far in the last week of Jesus' life. First, on Sunday, Christ had entered Jerusalem in accordance with prophecy, humble and riding upon a donkey, presenting Himself in the manner that the Scripture said the Messiah would. He came entering the ground of battle – Jerusalem – where He would in just a few days crush the head of Satan, deal a death blow to sin and three days later make a mockery of the grave by rising from the dead. He would do all of this to redeem for Himself a people, blood-bought worshippers, forgiven of sin and made alive to God the Father, to the praise of His everlasting glory. Then on Monday, He came to the Temple, to the spiritually fetid, disgusting, rotten, and worthless worship that dominated the Temple, an utter disregard and devaluing of God. Again, in keeping with the Scriptures, He cleansed the Temple, turning over tables, scattering animals, demonstrating divine authority and power over the spiritual life of Israel, over the Temple and its sacrifices and rituals which were to point to Him as Savior King but which had become mechanistic and empty of heart.

And now, in this text, we come to Tuesday morning. Jesus has spent the night in Bethany at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus and is now on His way back to Jerusalem, back to the

Temple where He is going to deal with the chief priests and scribes again and do some teaching. And it is while He is on the way back to Jerusalem that He will use a fig tree to teach the vital lesson:

Religiosity Without A Living Faith in Christ Results in Spiritual Barrenness and Death (v. 18-19)
We pick it up in verse 18 and we read: "In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once." (Matthew 21:18–19, ESV) Now you have to remember that every miracle that Christ ever performed he performed for a purpose and this one that we are looking at this morning is no different. Let's consider the facts of the story first and then we will consider the message behind the miracle.

As Jesus is on the road, coming back to Jerusalem, he sees this fig tree that is covered in leaves. The way that it is phrased in the original Greek is that this particular fig tree stands out from all of the others because it is covered in leaves. Jesus is hungry and seeing that this tree has leaves goes over to it expecting to find figs on it to eat. Now Mark says in his gospel that it was not yet the time for figs when this took place, and so you would think that Jesus shouldn't have expected to find any figs to eat. But here is what you need to know about fig trees. The fig tree grows leaves only when it had produced its figs and while the figs were fully maturing. The leaves were sort of an advertisement that there were figs to be had for anyone who was hungry. Now they may not have been fully developed and probably would not have been, but they were edible and oftentimes were eaten by the poor or by travelers. So the fig tree gives the appearance of being fruitful, the appearance of life. But when Christ found nothing upon the tree but the leaves, the false promise of fruit, Jesus cursed the fig tree and it immediately began to wither and to die.

Now look, Jesus is not just mad at the fig tree because it didn't have any fruit on it and decides to zap it. This is an enacted parable against the faithless of the nation of Israel. It is a pointed statement directed at the hypocrisy and barrenness of Israel's collective souls. See beloved, you have to understand that the fig tree was iconic in Israel, it was famous. The tree itself would often grow to be 20 feet tall so it was good for shade. The fruit was delicious and so people would often go and sit under a fig tree, sometimes gathering with other people, and just kind of relax and meditate, contemplating life, munching on figs. Within Israel the tree was regarded as a symbol of security, of joy, of prosperity and well-being. But above all, the fig tree

was used in the OT to represent the nation of Israel. By Jesus' time, the fig tree, along with the grape vine, was considered to be the emblem of Israel.

Knowing that, now you can understand the reason for what Christ is doing, the deeper symbolism of what Jesus is doing in this text. He is cursing Israel for her false promise, for its appearance of faithfulness but its lack of true fruit. The fig tree was a striking symbol of the Jewish faith at the time when Jesus walked the earth. They had the bustle of religiosity, the priesthood, the daily service in the temple, the morning and evening sacrifices, the yearly feasts, the teaching of the OT – all of the leaves, but no fruit. It had no life, no faith, no grace, no humility, no real holiness, no longing for God's glory, no awareness of God's Lordship, and no willingness to receive its Messiah.

As a whole the nation of Israel had stumbled and sinned and hardened her heart to

the One True God. They had depersonalized and marginalized and devalued God. The nation, as a whole, was faithless. No doubt, Israel had a name of being alive. They had the appearance of being God's people. They had a false form of godliness – the words, the dress, the doctrine, the reputation and rituals – but it was all leaves, all a mirage. They lacked the fruit of true, living faith. Real faith is more than words and that is particularly important in our day when every gather for religious purposes is called a church and when anyone who claims to know Christ is considered a Christian. Rightly does Jesus ask in Luke 18:8 this question. Speaking of His return to bring justice to the earth He says: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8, ESV) True faith is a fleeting thing in our day.

Jesus is saying that real faith is living and active. It is obvious. It has fruit. Real faith has fruit – obedience from the heart, reverence and love for God, joy, peace, godliness, mercy, humility, dying to self, hatred of sin, hunger and thirst for righteousness, a life centered on Christ and honoring Him. If there is no fruit – in faithfulness, in prayerfulness, in worship, in evangelism, in obedience, in love and in ministry – God will judge such outward churches, such people, just as he did Israel, and they will die. Those who profess to be God's people but live unfruitful lives are warned by this miracle.

Israel lacked true faith. They did not believe in the clear testimony of Scripture. They did not believe the obvious testimony of Christ. They refused to believe Him and they would be judged

for it. Hypocrisy in religion always brings judgment. On the day before Ezekiel learned of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, the Lord appeared to him to explain what was happening. Ezekiel 33 records for us these words, starting in verse 30: ““As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, ‘Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.’ And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.” (Ezekiel 33:30–32, ESV) Jerusalem was judged for the first time because the people merely wanted to hear the words of God, be entertained by the words of God, but not truly obey them by faith.

Israel was in the exact same condition when Christ walked the earth and was doing miracles and preaching the Word of God and putting Himself forward as the Messiah of God and they kept turning an unbelieving and spiritually blind eye to that truth. Jesus, by His actions, is declaring in picture both the temporal judgment – Jerusalem would be savagely destroyed and burned and the people of Jerusalem be driven out by the Roman army in AD 70, and declaring the eternal curse from God that was upon them because of their spiritual hypocrisy.

And so in this event, as Jesus curses and kills a fig tree, He is pointedly demonstrating that religiosity, minus a living and growing faith in Christ only results in spiritual barrenness and ultimately death, but a genuine, living faith in Christ results in fruitfulness and life.

A Genuine, Living Faith In Christ Results in Fruitfulness and Life (v. 20-22) Look at the response of the disciples because it is clear that they don’t get it right away. Verse 20 says: “When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?”” (Matthew 21:20, ESV) They are stunned by the whole thing and stunned that the fig tree just withers right away. They had never seen Jesus do anything like this before. How did this happen?

“And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen.” (Matthew 21:21, ESV) It seems like Jesus isn’t answering their question at all, but He is. In fact it is a very important lesson that He is going to

share right here. We know that by the way that he introduces His teaching with the statement: Truly, I say to you. Here it is. What was the chief thing that was missing in Israel, missing in the Temple worship, missing in the religious leaders and as a result, missing in the greater part of the people of Israel? The missing piece was the most important one – faith in Christ as Messiah and Lord. How did Jesus do this miracle? This may sound strange to hear, odd perhaps, but He did it by faith – by faith that He is the Son of God with unlimited incomprehensible power, and that His cursing of the fig tree was in accordance with God the Father’s will. He did it by faith in Who He is. He acted in faith and spoke with power and withered the tree. Faith -- it was the one vital thing missing from Israel that made its religion worthless and empty.

Listen, a façade, an appearance of spirituality and interest in religious things, religions teaching, cannot suffice for the soul’s great need of a fruitful faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Now look at what He says. If you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. This is not the first time that Jesus had said something along these lines to them. He said back in chapter 17: “For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20, ESV)

Obviously, Jesus is not speaking of literally causing a fig tree to wither or to command a mountain to be thrown into the sea. He is emphasizing the Scripture truth that what is most valuable, what is indispensable, what is necessary above all else is faith, active trust, surrendered belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and a trust in the will of God. If we have faith in Christ – what is seemingly impossible is made possible through faith and reliance upon Christ. In rabbinic language, a mountain was a figure of speech for any obstacle, difficulty, or humanly insurmountable problem—none of which is impossible for God. Jesus Christ, is infinitely powerful and absolutely dependable for every need – whether it is faith for salvation, or sanctification, or some particular situation. Faith in Christ can move the mountains of doubt, the mountains of hurt and the ravages of sin in our lives. Mountains of unbelief in the heart of men and women as we proclaim the gospel in faith – in intimate union with Christ. It can move the mountains of sin in us – can change a prideful, headstrong man into one that is meek before the Lord. Faith can move the heart of a covetous man to be generous beyond compare. Faith can move the mountain of enslaving sin, heal the broken heart, strengthen the weak,

renew the sin-clouded mind. It by grace working through faith that you are saved, that you are sanctified, that you can obey the commandments of God, that you can be pleasing to the Lord and live in manner that reflects the gospel.

A personal, abiding faith in Jesus is what makes the difference between barren religiosity and fruitful spirituality. The kind of faith that Jesus is describing here is explained so well in the promise that He gives in John 15 when He says to His disciples: ““I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:1–11, ESV)

The fullness of joy In Him, that is what Christ wants for us as His people, purchased and cleansed of our sin by His blood, delivered from the wrath we deserve, filled with love and life. He is after in us a life that recognizes that we draw our very life from HIM, not religious observances. He is after a heart and a faith in us that is completely yielded to Him, without doubt or wavering, as the character and direction of our hearts. Not that we will never fail or sin, but that the direction of our lives, the desire of our souls is to cling to and abide in and make our lives with Christ. Real fruitfulness, authenticity in the Christian faith is the result of genuine, living, personal faith in Jesus Christ.

And it is by faith, Jesus wants us to know, that we can lay hold of God in prayer and call upon Him for every need we face. It is by faith we are joined to the heart of God. ““And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”” (Matthew 21:22, ESV) Do you see what He is saying? Whatever you ask in prayer, whatever you need, my Father will take care of you. Ask

of Him in faith – faith in Me, faith in Jesus as the Son of God, Savior Lord and with trust in His will as being perfect and you will have what you need when you pray in this way.

No doubt, many have taken this passage out of context and focused it upon God enriching them materially and satisfying their wildest desires. But faith focuses upon what pleases God - doing His will, obeying Him, trusting Him, loving Him, leaning upon His and desiring to see His power manifest in our lives. But the key is faith.

How can we pray believing if we are not in relationship to Him? How can we trust in the Lord's goodness and compassion and generosity toward us toward unless we trust in Him and have a right view of Him rather than a distorted one that tries to shape God into the image we want? How can we pray unless we believe in His power to accomplish what we humbly ask according to His will? All of life is bound up in genuine, active, living faith in Christ.

Why The Disciples Needed and We Need to Hear This Message

Why would the disciples need to hear this message? They were with Jesus. Why did they need to hear this? Why this display done for them alone? No one else was there. This is just for them, for their benefit alone. You may even be thinking, “Why is this message important to me?” Well, let me tell you why. The reason the disciples needed to hear this message is exactly because they were with Jesus all the time. The disciples were with Jesus all the time -- listening to His teaching, seeing His miracles, eating with Him in the wilderness, and performing tasks that He assigned. It would be easy for them to trust in their proximity to Christ, the religious things that they observed, the stuff that they took part in, the teaching they heard, the miracles they witnessed, the things they did for Him, and fail to really trust in Christ Himself. Here is the truth, as Judas bears out. All of the things they were a part of – all of it was worthless activity apart from a genuine, living and abiding faith in Christ. You can see how susceptible the disciples would have been to a faithless religiosity.

Beloved, that same danger faces all of us today. Listen, because I am going to tell you the truth. This message is particularly applicable to us today in that we live in a culture that is massively consumed with outward appearance and reputation. Americans spend billions of dollars a year

trying to look a certain way, trying to look good. Fad diets, diet pills, fake tans, Botox, exercise equipment, cosmetic surgery, all the latest fashions – billions of dollars, mountains of resources – so much of it superficial and lacking in reality. We put on appearances in every arena. In many ways our culture fakes it. We live in a world of make-believe. And it cannot help but bleed over into the church.

It reminds me of the story of King Rehoboam, the foolish son of King Solomon. “In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. He took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king’s house. He took away everything. He also took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made, and King Rehoboam made in their place shields of bronze, and committed them to the hands of the officers of the guard, who kept the door of the king’s house.” (1 Kings 14:25–27, ESV) When the power of godliness is absent, men resort to outward appearances. When Shishak, King of Egypt, came up against Jerusalem and took away the gold shields that Solomon had made, King Rehoboam made bronze shields in their place and kept them under guard so no one would find out the reality. He put up appearances and kept the truth hidden.

There is such a temptation, such a danger of false religion that faces all of us. This passage was a picture of the spiritual emptiness of Israel, no doubt, it is also a direct warning – a warning to not be self-satisfied, to not be spiritually smug, to not be deceived or careless, to avoid hypocrisy and spiritual illusion that leads to delusion at all costs, a warning not to settle for a faith that is in word only.

Don’t miss the message today. True, living, vibrant faith bears up under examination. The leaves, the outward testimony, must reveal upon closer inspection the substance of real faith – fruit. Does your profession of faith bear up under examination? Can you say with confidence that the fruit of true faith are present in your life? I’m not just asking, “Do you profess Christ?” Everyone who comes here regularly would say that they have faith. Every Israelite in the Temple would have said the same thing. The question is not “How do you evaluate your faith?” The question is “What does Christ say about it? What do the Scriptures say about your faith? What do your actions say about your faith?”

You know beloved, from a distance, as someone looked at the city of Jerusalem, as they saw the beauty of the Temple shining in the sun, it would give the appearance of real spiritual life, of a city and culture centered upon God. But a closer inspection would reveal something entirely different. What about us? What does a closer inspection reveal regarding your life or mine? Are we as passionate about Christ on Monday through Saturday as we appear on Sunday during worship? Are we as passionate about Christ in the Summer as we appear to be in the Winter? Are we as concerned about faithfulness and righteousness in practice as we are with our words? Are we truly devoted to Christ or do we only give the appearance?

There is no hiding from Christ a heart of unbelief. Look the truth is this: real faith changes our priorities, real faith transforms our desires, real faith places Him first, real faith fuels self-denial and submission to Jesus. No amount of words, no amount of religious actions, no amount of empty professions can hide a soul that is barren of the fruit that Christ expects to find in soul that has been saved by grace through faith in Him. When Jesus looked at the fig tree, He found nothing on it but only leaves. Not even a little fruit, not even immature fruit, was anywhere to be found. Some evidence of true faith, some confirmation of the Spirit of God working in our lives by faith must be evident for us to be able to call ourselves Christians -- "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22–23, ESV) It is foolish to think that the outward appearance of being a Christian will satisfy the searching gaze of Jesus Christ. He inspects us, just like the fig tree. He looks to see if we really are united to Him by faith, trusting in Him alone, having laid aside the rights to ourselves to belong to Him alone. He looks to see that we confess and forsake our sinfulness. He looks to see if by the power of His Spirit dwelling in us we are being progressively sanctified. He looks to see if we are obeying Him out of a grateful heart of love. He looks to see if we are honoring and worshipping Him, offering ourselves as living sacrifices for our Savior and King. He looks to see if He truly is our first love, our supreme love, ordering our lives around Him. The kind of faith that does not affect your passion for Christ or your desire for holiness or your love for worship or your humility at the thought of God's greatness is a doubtful faith.

Israel, as a whole, was faithless and refused to admit it and they ultimately found themselves destroyed. This is what will happen to every merely outward church, to every person, who shows the green leaves of apparent spiritual life but which are devoid of the true fruit of faith. JC Ryle was right when He wrote: "Open sin and avowed unbelief, no doubt, slay their thousands. But profession without practice slays its tens of thousands...is not every fruitless professor of Christianity in dreadful danger of becoming a withered fig-tree? There can be no

doubt of it. So long as a man is content with the leaves of religion--with a name to live while he is dead, and a form of godliness without the power--so long his soul is in great peril. So long as he is satisfied with going to church or chapel, and receiving the Lord's supper, and being called a Christian, while his heart is not changed, and his sins not forsaken--so long he is daily provoking God to cut him off without remedy. Fruit, fruit--the fruit of the Spirit, is the only sure proof that we are savingly united to Christ, and in the way to heaven. May this sink down into our hearts, and never be forgotten!"

Beloved I said this last week and it needs repeating. It is easy for us to sit in judgment on Israel and yet to remain oblivious to our own hearts. But that is a worthless way to read Scripture and a worthless way to hear preaching. Jesus would have us understand His heart in this text. Jesus' point regarding the fig tree was that Israel, as a nation, had an impressive pretence of religion, represented by the leaves. But the fact that the nation bore no spiritual fruit was positive proof that as a whole she was unredeemed and cut off from the life and the power of God. Just as fruitfulness is always evidence of salvation and growing spiritual life, barrenness is always evidence of lostness and ungodliness, no matter outward appearance. Religious profession without spiritual reality is abomination to God and is cursed. But true faith, real fruitfulness is met with life and blessing untold. Get faith, vibrant faith, life-changing, priority transforming, hope filling, life giving, fruit bearing faith – true faith.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones." (Proverbs 3:5–8, ESV)

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