

Matthew 21:18-22 – “The Cursed Fig Tree” – Sep. 15, 2024

1. *What will Christ find when He comes to inspect us?*
2. Recap
 - a. Jesus has come from Jericho and entered Jerusalem riding a donkey
 - i. Joshua – coming from conquest in Jericho
 - ii. Judges – riding a donkey as He comes to rule
 - iii. David & Solomon – riding a donkey into royal service
 - iv. Jehu – rides a donkey over cloaks before he gets to work destroying the idolatrous worship in Israel
 - b. Jacob blessing his sons – Judah rules until Shiloh comes
 - i. This is when the glory departs as Judah is taken into exile
 - c. Jesus comes into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, where God’s glory had gone to rest when He forsook Israel and Judah (Ezekiel 11)
 - d. Jesus then fulfills the priestly function of coming back to His house for a second inspection to see if the disease is still there
 - i. Leviticus 14 – house must be dismantled brick by brick if disease persists
 - ii. Jesus starts the temple cleansing as an indictment for how prayer has been displaced by a commercial racket
 - iii. Jerusalem had prostituted herself out to the Romans and the worship in God’s House was now a joint venture between Rome and Jerusalem instead of the pure worship of God
 - iv. The scene takes a hopeful note at the end when simple children see what the Pharisees can’t see – and sing Hosannas to the Son of David

- e. Jesus ends by going to Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived
3. That takes us up to this well-known story of Jesus cursing the fig tree
- a. *What will Christ find when He comes to inspect us?*
4. VV.18-19 – *“In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. 19 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.”*
- a. We start by seeing the real humanity of Jesus
 - b. He wakes up hungry
 - c. He’s returning to Jerusalem from Bethany and sees a fig tree
 - d. The noteworthy part here is that there are leaves but no fruit on this fig tree
 - i. Mark’s account mentions an interesting detail that it was not the season for figs
 - ii. This adds the additional question of why Christ would have been angry at a fig tree for not having figs when it’s out of season
 - iii. Different explanations have been given, but I think the most plain one serves best
 - iv. There were different varieties of fig trees that matured at different times
 - 1. Just like we have spring wheat and winter wheat, so they had early and late fig trees
 - 2. Of course, the early figs were valuable because they were more rare

- v. On fig trees, the fruit precedes the leaves, so if there are leaves there should be the expectation of fruit
 - 1. The fact that this early variety showed so much promise and then proved to be completely useless illustrates a profound truth
- e. Israel was early; the first nation called by God, she had a special calling, but she has proven to be a fruitless tree who puts on a big show
- f. This tree is just like Israel – prized for its early signs of promise, but then turns out to be all leaves and no figs
 - i. All hat, no horse
 - ii. All pomp and ceremony but no love for God
 - iii. The fact that Christ used figs to illustrate the point is especially striking, because figs were used to symbolize the fruitfulness of Israel
- g. Jesus is acting out a prophecy here
 - i. Like so many prophets before Him, He is dramatizing something important in a manner that was obvious enough that it angered many
 - ii. He is showing that Israel is a fruitless tree with lots of show
 - 1. No action but plenty of talk
- h. The fig tree is Israel, the leaves are her religious show, and the lack of fruit is her empty religion that refuses to accept Jesus as Messiah
 - i. Because of this, Christ announces a permanent curse on the wicked nation
 - 1. *“may no fruit every come from you again”*
 - a. “permanent” language should be understood in relation to conditions

2. This is the beginning of Christ's judgment on Jerusalem
 3. The next few chapters of Matthew focus on Jesus' final confrontation with the Pharisees where He calls down woe on their religion and on their city
 - a. This judgment culminates in the complete destruction of the entire city, including the temple, by the Romans in A.D. 70, but the judgment starts when Jesus curses the fig tree
- ii. It won't have been missed by those familiar with Scripture, that the fig tree represented Israel
1. Jeremiah 8:13-15 – *“When I would gather them, declares 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.” 14 Why do we sit still? Gather together; let us go into the fortified cities and perish there, for the Lord our God has doomed us to perish and has given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against the Lord. 15 We looked for peace, but no good came; for a time of healing, but behold, terror.”*
 2. Hosea 2:12,13 – *“And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees, of which she said, ‘These are my wages, which my lovers have given me.’ I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them. 13 And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals when she burned offerings to them and adorned herself with*

her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers and forgot me, declares the Lord.”

- a. Hosea’s adulterous bride is also a picture of Israel, who prostituted her services out to the Romans, and now her vines and fig trees will be laid waste

3. Joel 1:11, 12 – *“Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. 12 The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.”*

- a. The vinedressers are to wail, the fruit is being dried up
- b. The pomegranates likewise dry up
 - i. These decorated the hem of the priestly robes, and the priests get brutally murdered when the Romans come in the final phase of this destruction of Jerusalem

4. Micah 7:1, 2 – *“Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires. 2 The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind; they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other with a net.”*

- a. The godly are gone

- b. There is no first-ripe fig to be found, because God has forsaken this place and the upright are nowhere to be found
 - c. This helps to create a picture for John the Baptist's words at the beginning of Matthew
- 5. Matthew 3:7-10 – *“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*
 - a. God's patience with old covenant Israel has run out
 - b. Christ has come not only to establish the new covenant, but also to cut off the temporary trappings of the old covenant
 - c. Israel as a nation has failed; they have broken covenant, and now God is recognizing that by bringing about all the judgements which Moses promised in Deuteronomy 28
 - i. Talking about God's judgment on Israel is always a sensitive manner because how it is so misunderstood

- ii. Some may be tempted to think that this warrants treating Jewish people poorly as though they are beyond the grace of God
- iii. Others think that somehow the Jewish religion is a close cousin to Christianity because of its history
 - 1. Fixation with modern Israel
 - 2. Modern Israel has almost no points of contact with Moses' Israel
 - a. Judaism today is an entirely different religion than Moses' day
 - b. Analogy of 90's Jets and current Jets
 - i. Same team? Or merely same name?
- d. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple were signs of what was about to happen
- e. The cursing of the fig tree is the initiation of the judgment, Jesus is going to call down a series of woes on Jerusalem and on the Pharisees, and this will all crescendo at the end of this generation when God takes down His house, stone by stone, till not one is left standing, just like the priestly house inspection law called for
- f. But the fig tree is the first act in this unfolding judgment

i. John Broadus – *“That barren fig tree, seared by the curse of the Savior, stands a conspicuous monument of the doom which must overtake all who, having a fair appearance, are found fruitless in the great day of account.”*

- i. There is much here particular to the history of redemption and to Israel in particular, but this can be applied to any person, institution, or nation who puts on a good show but lacks genuine fruit
- i. How many people in church can do Bible trivia, or act nice on Sunday morning, but on Friday night or Monday morning their actions show that they are all leaf and no fig?
 - ii. How many churches have lots of programming happening, but the shallow worship and spiritual immaturity of the people show that this is a church that is all leaf and no fig?
 - iii. How many nations have been founded on Christian principles, and have biblical verses and biblical themes very literally worked into their buildings and institutions, and yet their laws and customs show that this is a nation filled with sin and hypocrisy; a nation who can't deliver on what it promises?
 - iv. Just like this fig tree, people, churches, institutions, and even nations get judged and cut off by the Lord if they are not bearing fruit

- j. Broadus – *“The curse of the fig tree is a solemn warning to all who have the form of godliness without the power, to all who make a fair show of leaves, but are unfruitful in good works.”*
 - i. Religious hypocrisy is not at all confined to 1st century Israel
 - ii. This is something we are all capable of, and Christ putting an irreversible curse on the fig tree for its hypocrisy should serve as a stern warning for everyone who is tempted to make a show of Bible memory or theological precision, and yet in their life make it clear that they are not interested in submitting to Christ or in bearing the fruit that is in keeping with repentance
5. VV. 20-22 – *“When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, ‘How did the fig tree wither at once?’ 21 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. 22 And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”*
- a. The fact that the tree withered so fast causes the disciples to marvel
 - b. In Ernest Hemingway’s *“The Sun Also Rises”*, the character Mike Campbell is asked how he went bankrupt
 - i. *“Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly.”*
 - c. How did it come to this for Israel?
 - i. Gradually, then suddenly

- ii. How many decades and centuries has God spent sending His prophets to Israel, how many temporary judgments did He bring upon Israel and Judah?
 - iii. Now He has sent John to let them know it's done; the axe is at the root of the tree; He sent Jesus to let them know the kingdom has arrived and they must repent
 - iv. Now the judgment starts and it only serves to harden the religious leaders
 - v. Imagine being a 60 year-old man, watching Jerusalem in flames, the Romans have completely cleared all vegetation for miles outside the city, mothers are reduced to boiling their infants, and the great temple that had once been there no longer has a single stone standing in place
 - vi. Then you go back 40 years, a biblical generation, and remember what you heard Jesus preaching when you were a 20 year old, when He said this would come about
 - vii. How did this all happen?
 - 1. Gradually, then suddenly
- d. Again, treating the text honestly means that this is very focused on particular historical events, and this forsaken tree shows that these *historical events are also theological events*
- i. The theme of that echoes to today
 - ii. If you are a twenty year-old today, it may appear that there isn't a great cost to refusing to die to yourself and of living for your own glory, but consider the fig tree

1. For the time being it still appears to be “working”
- iii. As a 60 year-old looking back at fruitless living, you do not want to see that God’s judgment came gradually, and then suddenly
- iv. *Consider the fig tree*
- e. Jesus uses the fig tree as the object lesson for what He is about to teach
- f. When asked how the fig tree withered so fast, He answers
 - i. *“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. 22 And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith”*
 - ii. This is truly remarkable
 - iii. We are all familiar with “*the faith that moves mountains*”, but so often this is applied to personal goals, ambitions, etc.
 1. Look at what’s happening here
 - iv. Jesus starts with the fig tree and expands it to a mountain, and then He says that if we pray in faith, we will receive the same results
 - v. Moving a mountain has to do with judgment here, and not with performing a personal best on the 100M or having a 100 bu. wheat crop
 - vi. This is a statement about imprecatory prayers – those prayers which ask for God to move in judgment against His enemies
 1. Imprecatory prayers are easily abused and misunderstood, but they are in the Bible, and therefore they are valid

2. Many of the Psalms are David's prayers for God to overcome his enemies
3. Proverbs 11:10 says that "*When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness.*"
 - a. It is a happy occasion when a wicked ruler is removed; it is a cause for rejoicing when Israel leaves Egypt as a smoldering crater; it is time for celebration when the Nazis and the Soviets are defeated; it should warm our hearts when Roe vs. Wade is overturned
 - b. Our sinful nature sometimes wants to rush these outcomes
 - c. We remember that God can also conquer His foes by turning them into His friends, so we must avoid a Jonah spirit and always pray for God's will to be done, but if He chooses to overcome evil by destroying it, then we should see the goodness in that
- vii. In the Jewish conception, mountains represent power, stability, and the strength of empires and kingdoms
 1. Mountains are spoken of when nations are destroyed
 - a. (Isa. 41:15; 42:15; Ez. 38:20; Jer. 51:25; Ex. 17; Rev. 8:8)
 2. Here, Jesus points to the fig tree as the lesser and then expands the principle to a mountain being thrown into the sea as the greater
 3. Notice the language closely

- a. He doesn't say "any random mountain"
- b. He doesn't say "Mt. Robson in BC"
- c. He says "*this mountain*"
 - i. They are standing in Jerusalem, looking at the Temple Mount like in Matthew 24, and Jesus says that if they have the faith to pray that Christ's kingdom would emerge over the corruption, hypocrisy, compromise, lukewarm worship, and antichrist doctrine of Jerusalem, that even *this* great mountain will face the sea of God's judgment, as it in fact did
 - ii. Jesus is foretelling the destruction of the Temple, which is a sign of the closing of the old covenant age
 - 1. *Historical events are also theological events*
 - 2. Israel has been judged for her unbelief
 - 3. The old covenant has come to an end so that it is physically impossible now to even try keeping it
 - 4. The new covenant in Christ is up and running on its own with no training wheels
 - viii. Again, this is a prayer about the advance of Christ's kingdom in the face of opposition and not about personal vainglory and goal setting

ix. Compare the popular usage of this verse in propping up the prosperity gospel, or prosperity lite gospel of self-fulfillment to the context of what is actually happening in this passage, and how a cursed fig tree escalates into a mountain that collapses into the sea

1. Chilton – *“Was Jesus being flippant? Did He really expect His disciples to go around praying about moving [any] literal mountains? Of course not. More importantly, Jesus was not changing the subject. He was still giving them a lesson about the fall of Israel. What was the lesson? Jesus was instructing His disciples to pray imprecatory prayers, beseeching God to destroy Israel, to wither the fig tree, to cast apostate mountains into the sea. And this is exactly what happened. The persecuted church, under oppression from apostate Jews, began praying for God’s vengeance upon Israel, calling for the mountain of Israel to be taken up and cast into the sea. Their offerings were received at God’s heavenly altar, and in response God directed His angels to throw down His judgments to the land.”*

6. So what we have here is Jesus Christ coming to inspect, and then cursing all that which is not bearing the fruit it was designed to bear
- a. A fig tree that puts on a show but has no substance
 - b. A temple and a religious city and religious system that goes through the motions but is rejecting the substance of what it has been given

- c. Jerusalem prided itself in being the heir to Abraham and to Moses, yet if they had understood Abraham and Moses, they would have repented and received their Messiah
- d. Instead they reject the Messiah, break God's covenant to both Abraham and Moses, and as a result, God is sending them catastrophic judgment, a judgment that is so clear and so devastating that they will not even be left with the artifacts to pretend like they are honouring God
- e. Jesus is using the object lesson of the fig tree to show what it is like when He puts an end to people's religious games
- f. He is still in the same line of work today
 - i. *What will Jesus Christ find when He comes to inspect us?*
 - ii. Perhaps we can ask this on several levels
 - 1. Personal
 - 2. Family
 - 3. Trinity Fellowship
 - 4. Nation of Canada
- g. If you are a religious hypocrite this morning, then Christ stands ready to forgive you and to graft you into the fruitful vine, so that you can become a productive member of His kingdom
 - i. But this will have to be by grace
 - ii. If we refuse to die to ourselves; if we refuse the shame of the gospel, we will only add new layers of hypocrisy

- iii. And if we are bearing fruit, but we are unhappy with the amount, then He also stands ready to give us an extra measure of His grace to multiply our efforts
- h. But the fig tree and the mountain remind us that while God is longsuffering and patient, He will not withhold judgment forever
 - i. When He comes and inspects your fruit, or this church, or nations and empires, He is committed to cutting off the covenant breakers
 - ii. When this happens, the Bible says *our eye should not pity; it is good*
 - iii. In fact, it is so good, that Jesus is teaching His disciples to pray that it would happen – if we have faith and do not doubt, then what was done to the fig tree can also be done to the most imposing mountains that attempt to block the progress of the gospel

7. CHARGE

- a. *Christ has entered Jerusalem in the final week of His life. The city that should stand ready to receive her Messiah has proven to be His most stubborn opponent. The curse on the fig tree serves as a lasting memorial to what happens to all those who are likewise all show and no substance. Those who profess Christ but do not possess Christ are headed to a similar outcome. Christ is committed to removing sin and unbelief, and He starts with something as mundane as cursing a fig tree. After He explains what He has done, He instructs all of us to not only see the goodness of His judgment, but to actively pray for more of it. He points to the mountain in plain view and encourages His disciples that even this great symbol of power can and will be swallowed up by the sea of God's wrath. So, our charge*

this week is to actively participate in Christ's settled purpose to remove all unbelief, all idleness, and all obstacles that stand in the way of the advance of His kingdom.

8. BENEDICTION

- a. 1 Corinthians 15:58 – *“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*