

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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LET NO ONE EAT FRUIT FROM YOU

Mark 11:12-21

We find in the NT a disturbing passage in which the Lord Jesus exercised His power in order to destroy. Divine power was used for destruction. It is disturbing because the use of power for a purely destructive purpose is quite out of keeping with the character and behavior of the Jesus we know of the gospels. We normally think of Him as someone whose power is deployed to heal and to save, not to destroy. But in this particular incident, Jesus killed a fig tree. Let's look at this story. Mark 11:12-21.

*Mark 11:12. Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry.
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.
14 In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it.
15 So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.
16 And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple.
17 Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'
18 And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching.
19 When evening had come, He went out of the city.
20 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots.
21 And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."*

The power to judge

The destruction of the fig tree is very unusual in that it is the only act of a destruction performed by Jesus (unless we include the drowning of the Gadarene swine - Matthew 8.32) and it seems so contrary to Christ's character.

If you have power, you can use that power for good, to heal, or for judgment, to destroy. In this incident, Jesus wants us to understand that though He came to save, He will also come to judge. And here He exercised His power in judgment. With one sentence, He destroyed the fig tree. The plant withered away to its roots.

God is both good and severe, let us not forget that. As Paul said, *Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God* (Romans 11:22). We are to stress both the goodness and severity of God, not just His goodness. God is love, but He is also just. He demonstrates care and forgiveness, but He also holds men responsible and accountable.

Jesus is not always to be imagined as a meek and mild person as the temple scene here also reminds us. A man who cannot be angry at injustice is not a man of righteousness. A man who is willing to compromise with evil cannot be a man of righteousness.

But why did Jesus destroy the fig tree? Here is one explanation: it was to show that He, the Messiah, had complete power over all the physical world. He alone had the power to judge and to determine life and death, salvation and condemnation. Remember that Jesus was about to die. Death came upon Him because He willingly laid down His life for the sins of the world. No man took it from Him (John 10:18).

In destroying the tree, Jesus was showing the disciples that He had absolute power over the universe, even the power to keep Him from being killed. He was not dying out of weakness. He was not dying because of the plots and intrigues of men. He was dying because the death of God's Son was the way of salvation.

In other words, Jesus was picturing that He was the Messiah with omnipotent power, picturing it in a way that we can never forget. Right then, He was sent into the world to die for men and to save men, even those who were judging and condemning Him. But the day will come when He will judge them with absolute power just as He judged the fig tree.

Not the season for figs

Now there is another disturbing point in this passage. Take a closer look at v. 13. Verse 13 tells us that *it was not the season for fig*, i.e., it was not the right time of the year to find figs. Think about this. Jesus was in Bethany with His disciples. The next morning, He left Bethany and headed back into Jerusalem, perhaps without a breakfast. Somewhere along the way, He was hungry. Seeing a fig tree from afar, He was hoping to eat some figs. But He found none. So He cursed the tree, even though it was not the time for the fruit. How do you understand that? The tree got cursed for not bearing fruit even though it was not the season for figs. How can you expect to find figs on a fig tree when it was not the right season for figs? Had it been fig season, Jesus' behavior would have been more understandable. But it is not the case here.

Let's put the question from another perspective. Why did the Lord Jesus come to this fig tree, this particular fig tree and not all the other fig trees on the Mount of Olives? Since it was not the right season for fruits, He should have cursed all the trees. None of the fig trees were producing any fruit at that time. Why curse that particular poor tree? If you have the answer to that, you also have the answer to the previous question.

Let's read v. 13 again. *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.* Having said that there was no fruit, Mark goes on to say that it was not the season for figs. We see a problem there. But I don't think that it was a problem for Mark. Do you not think that Mark would have immediately sensed a difficulty if his intention was to point out that no fruit was found in a tree on a season we don't expect to find that type of fruit? What did he expect the readers to think after reading a sentence like this?

Clearly, for Mark, there was no problem. You see, that sentence simply explains why Jesus dealt with this particular tree, and not with all the other trees. We have to know something about figs, namely that the fruit normally comes before the leaves appear. Then you begin to realize why the Lord

Jesus came to this tree. This was the only tree that had leaves. Therefore He expected to find fruit on it. The others had no leaves. He did not curse all the other fig trees because they did not promise to offer any fruit. It was not the season for figs. But this particular tree was already in leaf. And therefore, Jesus expected to find some fruit on it.

Let me explain it in a different way. Fig trees are unusual in that their fruit appears before the leaves. The fig tree first of all puts forth its figs at the end of the shoots. The figs then become relatively ripe before any leaf appears. So if a fig tree has leaves on it, it should have edible figs. In our passage, the tree apparently stood out as having an unusually full coverage of leaves for Passover season. It had matured faster than all the other fig trees, having leaves at a time when no figs were expected.

Once we understand that, we realize that Mark was saying that it was not the season of figs, but this particular tree was in full foliage. It had leaves at an abnormal time. Then we understand why the Lord Jesus directed His attention to this particular tree. Since most of the trees, perhaps all of them with the exception of this one, were entirely without figs and without leaves, Jesus did not curse any of them, 'for the time of figs had not come yet.' So this sentence simply explains why Jesus did not deal with all the trees which were not bringing forth fruit. He dealt only with this particular tree which was showing promise that fruit might be found because of the abundance of leaves.

An acted-out parable

Jesus did not curse the fig tree because He was angry at not getting any food from it. This is an acted-out parable intended to teach the disciples a spiritual lesson. Let's try to understand the parabolic meaning of this incident.

First of all, anyone with even a basic knowledge of the Bible would know that the fig tree is a symbol of Israel. The fig tree represents Israel. Jesus used the parable of the barren fig tree in Luke 13:6-9 to highlight this point. The nation of Israel is compared to a fig tree which had received a choice spot in God's vineyard. But with this privilege came responsibility. Unfortunately, Israel failed to match privilege with duty. The tree was barren and after three years, it had to be cut down. God's judgment could no longer be postponed.

'Fruit' is another prominent metaphor in the Bible. It symbolizes the sort of behavior God requires of His people. A good example is in Matthew 22 where Jesus taught the parable of the vineyard. The story emphasizes the failure of the Jerusalem establishment to produce the 'fruit' due to the landowner by their rejection of the prophets' message and finally of the Son Himself. This will lead to their expulsion and the substitution of another nation which will come up with 'the fruits of the kingdom of God' (Matthew 21:33-43).

The specific association of 'fruit' with 'fig tree' is often found in the OT where the fruit of the fig tree is a prophetic symbol for the good life God expects from His people, and the lack of it, of their spiritual failure. You can read passages like Jeremiah 8:13; 24:1-10; Hosea 9:10; 16-17. Perhaps the most interesting one in the context of our lesson is Micah 7:1 where Micah's sorrow over the sins of the nation is described as his failure to find 'the first-ripe fig he wanted to eat.' *There is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig which my soul desires.* Following the explicit statement that Jesus was hungry in v. 12, the Lord's inability to find the early figs to eat speaks powerfully of how the Israel of His day failed spiritually.

And finally, we can say that the withering of fig trees is a symbol of God's judgment. Take for example Joel 1:7: *He has laid waste my vine, and ruined my fig tree; He has stripped it bare and thrown it away; its branches are made white.* Drunkards were told to weep because no wine would be available due to the destruction of the vineyards. Locusts had destroyed the vines and stripped even the bark from the fig trees, leaving their branches white, i.e., they were completely withered.

The fig tree, the lack of fruit, the withered fig tree - all this symbolism provides the key to the significance of this passage as an acted symbol of judgment to come on Israel. Jerusalem will be destroyed just as the fig tree was destroyed. This becomes even more obvious when you take the cursing of the fig tree in conjunction with the cleansing of the temple.

A desecrated temple

Notice that the story of the cursing of the fig tree is divided into two sections. The first one goes from v. 12 to v. 14 where Jesus cursed the fig tree for its fruitless condition and the second one from v. 20 to v. 21 where Jesus and His disciples passed by the same tree the following day and Peter expressed his surprise that it had withered away. Sandwiched between the cursing and the withering, in verses 15 to 19, there comes the incident of the cleansing of the temple. This is by no means a matter of chance. Mark wants the reader to compare the fate of the fruitless tree with the denunciation of the failed temple. In other words, the withering of the fig tree is a prophetic word of judgment that will find its analogue in the future destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Let's consider the cleansing story. The day before, Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem. Thousands had lined the roadway for His coming. As He rode along to the shouts of welcome from the crowd, He was led to the steps of the temple. He entered into the temple and *looked around at all things* (Mark 11:11), observing all that was taking place. What Jesus saw broke His heart. The temple itself, the place where men should be able to draw close to God, was corrupted by men. Heartbroken and weary, He left. He went to Bethany to spend the night. The next morning, He returned to the temple and cleansed it of those who profaned its sacredness.

What did Jesus see? This was the Passover season, as you know, and pilgrims were crowding into Jerusalem at this time. People were coming from all over Israel to worship at the temple. So the scene in Jerusalem and in the temple was one great activity. Everywhere, there was hustle and bustle.

Worshippers came to the temple especially to offer sacrifices. God had originally instructed the people to bring sacrifices from their own flocks (Deuteronomy 12:5-7). However it was usually impossible for a pilgrim who had to travel a great distance to bring his own animal. So a market for the selling and buying of sacrificial animals was set up in the court of the Gentiles. The court of the Gentiles was the huge outer court of the temple where Gentile converts to Judaism could worship. But it was tragically abused. It had become nothing more than a commercial marketplace owned, and in many cases, operated by the priests.

The court of Gentiles was also used for the inspection of the animals' purity. Those who brought their own animals had to have them inspected. Animals used for sacrifice were supposed to be without defect (Leviticus 1:1-3). The inspection cost a fee, and when the inspector managed to find the animal unacceptable in some way, worshippers were forced to buy another one.

Here is another sign of the desecration of the temple. Look at v. 16: *He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple*. It seems that people used the temple as a short-cut from one part of the city to another. They walked through the temple courtyard so that they do not have to go around the temple with their merchandise. This irreverent conduct stirred the spirit of Jesus. He stopped it.

The money changers did big business too. Roman coins had images which were regarded as idolatrous by the Jews. Therefore those who came from foreign countries had to have their money changed into Jewish currency. This was the only money the merchants accepted and the only money accepted for payment of the temple tax. And of course, for each change, there was a fee. The inflated exchange rate often enriched money changers, as you can imagine.

Full of leaves but no fruit

So Jesus looked at the scene in the temple. There was no lack of religious activity. Pilgrims coming in. Pilgrims going out. All kinds of animals going everywhere. It was full of religious activity, full of leaves. But where is the spiritual fruit? Nowhere to be found. Jesus said, 'My house was meant to be a house of prayer. And what have you done? You have turned it into a den of thieves!'

You look at the temple and you see all this outward religious activity. But inside, there is only commercialism. Prayer has been replaced by materialism. There were people who used godliness to make some money. 'You want to worship God? Then you got to do business with me.'

This is what the Lord already condemned in Isaiah 1. 'Who required of you all this slaughtering of animals? Who required of you all these offerings? All this observance is meaningless to Me unless it is done with the right attitude. I want righteousness. I want to see godliness in your heart.'

Jerusalem was now back to what it was in the days of Isaiah. It was back to the days when the nation was about to be destroyed and taken away in exile. Just as John the Baptist said, the tree was going to be cut down. *Every tree which does not bear good fruit, John the Baptist warned, is cut down and thrown into the fire* (Matthew 3:10).

So there was this Jewish temple. Countless sacrifices were offered to God on the altar. Was God pleased? No. People had all the leaves, all the externals of worship, but there was no spirituality, no true prayer. The temple, which was supposed to be a house of prayer, had become a den of thieves.

Understand that the parable is not just for Israel. It can be applied to every one of us who are the new Israel, the church. We may become just like that temple. We may have the all the externals of Christianity, but deep inside, we may have become a den of thieves because our heart has been given to the world. And sooner or later, such a place will be cursed by God.