

CASTING MOUNTAINS

Matthew 21:18-22

18 Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. **19** And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, “No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.” And at once the fig tree withered. **20** And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither all at once?” **21** And Jesus answered and said to them, “Truly 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 even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will happen. **22** “And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.” (**Matthew 21:18–22, 2022 LSB**)

This event seems like a strange little interlude in the Gospels (it appears also in Mark’s Gospel). We have all of the drama of Jesus entering Jerusalem during the triumphant entry and clearing out the Temple of those who abused it. And then the narrative turns to a fruitless fig tree and Jesus cursing it for being barren. In fact, this little, strange event sets the stage for much of what is to follow, not only in Matthew 21 but all the way through Matthew 25.

BLESSING, JUDGMENT, AND RESTORATION

BLESSING

The fig tree was an emblem of God’s blessing very early in the life of Israel. For instance, Deuteronomy 8:7-8 says,

“For Yahweh your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines **and fig trees** and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; (Deuteronomy 8:7–

8)

JUDGMENT

On the other hand, Jeremiah 5:17 says that when Assyria invades, “they will devour your vines and your fig trees.”

The Old Testament Scriptures frequently join grape vines and fig trees to represent God’s blessing and the loss of them as a picture of God’s judgment against Israel.

RESTORATION

When Yahweh promises restoration, He returns to the vine and the fig tree, as He does in Micah 4.

Now it will be that in the last days the mountain of the house of Yahweh will be established as the head of the mountains, and will be lifted up above the hills, and the peoples will stream to it. And many nations will come and say, “Come and let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may instruct us from His ways and that we may walk in His paths.” For from Zion will go forth the law, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem. And He will judge between many peoples and will render decisions for mighty, distant nations. And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war. **And each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree**, with no one to make them tremble, for the mouth of Yahweh of hosts has spoken. (Micah 4:1–4)

Yahweh used the fig tree to describe His initial blessing upon His people. He used the loss of fig trees as a sign of His judgment. But in the last days God’s blessing will be restored, as all mankind worships Yahweh, is instructed by Him, His Word goes out from Jerusalem, and peace is finally established. There will be a superabundance of blessings in that time.

The Old Testament certainly describes God's blessing upon His people, and His judgment upon them. But we have not yet seen the fulfillment of Micah 4.

JESUS AND THE FIG TREE

Matthew 21:18-19

Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered. (Matthew 21:18-19)

With that, we return to this weighty moment in Matthew 21. Jesus sees an isolated fig tree by the side of the road, full of leaves. As it happens, fig trees begin to produce fruit before there are leaves. By the time a fig tree is fully leafed, the fruit is ripe and ready to eat. A fig tree full of leaves is advertising its own health and fruitfulness.

But this tree is a lie. It is full of leaves, but it is fruitless. It is barren. Figs are not brightly colored like lemons or oranges. I imagine that Jesus carefully looked at the tree for fruit – any fruit.

So Jesus did a thing that shocked His disciples: He pronounced a curse on this tree. "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." In other words, Jesus says to this tree, "As you were. Remain as you are now." And at that moment the tree withered, and the leaves began to yellow and curl. Mark's Gospel says that when they passed it again the next morning it had dried up from the roots, and it looked as though it had been dead for decades.

A LIVING PARABLE

Most of Jesus' parables were stories He told. This is a living parable, a visual object lesson. Every Jew knew that fig trees were a sign of God's blessing on His people. They all knew that a dead, withered fig tree was a sign of God's judgment.

What did the parable signify? That Israel was dead and barren. As impressive as she was to the Jews – even the disciples can't help but boast about the grandeur of the Temple – she was fruitless. Jesus called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs full of dead men's bones. The same was true for Israel as a whole. By the mercy of God, there is always a remnant, and the eleven faithful disciples – we must always exclude Judas – and others were a remnant of God's people. But Israel as a whole was dead and barren and under the judgment of God. All leaves and no figs. All hat and no cattle, as they would say in Texas.

MOVING THE MOUNTAIN

Matthew 21:20-22

And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?" And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly 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 even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. "And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." (Matthew 21:20–22)

These verses are very often lifted out of their context and turned into a casual promise about prayer. Our confidence that all Scripture is God-breathed won't allow us to do that. We must consider them in the context of Matthew 21.

What amazed the disciples? The sudden change over the fig tree when Jesus cursed it. It is a picture of God's judgment on Jerusalem. About 40 years later, the Roman military laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed it, along with the Temple. Here's the 60-second history.

In 66 A.D. the Roman procurator stole 17 talents of money – about 1,130 pounds of

precious metals – from the Temple treasury. The Jews responded by openly rebelling against his authority and eventually captured the Roman garrison. The military commander of Syria brought in the Syrian legion, and the war was on. Several years of hostility passed, and in 70 A.D., just before Passover, Titus – who later was named Emperor – surrounded the city with three legions, about 15,000 soldiers. In the months that followed, the Romans took control of the city piece by piece, and in August, the Temple itself was set aflame and burned, and the flames spread to the city. Rome was in complete control by early September. Many Jews escaped; those who remained were put to death.

So how do the cursing of the fig tree and the judgment of Israel connect with moving mountains by prayer?

Simply enough, all things are possible for God. Jesus was able to instantly wither the fig tree because all things are possible for God. God was able to bring about the utter destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple because all things are possible for Him.

And when we come to the Father in faith, looking for His mercy and His kindness, looking for our own salvation and sanctification, calling on Him to “move the mountain” of our own sin and guilt, nothing is impossible for Him.

The truth is that until these men put their faith in Jesus Christ, they were all at risk of being fruitless fig trees. What made the difference? Is it that they were smarter, holier, or more humble? No, of course not. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is none who is righteous, no, not one. They were fruitful because nothing is impossible for God. They were fruitful because the Holy Spirit gave them faith to believe in Jesus as Lord and Christ, the Son of the Living God. They were fruitful because the Father had chosen them and given them life in His Son. They were fruitful because nothing is impossible for God.

We might be tempted to think that financial problems and health issues, and political

turmoil are mountains to cast into the sea. The truth is that our own sin and unbelief are the greatest mountains we will ever encounter. The more we grasp our own guilt before God and our need for a Savior – the greater the mountain of our own lostness fills our sight – the more we realize how much we need the Savior to cast our sin and unbelief into the sea and fill us with fruit.

BRINGING IT HOME

In a sermon called *The Withered Tree*, preached on September 29, 1889, Charles Spurgeon said this:

“Nothing but leaves is nothing but a lie.

If I profess faith and have no faith, is that not a lie?

If I profess repentance and have not repented, is that not a lie?

If I unite with the people of God and yet have no fear of God in my heart, is that not a lie?

If there is nothing but leaves, there is nothing but lies, and the Savior sees that it is so.”

(Charles Spurgeon, “The Withered Tree,” September 29, 1889)

If there is nothing but leaves, there is nothing but lies, and the Savior sees that it is so.

HOW MUCH FRUIT IS NECESSARY FOR A CHRISTIAN? *Some* fruit, surely. Jesus says in John 15 that the Father removes truly fruitless branches, just as Jesus cursed the fruitless fig tree. The Father looks for the fruit of saving faith in Christ, which sets the stage for the fruit of the Spirit. These are all works of the Holy Spirit within us. He gives us saving faith, He produces His fruit in us as we trust in Christ and obey His Word. And then, if I can shift metaphors, faith and the fruit of the Spirit become rich, deep soil for godliness, holiness, love of the Word, worship, service, evangelism, and so on.

AND HOW MUCH FRUIT DOES THE FATHER DESIRE? Well, *more* fruit, surely. Again, Jesus says in John 15 that the Father prunes branches that bear fruit. That pruning is not punishment

but purification. Ultimately, the true fruit the Father desires of us is Christlikeness – that also is the work of the Spirit. Until we are exactly like Jesus Christ, we are in need of further sanctification and purification.

WE OFTEN FEAR THE FATHER’S PRUNING WORK. It’s understandable. He doesn’t celebrate or affirm our identity, as so many falsely assume in our time. In fact, He rejects everything about us that does not reflect His Son. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, is the epitome of what it means to be a godly human being. Whatever of you and me that is not like Christ is offensive to the Father, and He will have it out in His time and in His way.

BUT WE SHOULD WELCOME THE FATHER’S PRUNING WORK. The entire Trinity is involved and focused on that very thing. Salvation is not the end but the beginning. In love, **the Father** predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, choosing us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him (Ephesians 1:4-5). The Father’s model of holiness and blamelessness is His Son. Tell me, as you look at the life and character of Jesus in the Scriptures, is there anything about Him that you don’t admire or don’t believe is worthy of praise? Would you really say that you would rather have your character than Christ’s? And **the Father** – who chose us to be holy and blameless – and **the Son** – who is the very definition of holiness and blamelessness – have sent **the Holy Spirit** to bring about this transformation in our lives. The Spirit who came like a dove. The Spirit who raised Christ from the dead. The Spirit of truth. The Spirit of holiness. The Spirit of promise. The Spirit of grace. The Spirit of glory. That Spirit. Will the Spirit’s work in us be uncomfortable? Yes, frequently; at times, painful. But He works only that which the Father desires and the Son embodies. By the will of the Father, the Holy Spirit is transforming us from glory to glory into the image of Jesus Christ.

So brothers and sisters, aim your prayers at that mountain because all things are possible with God. Ask Him daily to be casting the mountain of your old, dead, sinful nature into the sea and to replace it with the character and image of Jesus Christ.