

Fed by Grace | Food in the Gospels

He Became Hungry (The Fig Tree)

Luke 13.4-9; Mark 11.12-22

4.13.14

"Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." And He began telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

(Mark 11) *Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late. On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.*

Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And He began to teach and say to them, "Is it not written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS '? But you have made it a ROBBERS' DEN." The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.

When evening came, they would go out of the city. As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered." And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God."

We've been looking at the life of Jesus Christ and especially how often the topic of FOOD comes up. He was born and His first crib was a feeding trough... and all the way through His life, food figures prominently in His teaching and in His method – He ate with people.

Today and last week, the food on the plate is FRUIT... grapes last week ("I am the True Vine") and figs this week.

In the two readings, Jesus Christ first preaches a parable and later, the day after the original Palm Sunday, He performs the parable. He goes to the Temple and looks around, looks into the interior life of ancient Israel. Then, the next day, He returns and works His last miracle when He sees a fruit tree in the distance...and behind it a Temple in the distance. They have something in common and He treats the tree and the Temple in the same way.

There are two occasioning issues for this parable of the fig tree that's first narrated and then demonstrated. The first issue is WHY disaster strikes and the second is false advertising – spiritual veneer that's misleading. Let's look at these issues and how they're related. #1 – Those Bad people and That Fruitless Tree #2 – The Mystery of the Cursed Tree #3- The Cure-All For All

They come to Jesus Christ with news ripped right out of the headlines. Jesus was a Galilean (from Nazareth, away from the capital) and there was apparently a group of pilgrims on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (the big city) and maybe they started some sort of riot... somehow they stirred the anger of Pontius Pilate (the Governor) and he had them whipped or executed...Then there was a collapsed building and 18 people died and...Why?

And Jesus Christ is saying, "Everyone is so sure that these people did something to deserve these things...You all think that when catastrophe strikes it's God's way of getting even with bad people... but if that's true", says Jesus, "then why are YOU still standing?"

"Well, Rabbi, are YOU implying or suggesting that ...WE are bad people?"

And Jesus says, "Oh no! I'm not implying ...I'm coming right out and saying it – if bad people get whacked by God than you ALL better watch out – because you're all bad!"

"That can't be your answer to why tragedy strikes! You have to have a more nuanced and more elegant way of thinking about how God works".

So, is Jesus Christ saying that when people suffer hardship it's never as a result or consequence of their misdeeds and sins... ?

No, sometimes it IS...just not always.

And mostly, there's a built-in connection between the sin and the consequence (moral law of gravity) – e.g. if you lie a lot – you'll lose your friends. OR if you drink and drive, you'll wreck your car. If you're jealous, envious you'll become generally miserable and hateful.

And sometimes... God does indeed step in and puts a stop to a person's folly...by a catastrophe... BUT if you think you've avoided hardship and catastrophe because you're a good person – you don't really know yourself and you don't really know how God works.

It's not that those who suffer disaster are necessarily more deserving of judgment than those who do not face disaster. And to walk around saying dumb things like "This natural disaster hit this or that city because they did this or that bad thing" is just presumptuous (unless of course God has given you some sort of direct line and some secret, behind-the-scenes information).

And ...speaking of secret, behind-the-scenes information – Jesus tell the story of the fruitless fig tree that's up for review.

"Cut it down", says the owner, "it's only taking up space!"

But the gardener pleads, "No, wait! Let me work with it! Let me use extraordinary measures... let me fertilize it and wait a year and if not then..."

And Jesus Christ is saying, "This is the secret, behind-the-scenes information - you are ALL fruitless and are ALL under review and awaiting judgment but God has issued a stay-of-execution."

And Jesus Christ says, "Yes, there is a Gardener who pleads for the fruitless tree and has postponed the day of calamity... An impending crisis has been delayed. So...take advantage of this moment and become fruitful...quick!"

And...that solves the mystery of why all bad people don't get all the bad they deserve...a Gardener pleads for delay.

But wait...there's more... When Jesus Christ, the Gardener, entered Jerusalem and cursed that fig tree, He was pointing to a bigger reality: the fig tree is a symbol, a symbol for Israel.

During that time of the year fig trees get all full and bushy and they look all...promising! And Jesus had gone like so many pilgrims/seekers the day before...into the Temple. He looked all around... and what looked so promising, this grand, glistening Temple looked so... spiritual... so impressive!

This looks like a PLACE where a person could find God...but it was all a mirage...like a lush and leafy tree that wasn't in fruit season. And when you part the branches and look inside: "nothing but leaves" (13)!

God had given Israel the exclusive franchise for distributing grace and truth to the whole world... Gentiles from every nation were to be able to see this City on a Hill and be drawn to it and to find the evidence of God there! But when they came to the center, to the temple, inside, to the court of the Gentiles...nada! Nothing! Fruitless! A racquet!

Israel was like a fig tree out of season...false advertising...and even the fertilizer of the grace and the teaching and presence of God in Jesus Christ did not make Israel fruitful...Israel and the Temple were not the benefit to the world that God intended them to be (Gen 12.2-3) ...no satisfaction for the world's spiritual hunger!...Cool temple...but nothing inside. So...the tree will be cut down and cursed...

But to really understand the mystery of the cursed tree...you have to see that when Jesus Christ withered that fig tree, He was in effect saying, "This Temple is having its franchise revoked. It will no longer be the distribution point of grace and truth to a world that is ripe for judgment and desperately needs light and mercy!"

BUT Jesus Christ is also taking the franchise to Himself. "I will become the New Temple, the Light, the True Vine, the Tree of Life (Rev 22.2) , the True Israel."

Out of the stump of the cursed and cut-down tree will come a Shoot. 700 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah wrote, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." (Isaiah 11) Jesus Christ is the New Israel.

He comes voluntarily...on a donkey not the steed/war-horse of a conqueror; He comes with an offer of peace and says, "At this point I am pleading with you...O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...I will be withered for you! I will be cut off...I will be like fertilizer put in the ground for you...I will hang from the cursed tree. That's how badly I want you! O Ephraim, how can I give you up? (Hosea 11.8) ...Only come."

That's the mystery of the cursed tree – Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of everything Israel and the Temple should have been. He takes the franchise back. And He earns that right by carrying out the mission and becoming a curse (Gal 3.13), by becoming absolutely withered and depleted so we might become truly fruitful.

Now, what are we supposed to do with all this and what very practical steps forward are we to take in response?

Well, in the application of the first reading (and the first part of it), when the questioners show Jesus Christ the headlines as if to say, "Hey, what about this Rabbi; those guys must have pretty bad right?!" Jesus basically says, "Let's not talk about their badness...They're dead...Let's talk about your badness because there's still time for you...FOR ALL OF YOU!"

And that word "ALL" is important. It's repeated very deliberately four times (v. 3-5) and that's why I called this last point, "The Cure-All FOR All"

What Jesus Christ says is, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will ALL likewise perish".

His answer for "all-all-all-all" is to repent.

Now, if you're new to the Gospels, the four accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you will probably be struck by how often this word appears AND how central it is to the whole message. In fact, (in Mat/Mk/Lk/Jn) it summarizes everything Jesus Christ and also John the Baptist taught, "repent, for the Kingdom of God is here!" It is maybe THE central response to the teaching of Jesus Christ.

And if you want to respond to Jesus Christ and be a follower of Jesus Christ and benefit from what He did, you have to know something about that word. Let me look at just 5 ideas and misconceptions about this "ALL"-Important word, "repent".

#1 – If this is so important to Jesus and John the Baptist and virtually all the prophets/writers of the Bible then maybe we have the wrong idea of what the successful and fruitful spiritual life really looks like.

We THINK that a fruitful and thriving Christian is a person with a certain kind of family...a kind of respectability on the job...a high degree of integrity and loyalty and responsibility...He is the example of goodness and he rarely...sins.

But maybe, if Jesus knows anything about the Christian life...maybe the successful and fruitful Christian is the one who is best at repenting and that far from RARELY sinning, the really alive and thriving Christian sins a lot and therefore repents a lot.

Now you may be thinking, "I really like that! A kind of redefinition of success that takes the heat off and it sounds like...I could afford to sin a little more! If sin is the raw-material of repentance...I guess I could use a little more raw material!"

But the point is: you already have all the raw-material you need to repent a lot more than you do! You don't need to sin more, just be more aware of what's already there!

#2 – Repentance is not another word for bad self-esteem. It's not that some people are more naturally disposed to feel bad about themselves and, THEREFORE, for them it's easy to repent.

Repentance is a gift from God. It comes naturally and easily for no one. God has to enable you to see your sin as it is – the source of misery and trouble and the thing that keeps you from thriving and growing in your relationship with Him, with others and even with yourself.

We shouldn't think that working up a kind of worm-persona is the same as repentance.

#3 Another misconception: "I've already done that!" A lot of people in churches think that the Christian life begins when you repent and then you start implementing Biblical principles and the longer you go the less you need to repent. In fact, it's just the opposite. The more you grow, the better you're able to see your sin and the more you need to repent. If you're a really thriving, growing Christian but are not repenting more and more...Then you're not the thriving, growing Christian you thought you were. Maybe a lot of leaves but little FRUIT!

"All--all--all -- all" - that's who needs to repent.

#4 Another misconception -- "If I repent a lot, I'll be sad all the time and no one will want to be around me".

Well, if you play at repentance that's true. People will see right through it and you'll just look like a jerk. (Uriah Heep -- David Copperfield).

But if you really repent, it will lead to greater joy. Our own catechism says, "out of a true sense of his sin, and awareness of the mercy of God in Christ". You will find yourself sensitized to God's mercy. It leads to tremendous freedom and joy...and true humility...and honesty. It's the other side of faith (see last words Mark 11).

Look: ask yourself -- do you like to be around people who are free and joyous and grateful and truly humble and open and honest? (I find people like that to be refreshing! I feel like since they're judging themselves they probably won't have time to judge me!)

Being repentant makes you winsome. You can even share the gospel with non-Christians in a winsome way if you are repenting. In other words it leads to productivity and fruitfulness.

LAST, you can only really live this way to the degree that you see the truly fruitful Tree who was cut down for you.

If you know that Jesus Christ lived the vibrant life of beauty and perfection ON YOUR BEHALF and you have a sense that His record has been credited to you...you're living on His righteousness: only then can you begin to stop defending yourself and have the courage to face your junk.

Paul wrote, "the kindness of God leads you to repentance" (Romans 2.4) -- as we move toward Good Friday and Easter, maybe we should ask for a fresh vision of God's liberating, enlivening kindness that leads to repentance.