

Figs

Both Matthew and Mark tell an interesting (and curious) story about Jesus and a fig tree.

This story carries a powerful message—even if it's not immediately apparent.

To really understand the significance of this story, we need to dig into the background a bit.

Jesus has just had His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and He is going to cleanse the temple, which will push His relationship with the Sanhedrin past the point of no return.

And the gospel writers want to ensure that we interpret the fig-tree incident in light of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple.

Matthew places the story of the fig tree right after the cleansing of the temple, but Mark frames it differently.

He wants to ensure that his readers understand why the cursing of the fig tree is such a critical image, so he bookmarks Jesus clearing the temple with the fig-tree story.

Focus, The fig tree and the temple

Mark 11:12–14 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

Mark tells us that this wasn't the season that anyone should be expecting figs, but the tree's foliage suggested that this tree would have fruit.

So why would Jesus curse a fruit tree for not having fruit when it's not even in season?

To answer this question, Mark wedges the temple narrative into the fig-tree story:

Mark 11: 15–19 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers.'"

The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

When the topic of temple cleansing comes up, we tend to focus on the words "den of robbers."

The assumption was that Jesus was angry that people were being financially exploited by those selling doves and exchanging money.

But if we walk away thinking that Jesus was trying to reform behavior in the temple, we miss the point.

They would be back up and selling again within hours of Jesus leaving the premises.

Jesus was announcing prophetic judgment on the temple and its purpose.

He knows that not only will temple practices not be corrected, but the temple is also going to be destroyed.

And He later explains this to the disciples:

Matthew 24: 1–2 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

Focus, A den of robbers

In the cleansing of the temple, Jesus quotes Jeremiah 7.

In this passage, Jeremiah challenges the Israelite view of the temple.

The mindset that Israel had adopted was that the temple's sacrificial system covered all their iniquities:

Jeremiah 7: 9–11 "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe'—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord" Jeremiah.

When Jeremiah uses the term "den of robbers," he isn't saying that the temple is where the theft is taking place.

On the contrary, he's saying that it's the site where the robbers go to shield themselves from the consequences of their behavior.

Their den is their refuge.

The whole sacrificial system was being used to remove guilt from actions that Israel had no intention of amending.

From the very beginning, Israel was to be a city on the hill that drew the nations to God.

When the Lord first called Abraham, He told the patriarch:

Genesis 12: 2–3 I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

But instead of turning the temple into a "house of prayer for all nations," it had become a cover for their wickedness where they could escape God's judgment.

The money changing in the temple was only a symptom of a much larger problem—and God was pronouncing judgment on the entire system.

Mark wants us to understand the significance of the temple cleansing by using the fig-tree story.

As soon as the temple narrative is over, Mark wraps up the cursing of the fig tree:

Mark 11: 20–21 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

Focus, Israel: God's fig tree

This isn't the first time that Scripture has used fig trees as symbols for Israel.

In fact, it was often done in an attempt to communicate something severe.

Hosea 9: 9–10 They have sunk deep into corruption, as in the days of Gibeah. God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins. When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert, when I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved.

God's words through Hosea are very reminiscent of the fig-tree incident.

God sees young Israel as a young fig tree full of fruit, but they don't live up to their promise.

And the prophet Jeremiah—whom Jesus quotes as He cleanses the temple—has this to say about God's coming judgment:

Jeremiah 8: 13 "I will take away their harvest," declares the Lord. "There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them".

Jeremiah's words were being played out on a real fig tree and the nation of Israel as the Kingdom of God was being opened to every nation, and His Spirit poured out on everyone who would come to Him.

Focus, It's all about bearing fruit

Throughout Jesus's ministry, He reinforced the importance of being productive.

To do so, He'd use fruitfulness to illustrate His point.

After the cleansing of the temple, the Pharisees challenge Jesus's authority.



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And He responds by telling them the Parable of the Tenants.

In this parable, Israel is represented by a vineyard which is being poorly cared for by tenants, which represents Israel's religious establishment.

After beating and abusing the landowner's servants (the prophets), the landowner sends his heir (Jesus)—and the tenants choose to kill him.

The crux of Jesus parable lies in these words, ***"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (f).***

This reinforces the fig tree's message.

God expects the trees He plants to produce fruit.

Focus, The parable of the unfruitful fig tree

Jesus further fortifies this message with a parable about a man and (believe it or not) his fig tree:

Luke 13: 6–9 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

"Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

The landowner is a patient man.



For years, the fig tree has taken up valuable real estate in his vineyard.

It's used up nutrients and taken up the attention of the caretaker.

But after years of not producing fruit, the landowner is ready to replace the fig tree with something that will actually produce.

Why waste the soil on a tree that will not bear fruit?

The caretaker asks the landowner for one more year.

He will pay special attention to the tree and give it one more opportunity to create fruit.

If it doesn't produce in that year, the caretaker promises to cut it down.

The whole parable drives home the point that God expects a certain amount of fruitfulness.

He has patience, but His restraint is intended to lead to repentance.

Eventually, He will pass judgment and that's what will happen with Israel.

Focus, Minding our fruitfulness

The expectation of fruitfulness is not limited to Israel.

Jesus expects His followers today, to bear fruit as well.

He explains this in one of His final dialogues with the disciples before the crucifixion:

John 15: 1–4 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

In this analogy, Jesus's followers are fruit-bearing branches.

As we stay connected to Jesus (the vine), we're empowered to be productive—a condition that we cannot manufacture on our own.

Meanwhile, the Father is at work, pruning us so that we can become even more fruitful.

The very fact that God puts so much energy into increasing our yield really drives home the importance of fruitfulness.

Jesus goes on to explain:

John 15: 5–8 I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciple.

The Lord reiterates the critical nature of remaining attached to Him so that we can bear fruit.

And then He restates the lesson of the fig tree: branches that can't produce fruit are eliminated.

In the end, fruitfulness is essential because that's how we show we're genuinely disciples of the Master.

Focus, The emphasis Jesus chooses

As we've seen, the disciples notice that the tree Jesus cursed has withered.

Instead of explaining why or elaborating on the object lesson, He tells them:

Mark 11: 22–26 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Three Take Aways:

After pointing out that the tree has withered, Jesus encourages the disciples to:

Have outrageous faith
Pray bold prayers
Practice courageous forgiveness

And by doing this, they'll remain connected to the vine and empowered w bear much fruit.

As Jesus was fond of pointing out, you can tell a lot about a tree from its fruit.

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- 2. Pray bold prayers**
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