

The Withered Fig Tree: A Teachable Moment

Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

By [Rev. Billy Dempsey](#)

Let me ask you to open your Bible to Mark chapter 11. We'll give attention to a visual parable tonight. We are accustomed to hearing Jesus teach in parables. Tonight we watch as He takes an object lesson as He takes a fig tree that makes a promise but produces no fruit, and He turns it into a teachable moment for His disciples, those twelve who were with Him, and us as well. Before we read God's Word, let's go to Him in prayer.

Father, how we thank You for the fact that Your Word is true through the ages. Your Word is always true and it speaks to us tonight. It brings words of life, it brings words of examination, a call of faithfulness, a call to follow You, a call to be sure that we're taking advantages of opportunities all around us to demonstrate and produce the fruit of faith. Father, we ask You to plant that Word deep in our hearts this evening and help us in the days to come to bring forth fruit of faith. Hear us; open our hearts. Make us like play-doh and conform us to the image of Your Son, for as ask it in His name and for His sake. And call God's people said, amen.

Now let's give our attention to the reading of God's Word, first Mark chapter 11 verses 12, 13, and 14, and then we'll move to verses 20 to 25:

On the following day... (and that's the day following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the beginning of Passion Week),

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if He could find anything on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And His disciples heard it.

And now moving to verse 20:

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that You cursed has withered." And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken

up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

What does the Word of God tell us this evening? It might tell us if we're not careful that Jesus is a tad unreasonable, might it? It's not the season for figs! How is He out of sorts with a fig tree that's not producing figs in season? Aren't fig trees supposed to produce figs in season? What's happening here? Well, as I mentioned just a moment ago, the fig tree is a teachable moment, an object lesson. It tells us something about faith. The fig tree, in leaf, in Jesus' day, indicates the presence of those early figs. They're not the full-sized figs that will be found on that tree late in the fig season — summer or early fall — that is what Mark would say the season for figs. The tree in leaf promises those early tasty figs. Jesus is hungry. He sees the tree in leaf from a distance. He says, "There are tasty figs there, the little bitty figs that I can munch on the way" and He doesn't find them. You see, the tree has the appearance of bearing but it does not. You see, the reality that Jesus found didn't measure up to the promise made by the leaves. Let me say that again; that's important. The reality Jesus found did not measure up to the promise made by the leaves — plenty of leaves but none of those early figs; tremendous promise but no performance.

Let's remember the context in which these events occurred. Jesus has, just the day before, come into Jerusalem to a crowd, streets thronging with people, and even the way into the city is teeming with people. And what do they do? They shout and they cry, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!" It's a tremendous scene of excitement and frenzy and praise and Jesus' traditional enemies, the scribes and the Pharisees, are there saying, "Hey Jesus, Jesus, shut these people up! Jesus, this is a big mob scene!" And always on the other side of any issue from the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus who, for all His entire ministry stayed away from the praise of people and acted almost in secret if He could, for the first time says, "If they don't praise, even the stones will cry out." This is the moment for praise; this is the moment for adoration. This is the moment for a people to own their Messiah. This is the moment when God's people rise and say, "Blessed is the name of the Lord and the One who comes in it!" He will not quiet them. He will not shush them. That praise is that promise of faith, isn't it? Those leaves, whispering of those early figs. That praise is that promise, that leafy promise — there's faith here; there's faith here. "We've been waiting for You. We receive You with adoration." You know that Jesus knows the hearts of all people. He knows how shallow that praise is.

He's on His way to Jerusalem. Remember, this very day will be the day in which He cleanses the temple, Jerusalem, again, teeming with lots of people there for the Passover Feast, the great Gospel celebration of the Jewish faith. Teeming with people who are there to worship God, and yet He will find all this bustling activity without a lot of faith. He'll go into the temple and He'll cleanse the temple. He'll clear it out of the money changers. He'll clear it out of those selling the high-priced animals for sacrifice. They're using the only place that the Gentiles can go and pray. And He says, "You've made My Father's house into a den of thieves, a den of robbers! This is a house of prayer and the people can't even come and pray because there's no room and there's this stench of livestock and all their noise!" In a nation characterized by bustling, religious activity, He finds no faith. Go back and read Matthew chapter 23. In the same week at the same time, He is denouncing the religious leaders of the day, not just another denomination, the religious leaders of the day — the scribes and Pharisees — and He calls them blind guides and white washed tombs and filthy cups. He calls them hypocrites. He says, "Woe to you! You've brought ruin! Woe to you!" You see the work of the scribes and Pharisees looks like so much religion. Jesus said it's leaf and no fruit; it's promise and no substance.

RELIGION BUT NOT FAITH

Listen to what He says as He talks to His disciples about the destruction of the temple to come in all three synoptic Gospels. He says there's no faith; there's religion but there's no faith. "Not one stone," He says, "will be left on another." That's what's about to begin in this Passion Week that Mark sets us at the beginning of as Jesus pronounces a curse on a tree that looks like it offers fruit but offers none. So I guess the question is, "So what? So what?" Let me cut to the bottom line: Does Jesus find faith as He searches the Church today? Does Jesus find faith as He searches the Church? I'm not talking about simply a set of beliefs, but belief that impacts life. I'm not talking about a creed, but a creed that leads to works of faithfulness. Someone prayed while ago that we would be not just hearers of the Word but doers also. I remember what James said, and you do too, that faith is demonstrated by works. Is Jesus finding, as He searches the Church in our nation today, is He finding faith that leads to works of faithfulness? Is He finding leaf and no fruit? Or is He finding fruit?

Jesus, as He begins to talk the next day with His disciples — what is faith? Peter's mystified as he sees the next day that the tree that Jesus cursed really is cursed; it's withered; it's dead. It will never produce fruit again. No one will ever eat from that tree again. And Jesus begins to talk to Peter and the rest of His disciples about what is faith — and just a couple of points.

Jesus would say that Biblical faith is childlike. What does He say to Peter when Peter is marveling at the fig tree? He said something very simple. It's not very

profound in its difficulty; it's profound in its simplicity. "Peter, have faith in God. You're marveling at the withered fig tree — Peter, have faith in God. Have a personal confidence in God's actions because they rise from His character. Peter, it's very simple. Have faith in God." It's childlike. Have faith in God. It is simple. Look at verse 23. Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, whoever says to the mountain, 'Be taken up and be thrown into the sea,' and doesn't doubt in his heart but believes, what he says will come to pass; it will be done for him." Because Jesus would say Biblical faith is simple — ask and believe. Jesus would say Biblical faith is simple.

How much thought did we put into driving our cars this morning? Well, I hope we put some thought into driving our cars, but how much thought did we put into whether or not all the complicated mechanical instruments were really going to work when we turned that key? I'll bet you didn't think of it any more than I did. We just got in the car, turned on the key, expected it to run, put it in gear, and got here. Seems to me that's an awful lot like faith — we ask and we believe. Just like we believed that car was going to function like it was supposed to and didn't give a moment's thought to whether the exhaust was going in the right way, whether there was anything obstructing the air intake, didn't give any kind of thought as to whether or not we might have a leak in the fuel line that would strand us on the side of the road. Did you kick your tires before you started this morning? I'll bet you didn't because you thought your tires were going to get you here and get you back home again. It seems that faith is just that simple. We trust God, we learn how to trust, from just those simple, daily, dumb things as simple — everything from coffee makers to cars — that work when we push buttons or turn keys. That's what trust is. That's what confidence is. We expect God to do what we ask Him to do and if He doesn't we expect He's got a good reason. We trust Him; we trust Him. We ask and we believe. It's just that simple. That's what Jesus is telling Peter.

He also says that Biblical faith is aggressive. Did you notice what He says? He says in verse 24, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it." That sounds fairly aggressive to me - ask and expect; ask and expect. You know the story of George Mueller who fed and clothed and educated thousands of orphans in Britain...because he had a big fundraising program. He had fundraisers working the countryside and hauling great big barrels of money to him — no. You know the story. George Mueller did not ask any man for anything. He took every need of that orphanage to God in prayer; everything from clothing to soap to food, to food — not for tomorrow — food for today. Children sitting at the tables in front of empty plates and empty cups waiting for God to move. And you know what? There wasn't a meal missed. There wasn't a child who went to bed hungry, there wasn't a child who went to bed cold, there wasn't a child who failed to be educated, there wasn't a child who failed to benefit from the faith and the works of faithfulness demonstrated in the life of George Mueller.

It seems to me that Biblical faith is aggressive. Ask and expect. And because we expect, we move forward. Ask and expect. We move forward because we expect God to move in response to our prayers. Might we have to change plans? Yeah, we might have to change plans. Will it be because God is not moving? No, God will be moving. He may not be moving in the way that you and I suspected He would or hoped that He would, but He's going to be moving. Who's God? He is. What are we going to do? We're going to adopt our own moving to His moving. But we don't just sit around and wait for Him to move. We ask and expect and begin to go.

One more thing. Biblical faith, or rather a heart of Biblical faith, as Jesus describes it, is a forgiving heart. You see what He says? It's interesting that He throws this note in as He's talking with Peter and the other disciples around this fig tree because He says, "Whenever you stand praying," in verse 25, "forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven may forgive your trespasses." You see, Jesus always goes to the heart, doesn't He? Jesus always goes to the heart because I can pray this way and believe this way and I can build in my heart a simple faith, an aggressive faith, a childlike faith, but if my heart is locked up with grudges and unforgiveness, if my heart is teeming with cherished resentments and old wounds that I keep fresh by rehearsing the slights and the insults and the ostracisms, and the list goes on, then I've missed something very important. I've missed what it means to be forgiven. And if I've overlooked, if I've missed what it means to be forgiven, can I even have a claim of a relationship with God on which to stand in prayer? If I don't understand forgiveness myself, if I don't begin to recognize how much God has forgiven me, but instead hold against you every slight, every insult, every pain, even injury, then something crucial is missing.

It reminds us of the parable that Jesus told of the unmerciful steward, doesn't it, who owed his master so much — ten million dollars I think is the total in our denomination, in our money. And his master forgave. He left, he left the trial, the lawsuit with his master a free man, and ran into on the very courthouse steps somebody who owed him a day's wages. "Put him in jail!" because it escaped him how good his master had been to him. He could not extend that goodness, he could not extend that forgiveness, he could not extend that mercy to another. His master says, "How could you not understand? How could your heart be so cold? How could you be so unaware of what I've done for you and couldn't extend it?" Remember how the servant, the steward ended up? In jail himself. He lost the benefit of his master's favor.

You and I are called to believe and called to be faithful and called to not only just believe but produce fruits of faithfulness. And Jesus puts His finger on the very place we hurt the most and He says, "Let it go. Let it go. Forgive. Extend mercy. Overlook the hurt. As My Father has forgiven you, so you forgive one another." It's an amazing, it's an amazing traveling from the standing in front of the withered fig tree and Peter and the rest of the disciples are having to look square

in their own hearts as you and I have to look square in our own hearts and recognize where we have to let go, let go of hurts that we cherish and pains that fire our anger. We've been unjustly accused; we've been unjustly handled. What does Jesus call us to do? We want to be men and women of faith? We want to produce works of faithfulness? We let it go, give it away and learn what it is at that intimate, most personal level, to trust God to undertake for us, at that intimate, most personal level, to trust God to bear up for us. Now we're not just trusting God for things, we're trusting God to bind up wounds and to heal brokenness and to move us into a closer relationship with Him and a closer relationship it those that we serve with, serve Him with.

THE CHURCH AND THE FIG TREE

What is Jesus going to find as He looks at the Church? I fear He'll find a Church that has massaged the offense of the cross right out of the message of the Gospel. As He looks at the leafiness of the Church I fear He'll find a Church that has made worship the equivalent of entertainment and personal satisfaction. "We had a good worship service today; I liked the songs that we sang." I fear He'll find a Church that sees no cross to carry and no flesh to crucify. I fear He'll find a Church that loves no truth other than what it wants to hear. That's why it's important that we pray that God would send His Spirit, that God would revive the Church. We pray for renewal in the nation and a great awakening, yes. I think that's one of the things that I enjoy about our men's prayer breakfast on Saturday mornings. Every prayer circle that I've sat in there has been truly heartfelt prayer asking God for an awakening in this nation and a revival in the Church. Every prayer circle I've sat in there's been genuine heart pouring out, "God, revive the Church; God, send Your Spirit throughout this nation." I think we need to be praying that way, that God would do an amazing work in our day, another awakening, another great revival in the Church so that these questions that we're asking tonight really press home to us.

What does Jesus see when He inspects the leaves of our Church? What does Jesus see when He inspects the leaves of our families and our own faith? Is He going to find belief and faithfulness in our homes, in our businesses? Is He going to find belief and faithfulness in our relationships? Is He going to find our living characterized by the things we do because we trust Christ or is He going to find the empty leaves of self-love and self-absorption? I reminded my Sunday School class this morning of what Francis Schaeffer said were the two great values that shape our culture in these days in the last fifty years. And they are personal peace — "Don't bother me. Leave me alone. Don't involve me." And affluence — "Give me more, more, more of what I want." Those are empty leaves and they don't lead us to that fruit of faith, those faithful works, those attitudes. And as you begin to see them you begin to see how they shape your own life. As I see how they shape mine and how they shaped our living and doing in this culture, day-in, day-out, at every level. That's a fertilizer for empty leaves — no fruit. Does our

trust in Christ shape the way we do normal, daily business? Buying groceries, buying gasoline, the people we deal with there? Our schoolwork, our stewardship, our politics? Does our faith in Christ touch all those areas? See, that's fruitfulness that Jesus searches for as He searches the Church. That's fruitfulness that He's searching for as He searches us. Maybe we need to ask ourselves a question. "Are we really good at producing leaves or do we produce fruit?"

Those of you that have an association with Belhaven College know the name, Betty Quinn. Betty's one of the faculty members there and, I'm sorry, I'm dating myself — Belhaven University. And has for years gone by has worked for Baptist Hospital in the ER during holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas so those folks could go and be with their families. And she was handling the paperwork always for ER admissions. And so one evening a man came in, bloody mess, they know he had lots of wounds and he was writhing in pain on the table saying, "I've been shot and I've been stabbed! I've been shot and I've been stabbed! I've been shot and I've been stabbed!" And so they are working with him and working with him and working with him and they can find numerous wounds and they all appear to be knife wounds and slashes and they're working on those but they're looking for that gunshot wound because they know that's the one that may get him. These all seem to be fairly superficial; it's that gunshot wound. And so they turn him over. "Oh, I've been shot! I've been stabbed! Oh, I've been shot and I've been stabbed!" And then finally they get his attention to say, "Look, look, where's the pain of that gunshot wound? We can't find it?" And he cocked one eye open and he said, "You mean that man missed?"

Let's not miss. Let's not miss those opportunities in front of us every day to grow faith and grow in those works of faithfulness. Let's not miss those opportunities to extend ourselves for the kingdom and the good of other people around us. Let's not miss an opportunity to go out of our way perhaps and extend the good of the kingdom towards someone who might make us a little bit uncomfortable because they're so vastly unlike us. Let's not miss the opportunities that God puts in front of us to step away from personal peace and affluence and spend ourselves for His honor and glory just a little bit for someone else's good. I promise you, as we do, as Jesus searches He finds fruit and not just leaves.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, how we ask You to deposit Your Word in our hearts tonight. Teach us these great truths that we have heard from Your Word. Change us; make us different. Increase our Christlikeness. Help us see those opportunities in front of us this very week to do good, to demonstrate both faith and faithfulness. Father, we love You. How we thank You that You love us. Make us like Christ for His honor and glory and for our good. And we pray in His name, amen.

Let me ask you to stand for the benediction.

And now may the God of all peace who brought again from the dead our great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even our Lord Jesus, equip you with everything good for doing His will and may He work in all of us for His honor and glory through Jesus Christ both now and forevermore. Amen.

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