

Lessons from the Withered Fig Tree

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Please read the text of **Mark 11:12-14, 20-25** and consider:

Fig trees in Palestine may live as long as four hundred years. A well-cultivated tree should produce fruit for ten months of the year in those locales. However, because of the difficulties of translation, some have extrapolated a point from this text in the way it comes across to us in our English Bibles, which needs to be corrected. Some have claimed that you could not have expected to find any figs on this tree at the time of year when this occurred; fresh young leaves, yes, but the fruit would not have been ready yet.

Now, there are three things wrong with this postulation:

1. Fig trees can bear fruit for 10 months of the year over there – some of the varieties, and indeed even individual specimens, can bear quite early, especially if they are in a sheltered spot, so to have ripe figs on a tree at Passover time is indeed quite feasible. But those who interpret the phrase in the text as meaning “It was too early for figs” are expressing their ignorance of this fact. As well . . .
2. Anyone familiar with the growth habits of figs will tell you that fig trees are deciduous and, as such, show a remarkable trait of the fruit being visible on the tree before the leaves even appear after its dormancy period. Therefore, a tree in full leaf, as this one was, should have fruit on it.
3. What about what this says about our LORD? Some may not realize that they are making Jesus out to be vindictive, cruel, and unjust by his cursing of this fig tree. Our Lord who made the trees, would certainly have known whether this particular variety or this particular tree should have been fruiting! He certainly would not have been looking for fruit long before its proper time, as these critics suggest.

These critics simply miss the point. Or, I should say, the “points” of this incident.

Some Lessons from the Withered Fig Tree

Jesus took the opportunity to use the cursing of this fig tree as an object lesson for his disciples (and we can learn this lesson as well) about faith. In fact, there are several good lessons we can learn from this incident. One of the greatest ones for our context is the one Jesus taught in **Matthew 7:15-20**, “*By their fruits you shall know them!*”

You see, that fig tree was a pretender! It “looked right” but in truth, it was not right at all! Was it wrong for this tree to look beautiful and nice – to look the way that it should? No! Was it wrong for this tree to only LOOK good but to, in fact, be no good? Yes, that is what was wrong!

This is the same lesson that Peter speaks to in **1 Peter 3:3-4**,

Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

Is it wrong for a woman to look nice? No! Is it wrong for her to only *look* nice but not *be* nice? Yes!

What do people observe when they watch you suffer?

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

What prompted Ruth to say those words? She had seen her mother-in-law become bereft of her husband and her two sons. She suffered all of this in a foreign land, far away from her home and her people. The way Naomi conducted herself in godliness and righteousness through all of these depravations left an indelible impression upon her daughter-in-law, Ruth! Ruth saw the godly fruit being borne by Naomi as she dealt with the hardships of life. This prompted Ruth to become a follower of God.

"By their fruits you shall know them!" Are you bearing good fruit for Christ?

Consider **Matthew 23:3** as well, *"...so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice."* Read all of Chapter 23 to see the litany of crimes of the religious leaders of the Jews. And yet, because they did proclaim and teach the Law of Moses, Jesus said quite literally, *"Do as they say, not as they do!"*

So, what do we glean from the withered fig tree?

1. All of us are flawed. All of us are inadequate. We all have our idiosyncrasies, our imperfections. None of us can serve as a model for someone else to follow in terms of getting to heaven.
2. The answer is found in being like Christ. So, be like others, but only in the ways that they are like Christ.
3. Don't put on a show. Simply live your life for Christ, bearing the fruit that He seeks, not what may impress someone in a human sense.