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*You Must be Born Again!*

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## *The Gospel of Matthew*

### *The King and a Barren Tree: Judgment Upon a False Church*

*January 5, 2020*

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 21:18-46

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew 21:18-46

Psa 1:1-6 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; (2) but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (3) He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. (4) The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (5) Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the

congregation of the righteous; (6) for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Trees and fruit-bearing. These are very common themes in the Bible – trees with fruit and trees without fruit. They are common in Scripture because they are some of the Lord's chosen symbols for *blessing and curse*. The righteous man who follows and obeys the Lord is a tree that is blessed. The Lord waters that tree and makes it fruitful. It is a prosperous tree just as the blessed man is prosperous because of the Lord blessing him.

Not so the wicked. They are like a tree as well – a cursed tree. The Psalmist in fact does not even picture them as a tree with any root at all – they are mere chaff, dead and dry and fit for the fire.

As you see, our text this morning has a tree. A fig tree. Listen again as Matthew tells us what happened when

the King, the rightful owner of that tree, came to it:

Mat 21:18-19 In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. (19) And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, **he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves.** And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once.

I have listed this entire section, verses 18 through the end of the chapter, as the text we will be considering this morning. We will of course not be able to deal with all of it in detail today, but we will plan to return to it next time. I present it to you as a block however, as a unity, because as you will see we cannot understand this incident of the fig tree without considering the larger context.

### The False Church

Let’s first consider fig trees and the Old Testament. The Jews of Jesus’ day would have been very familiar with this theme:

*A fruit-bearing, healthy fig tree was a sign of God’s blessing for His people.*

1Ki 4:25 And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his

fig tree, all the days of Solomon.

Mic 4:3-4 He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; (4) but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

Similarly and in contrast, barren fig trees were a plain announcement of God’s curse –

Jer 8:12-13 Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD. (13) When I would gather them, declares the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.”

When our Lord came into this world and came to His earthly, covenant people, the physical seed of Abraham, He found them to be barren of righteousness. Fruitless. The Lord had

been very, very patient with them as another fig tree parable in Luke demonstrates:

Luk 13:6-9 And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. (7) And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ (8) And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. (9) Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

He had been long-suffering with these habitually covenant-breaking people. They have not born the fruit of righteousness and godliness. They had not been a holy nation and priesthood to shine His Light in a fallen, dark world. *And specifically His wrath was upon the false shepherds of Israel.* Those scribes and Pharisees, priests and false prophets who oppressed the Lord’s flock.

These are the things that the fig tree Christ cursed symbolized. We know this because of the context:

Mat 21:15-17 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the

children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, (16) and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, “‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise’?” (17) And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

Mat 21:23 And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

The entire Temple system, you might say the visible “church” at Jerusalem was corrupt. It was like that fig tree – alive but really dead. It had leaves, but it bore no fruit and was in reality then no more good to anyone than a plastic tree. God’s blessing was not on it and Christ in fact pronounced the divine curse on them, using this fig tree as a perfect visual aid which they all would have known the meaning of – or at least they should have known.

Listen to William Hendriksen:

“The pretentious but barren tree was fit emblem of Israel. Jesus himself would interpret the figure the next day (see 21:43). In fact, the disciples did not

even have to wait until the next day for the explanation: The fig tree had its counterpart in the temple where a lively business was being transacted so that sacrifices might be made, while at the same time the priests were plotting to put to death the very One apart from whom these offerings had no meaning whatsoever.

Plenty of leaves but no fruit. Bustling religious activity, but no sincerity and truth. In cursing the fig tree and in cleansing the temple, Jesus performed two symbolic and prophetic acts, with one meaning, He was predicting the downfall of unfruitful Israel. Not that he was through with the Jews, but that in the place of Israel an international and everlasting kingdom would be established, a nation bringing forth not just leaves but fruits, and gathered from both Jews and Gentiles.” [New Testament Commentary, Baker]

Much of the visible church today is exactly like that fig tree and thus exactly like unfruitful, sinful Israel in Jesus’ day. Christ has been very, very merciful to such churches, but His mercy is not unlimited for unrepentant wolves. For such people, His forbearance eventually ends:

And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once.

I have no doubt that there are many local churches, many so-called “ministries” today which have already received these final words from the Lord. They are like a rotting corpse being dressed in finery and makeup, but nothing will make them live ever again. Their fruit is rotten and repugnant in the Lord’s sight.

### The Nature of Real Fruit

Just what is the fruit Christ is looking for in His people? What does a fig tree that is blessed by the Lord look like?

Isa 45:8 “Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the LORD have created it.

Isa 61:11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

Gal 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Php 1:9-11 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, (10) so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, (11) filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Heb 12:11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

We say it again and again and again – *you must be born again*. These people who were the supposed teachers and leaders of Israel in Jesus' day did not know the Lord. They were not born again. They were dead, barren, fruitless fig trees parading as being blessed and chosen by the Lord. But they were not and Jesus exposed them for what they really were. He pronounced judgment upon them when He cursed that fig tree.

Understand this very, very clearly now. The Lord may well be saying about someone who is listening this morning – give them one more season. I will cultivate and fertilize them even more. I will send My Word to them for another season and call them to repentance. But after that, if they still

will not hear, if they do not bear fruit, they shall be cut down once and for all.

This notion that we hear among professing Christians and from pulpits so often – *it is never too late to repent* – is simply not true. It was too late for that fig tree the day Christ came to it, and it was too late for the wolves who oppressed His flock and hated Him. Do you understand?

Listen to the Lord's call of Isaiah:

Isa 6:8-12 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." (9) And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'" (10) Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." (11) Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, (12) and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

Do you grasp what the Lord is saying here? He is telling Isaiah that the

message he is to preach to the Israelites is a message that will actually make them deaf and blind so that they will not be able to hear, see, and understand God's Word and thereby be healed. This is why Jesus spoke to the people of His day in parables, you recall. *There is a point when God's mercy ends and His judgment comes. And that is what His fig tree curse was an announcement of to corrupt Jerusalem:*

Mat 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Her time had run out.

Luk 3:8-9 Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. (9) Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And so WE must examine ourselves and see if we are truly in the faith or not. Is the course and characteristic of our lives righteousness or wickedness?

*The fruit we bear reveals what kind of tree we are – blessed or cursed.* Perhaps the Lord in His kindness is giving unfruitful people another season to repent, to believe the gospel, and thereby to be born again and become a tree that is truly alive and bearing the fruit of righteousness. You must be born again! You cannot make yourself alive, you cannot produce fruit unless Christ makes you a new creation:

Joh 15:1-5 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. (2) Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (3) Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. (4) Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (5) I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Let's be done with this nonsense that is so common today and which makes excuses for fruitless fig trees that claim to be Christ's churches and people. You know it – *well we are all sinners and it is too judgmental to expect Christians to be perfect.* But we are not expecting people who profess to be Christians to be perfect and totally

sinless in this life. *What we are expecting by the authority of God's Word is the fruit of righteousness!* Where the Spirit of the Lord is there will be the fruit of the Spirit. In contrast:

Rom 8:5-9 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

(6) For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (7) For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. (8) Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (9) You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

### Mountains into the Sea

Finally, let's see if we can understand what Jesus told the disciples immediately after the fig tree withered:

Mat 21:20-22 When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" (21) And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has

been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. (22) And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

Christ's kingdom has come and is coming. The disciples, like their countrymen, probably had grown up with the worldview that Israel, the Temple, the mountain upon which Jerusalem was built, *would always exist and continue*. For it to be otherwise, for them, would be impossible. The Messiah and His rule and dominion was all wrapped up in their thinking with this earthly Jerusalem.

Could it be, and I simply propose this question, that when they saw Jesus curse the fig tree that they began to just begin to see that their thinking about Jerusalem was wrong? In other words, could it be that they were not just astonished at the miracle of the withered fig tree, but were unsettled about what Jesus was communicating to them in it? These men who would soon do this:

Mat 24:1-2 Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. (2) But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not?

Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

*Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* This is what Christ taught them, and us, to pray. So consider our own world today – *is this not how most people think about this present world, but we as Christ’s people are instructed to pray, Thy kingdom come. And we are to pray in faith without doubting that Christ’s promises are true.* We must not be unbelieving like the world:

2Pe 3:3-13 knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. (4) They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” (5) For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, (6) and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. (7) But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (8) But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is

as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (9) The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (10) But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (11) Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, (12) waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! (13) But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

#### Summary Challenge and Application from J.C. Ryle & Matthew Henry

The second event that demands our attention in these verses, is our Lord's curse upon the fruitless fig-tree. We are told, that being hungry He came to a fig-tree in the way, and "found nothing on it but leaves. He said to it, 'Let there be no fruit from you forever!' Immediately the fig tree withered away." This is an incident

almost without parallel in all our Lord's ministry. It is almost the only occasion on which we find Him making one of His creatures suffer, in order to teach a spiritual truth. There was a heart-searching lesson in that withered fig-tree. It preaches a sermon we shall all do well to hear.

That fig-tree, full of leaves, but barren of fruit, was a striking emblem of the Jewish church, when our Lord was upon earth. The Jewish church had everything to make an outward show. It had the temple, the priesthood, the daily service, the yearly feasts, the Old Testament Scriptures, the rituals of the Levites, the morning and evening sacrifice. But beneath these goodly leaves, the Jewish church was utterly destitute of fruit. It had no grace, no faith, no love, no humility, no spirituality, no real holiness, no willingness to receive its Messiah. (John 1:11.)

And hence, like the fig-tree, the Jewish church was soon to wither away. It was to be stripped of all its outward ornaments, and its members scattered over the face of the earth. Jerusalem was to be destroyed. The temple was to be burned. The daily sacrifice was to be taken away. The tree was to wither away to the very ground. And so it came to pass. Never was there a type so literally fulfilled. In every

wandering Jew we see a branch of the fig-tree that was crushed.

But we may not stop here. We may find even more instruction in the event we are now considering. *These things were written for our sakes, as well as for the Jews.* Is not every fruitless branch of Christ's visible church in a dreadful danger of becoming a withered fig-tree? Beyond doubt it is. High ecclesiastical profession, without holiness among the people--overweening confidence in councils, bishops, liturgies, and ceremonies, while repentance and faith have been neglected--have ruined many a visible church in time past, and may yet ruin many more.

Where are the once famous churches of Ephesus, and Sardis, and Carthage, and Hippo? They are all gone. They had leaves, but no fruit. Our Lord's curse came upon them. They became withered fig-trees. The decree went forth, "Hew them down." (Dan. 4:23.) Let us remember this. Let us beware of Church-pride. Let us not be high-minded, but fear. (Rom. 2:20.)

Finally, is not every fruitless professor of Christianity in dreadful danger of becoming a withered fig-tree? There can be no doubt of it. So long as a man is content with the leaves of religion--with a name to live while he is dead, and a form of godliness without the

power--so long his soul is in great peril. So long as he is satisfied with going to church or chapel, and receiving the Lord's supper, and being called a Christian, while his heart is not changed, and his sins not forsaken--so long he is daily provoking God to cut him off without remedy. Fruit, fruit--the fruit of the Spirit, is the only sure proof that we are savingly united to Christ, and in the way to heaven. May this sink down into our hearts, and never be forgotten!

Ryle, J C. Expository thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew (Expository thoughts on the Gospels - J C Ryle Book 1) (pp. 309-311). ICTHUS PRESS. Kindle Edition.

And Matthew Henry:

(A.) This cursing of the barren fig-tree, represents the state of hypocrites in general; and so it teaches us,

[1.] That the fruit of fig-trees may justly be expected from those that have the leaves. Christ looks for the power of religion from those that make profession of it; the savour of it from those that have the show of it; grapes from the vineyard that is planted in a fruitful hill: he hungers after it, his soul desires the first ripe fruits.

[2.] Christ's just expectations from flourishing professors are often frustrated and disappointed; he comes to many, seeking fruit, and finds leaves only, and he discovers it. Many have a name to live, and are not alive indeed; dote on the form of godliness, and yet deny the power of it.

[3.] The sin of barrenness is justly punished with the curse and plague of barrenness; Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. As one of the chiefest blessings, and which was the first, is, Be fruitful; so one of the saddest curses is, Be no more fruitful. Thus the sin of hypocrites is made their punishment; they would not do good, and therefore they shall do none; he that is fruitless, let him be fruitless still, and lose his honour and comfort.

[4.] A false and hypocritical profession commonly withers in this world, and it is the effect of Christ's curse; the fig-tree that had no fruit, soon lost its leaves. Hypocrites may look plausible for a time, but, having no principle, no root in themselves, their profession will soon come to nothing; the gifts wither, common graces decay, the credit of the profession declines and sinks, and the falseness and folly of the pretender are manifested to all men.

(B.) It represents the state of the nation and people of the Jews in particular;

they were a fig-tree planted in Christ's way, as a church. Now observe,

[1.] The disappointment they gave to our Lord Jesus. He came among them, expecting to find some fruit, something that would be pleasing to him; he hungered after it; not that he desired a gift, he needed it not, but fruit that might abound to a good account. But his expectations were frustrated; he found nothing but leaves; they called Abraham their father, but did not do the works of Abraham; they professed themselves expectants of the promised Messiah, but, when he came, they did not receive and entertain him.

[2.] The doom he passed upon them, that never any fruit should grow upon them or be gathered from them, as a church or as a people, from henceforward for ever. Never any good came from them (except the particular persons among them that believe), after they rejected Christ; they became worse and worse; blindness and hardness happened to them, and grew upon them, till they were unchurched, unpeopled, and undone, and their place and nation rooted up; their beauty was defaced, their privileges and ornaments, their temple, and priesthood, and sacrifices, and festivals, and all the glories of their church and state, fell like leaves in autumn. How soon did their fig-tree wither away, after they said, His blood

be on us, and our children! And the Lord was righteous in it.

Henry, Matthew. Unabridged Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible (best navigation) (Kindle Locations 264971-264993). OSNOVA. Kindle Edition.