

Introduction

The emerald ash borer has wreaked a lot of havoc in our part of the country. It is the reason you have to keep your firewood local. But that is a small inconvenience compared to the fact that many people have lost dozens and dozens of ash trees. I have a living ash tree in my front yard, but from my house I can see several nearby which are standing there dead. Ariail had to have a dozen or so dead ash trees cut down in her yard. And I think Doug Ferrell has set the record around here. He lost about 200. It completely changed the landscape at his home. This morning we are going- to talk about the death of a tree but not by the emerald ash borer or any other insect for that matter. This tree died because Jesus cursed it.

[Read Text and Pray]

This morning's text brings to our attention several distinguishable and separate lessons. What ties the lessons together is the central figure of a fruitless fig tree. Because of Jesus, a tree without fruit becomes a tree without life and a tree under his curse. I want you to see three truths Matthew highlights from Jesus's encounter with this fruitless fig tree.

I. The Dual Nature of Jesus.

Matthew tells us what led to the encounter with the fruitless fig tree. It began when Jesus became hungry. "In the morning, as he was returning to the city, [Jesus] became hungry." We should not skip over this detail. It is a common experience for all of us. When I get up in the morning, my body communicates to me a clear message. It says, "feed me." I feel sure you know what I am talking about. Most people enjoy breakfast. We hunger for it. And it seems expected that Jesus became hungry in the morning on the way back into Jerusalem because getting hungry is a human thing to do. You can perhaps imagine Jesus saying to his disciples, "Guys, I am hungry. Sure would be nice if figs were in season. O! Look! A fig tree with leaves! I can taste them now! Let's check it out!"

Hebrews 2:14 confirms why hunger would be a real experience for the Son of God. "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things." Verse 17 tells us, "he had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God for the sins of the people." So Jesus's hunger is a reminder to us that Jesus is human.

But of course what makes Jesus's humanity all the more striking is that he is at the same time God. And his deity shines in an act that made the disciples marvel. He cursed the tree and suddenly it withered. I need to insert a little textual explanation here. When we piece together Matthew's account with Mark, we find that the way it all took place is that Jesus had the encounter with the fig tree Tuesday morning, the day he cleansed the Temple. And it was Wednesday morning when the disciples came again to the tree and noticed it was suddenly withered. The emerald ash borer is a little metallic green insect which attacks the ash tree by tunneling under the bark and feeding on the part of the tree that moves water and sugars up and down the trunk. The time it will take for the borers to kill a tree ranges between 2 and 5 years. But for Jesus here is the death of a tree in the span of just one day. It happened at once, and Mark says it was withered away to its roots.

The disciples had heard Jesus say, "Peace. Be still." They saw the lake go from ferocious tumult to a sudden calm. Now they saw the effect of words spoken to a tree. Suddenly it was withered and graphically dead. The ability of Jesus to wither a tree with his mere words points us to his deity. Jesus is a man. But he is more than a man. He is God. In the beginning was the word and the word was God. In the course of time he became the God/man. The God who spoke fig trees into existence now comes to one of his trees looking for some food to satisfy his human hunger pangs. He who created the human body to digest and process food now came in a human body to consume some of that food in order to give his human body energy to go cleanse the temple of God. The combination of his humanity and deity defies our full comprehension. Jesus is not part man and part God. He is fully God and fully man. This is what theologians call the "HYPOSTATIC UNION." The intent of the term is to assert that Jesus is one person but has two natures. At one and the same time Jesus is fully God and fully human. The concept is not easy to understand. However, it is critically important to our salvation. Jesus had to both man and God in hypostatic union for him to deliver humans from death and make a suitable propitiation to God for us.

The two natures of Christ preach good news to us. Because of our sin we owed an incalculable debt to the justice of God. Only God could pay that debt. But that debt had to be paid by a human representative. For that very purpose the Son of God became the son of man and bore our burden to where the debt was paid—on a cross outside Jerusalem. And because he did, we have been offered reconciliation. We take possession of that great gift through faith alone. Come sinners, you who are poor and needy, condemned by the law. Through Jesus you may be justified by faith; you may escape condemnation through the sacrifice of the God-man for you.

II. The Judgment of Fruitlessness.

To grasp this point we need to know a little about fig trees in the Middle East, and I guess anywhere. Mark's gospel points out that this was not the normal time of year for fig trees to produce. However, there were some fewer varieties of fig trees that ripened at different seasons. So the tell-tale indication of figs was not the season. Leaves on a fig tree were the certain sign of fruit. You see, with the fig tree the fruit emerges BEFORE the leaves. It is not the case with other fruit trees. In their case, as for example an apple tree, the leaves come first and then blossoms and then the fruit. But with the fig tree, the fruit is produced before the leaves open up. So once the leaves open up, you can be certain you will find fruit. But something was wrong with the fig tree in question this morning. For Jesus came to the tree which had all the signs that it should have fruit, but it had none. The problem was not a small amount of fruit but NO fruit, nothing, only leaves. In other words, the tree was all show and no substance. It bore the appearance of vitality but lacked the proof of it. After all, what good is a fruit tree if it produces no fruit? So Jesus cursed the tree, decreeing that the tree would never again produce fruit. And it died and withered.

Some might suggest that Jesus flew off the handle here. The absence of fruit on the tree when he was hungry was just more than he could stand and he took his anger out on the tree. However, such behavior suggests sin, and Jesus never sinned. Rather, Jesus used the fruitless fig tree in the role of a prophet to proclaim a message through an object lesson. I can think of two examples from the prophet Jeremiah. He retrieves a buried loincloth to tell the house of Judah they were made to cling to the Lord but they would not so that they are ruined. He breaks a piece of pottery in a certain place to communicate that God will break the people in the same way. Here Jesus is cursing the fruitless tree to proclaim a message.

To grasp the message, it is necessary to realize that the fig tree was one of the emblems of satisfaction and blessing in the land. Fig trees were quite common in Palestine and grew tall and

provided refreshing shade from the sun. The Lord held before the wandering Israelites the prospect of entering the good land of promise. It was "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates." Zechariah proclaimed to the people a message of hope for when God would remove the iniquity of the land. And in that day, declared the Lord of hosts, everyone would invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree to shady refreshment.

The fruitless fig tree then functions to represent the Jews as a people. They had leaves but no fruit. They were barren in terms of substance. They had signs of life. Religiously they were busy, but in essence they had no real life. They produced no fruit. They were displeasing to God. They were marked by hypocrisy and empty religion. As a people they were cut off from God. So Jesus curses the tree to say to the Jews, you are cursed like this tree. You are no good and the proof is no fruit. So you are judged and cursed. You are condemned. Barely 40 years later Jerusalem and its Temple were taken down to the ground and the people were dispersed abroad.

Judgment was the message for the Jews. But a lesson arises out of that message for professing Christians as well. It is the lesson of fruit. What God looks for in the lives of those who profess to know Christ is fruit. We say we belong to Christ. We say we follow him and we love him. We come to church; we may even read the Bible. That's leaves. And where there are leaves, there ought to be fruit. But the danger of being a fruitless professor is real. It is for this reason that James writes that "faith without works is dead." It is for this reason that Jesus told the parable of the soils. Do you remember that parable? The soil represents the heart. The seed represents the word. The seed falls on four kinds of soil. One is impervious to the seed. Nothing even springs up because the birds eat the seed. Three soils produced something. The seed that falls on the rocky soil springs up but soon dies away. The seed that falls on thorny soil comes alive but is choked out and proves "unfruitful." Only one soil, the good soil, produces a crop. The amount varies from person to person, but there is fruit. The encouragement and the warning are clear. Be sure that you are good soil. Jesus hears you SAY you love him. He sees the leaves. But he comes to you looking for fruit. Is there fruit in your life? Is there proof of genuine faith? A lack of fruit ultimately means being cursed, being judged.

A person is not saved by their fruit, but if they are saved, there will be fruit. So you might be saying, "What is the fruit for which Jesus is looking?" The Bible is quite clear. Fruit is a life that puts to death the deeds of the body, the passions of the flesh. Fruit is putting off the works of the flesh and in the power of Christ putting on the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Fruit is obedience to Christ, confessing Christ. It is controlling the tongue. It is bridling anger, lust, and envy. It is loving your neighbor in Jesus' name.

Before moving on, let me mention a critical key for bearing fruit. It comes from the image Jesus gave that is recorded in John 15. There Jesus compares himself to a vine and his followers to branches. And he exhorts, "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. 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." Fruit-bearing requires remaining in the vine. For the Christian, it requires remaining in Christ—living in communion with him, obeying his word, and being strong in his power through prayer and faith. The word and prayer and active involvement in Christ's church may seem every day and mundane, but these are how nourishment comes from the vine through the branch to produce fruit.

III. The Power of the Fruitful.

When the disciples of Jesus saw how suddenly the tree had withered, they marveled, saying, "how did the fig tree wither so quickly?" This is mind-boggling! This is incredible! You know, our surprise is so often God's opportunity to correct our understanding. And so it was here. In essence, Jesus taught the disciples that they themselves who are his followers, who remain in the vine, could by their words also take part in even greater works. They could speak to mountains and the mountains would be hurled into the sea. He closes with the assertion that "whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

The unfruitful will be judged, but the fruitful, the true believers, will see God's mind-boggling power at work through their prayers.

So Jesus is teaching that you can have whatever you want if you just have enough faith. Right? Well no, it is not a matter of enough faith. He just says if you have faith. But there are characteristics of genuinely biblical faith that demonstrate that Jesus is NOT saying, "here is a way to get whatever it is you want."

The faith of which Jesus speaks here is not faith in faith but faith in God. And faith in God is a faith that believes he is able to do anything at all that he wants to do. It believes that with God all things are possible. But this faith also is convinced that God is willing, and that by performing a certain work God will be glorified.

The faith of which Jesus speaks here is not a faith that is concerned with demonstrating to a watching world how great one's faith is. Jesus would not be suggesting here that his followers do something he would not do. And something he would not do was to perform great and exciting works purely for the purpose of charming bystanders. That is what Satan tempted him to do. The Jewish leaders asked Jesus to show off his power if he was Messiah, but he would not do that kind of thing. Neither is Jesus suggesting that we do that kind of thing.

Jesus is not giving us a key to experience an easy life either, as though we might just pray that God would heal us of afflictions and make life untroublesome. Which requires greater power: being healed of a terrible injury or living a life of faith that embraces an injury for the glory of God? I am sure Joni Erickson Tada would say the latter.

Neither is Jesus giving us a scriptural basis to fill our lives with material things. The word of faith movement suggests that if you want something bad enough and just have enough faith and speak your desire enough then you will get it—new cars, fine clothes, luxurious housing. But why would the God who tells us not to seek those things or love the things of the world tell us what we would need to do in order to take possession of them? That is nonsense. Faith remembers that what the world seeks and what God values are vastly different. MacArthur writes, God's "will for his children includes their willingness to sacrifice, suffer, and die for him if necessary. For the believer who seeks God's will, it is never a matter of succeeding or failing, of prosperity or poverty, of living or dying, but simply of being faithful."

In the context of prayer, faith involves knowing God, believing God, and being convinced that God desires to work in a certain way. It involves your desires being melded with God's desires. Faith embraces what God wants for you. Faith seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. If you truly want what God wants for you, then ask for it believing and you shall have it. And that is mountain-moving faith.

The impetus of what Jesus tells us here is certainly that God's people should pray. We should pray in faith—believing God, loving God, seeking his kingdom, his glory, and his will. And we should not be daunted in what we pray for just because it seems impossible. No. In fact he has designed to accomplish great and mind-boggling works that come from him as a response to our prayers. Pray like you know that is true.

Now the fact is that many times we do not know what God's will is. James makes the point when he tells us not to presume on the providence of God. We do not know what a day may bring forth. So do not be shocked or disheartened when you pray earnestly for something or some outcome and God says, "No." Paul guides us when we do not know God's will to simply make our request known to God. He instructs in Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God." Then faith trusts in him to do what he wills and "God's peace which surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Conclusion

So Jesus curses a fig tree and shows us his greatness. It is a greatness by which he warns the fruitless and encourages the fruitful. Religion does not save. Works do not save. Jesus saves. And those who are saved by him work; they produce fruit. They also have the hope and peace of being involved in the greatest enterprise in the world—to spread the knowledge of the glory of God.

Prayer

Induction of New Members