

“Pointless Religion”

Matthew 21:18-22

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Our scripture passage for today reminds me of the story about a guy who got arrested for throwing a brick through the window of a Taco Bell. The police arrested him, and when they asked why he did it, and the man said “Because I was hungry, and the Taco Bell was closed.”

The story from the Gospel of Matthew seems kind of like that. And it makes us a little uncomfortable. According to Mark’s version of the story, it wasn’t yet the season for figs to bear fruit (Mark 11:13). That leads us to the question: Is Jesus blasting the tree for what it couldn’t have done in any case? Is he just getting ticked off? No, something more than that is going on. And to understand what it is, we need a little background.

First, what fig trees represented in Jesus’ time.

Fig trees have been common in Israel since ancient times, along with date palms and olive trees. If you’ve had figs before, you know how sweet they are, like a natural candy. The fruit of the fig tree appears before the leaves grow in each year, so if you see the leaves you can expect figs to be there.

The first time they’re mentioned in the Bible is in Genesis when Adam and Eve used their leaves to cover themselves. Figs were not just used for fruit and for making cakes, but even for medicine, so you can understand why the fig tree became a sign of well-being. The phrase “sitting under your own vine,” or “sitting under your own fig tree” became an expression, a picture of prosperity and peace. You see that in the book of Kings, when it says:

“During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.” 1 Kings 4:25)

That phrase is used again in Micah, when God promises:

Every man will sit under his own vine
and under his own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the LORD Almighty has spoken.” (Micah 4:4)

It’s used again in Zechariah, when the prophet says:

“In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,’ declares the LORD Almighty.” (Zechariah 3:10)

So it happens at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when he’s calling his disciples to come and watch his life. John’s Gospel says Jesus say Nathanael and said,

“Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

Strange reaction, isn't it? Except a fig tree was a sign of prosperity and peace; it was a private place, an extra room to your house where you could hang out in its shade on your patio. Jesus was saying "I know you even in the secret places of your life." And Jesus answered him,

"You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:47-51)

The fig tree represented blessing, fullness, and well-being. You can't cultivate fig trees in times of drought and war.

Second, Jesus is enacting a prophetic parable.

Now, a lot of people have been embarrassed by this story, or tried to explain it away. They thought it showed Jesus as the guy who just gets peeved, and throws the brick through the window. They thought it showed Jesus as doing what the devil tempted him to do at the beginning of his ministry, to use his power for personal gain or revenge. But Jesus is doing something more.

The prophets of Israel performed parables, little dramas to get across an important lesson God was giving. Isaiah had to walk stripped and barefoot for three years; Ezekiel had to lie on his side for 390 days; Jeremiah shattered a clay jar to show Judah "the Lord is going to smash the nation for its sins"; then he has to wear a yoke to show that God is going to put the people under the yoke of the Babylonians.

There are judgment stories all over the Old Testament, miracles that bring punishment. But this is the only one in the New Testament, and it's not against people but a tree. You could say the tree had a more important ministry in dying that it did in living, because it was teaching us something.

Jesus is teaching a lesson here, a dramatic parable. The problem isn't just fruitlessness. It's showy fruitlessness.

Third, it's dangerous to promise lots but deliver little.

Fig trees produced fruit before they sprouted leaves. If the tree grew leaves, then it should have had fruit. Otherwise, it was nothing but pretentious. The tree had early leaves—it was pretending to be more than other trees, but there was nothing to its boast. You could say the tree's fault wasn't so much not having fruit as *pretending* to have it.

The fig tree is supposed to be Israel itself. Notice how the story right before this one is about Jesus cleansing the Temple—you remember, when he chased out the money changers, and

said it was supposed to be a house of prayer, not a den of robbers? He was talking about the faith of Israel, the spiritual condition of Israel. The faith of Israel had to be real, authentic, bearing fruit, or it would come under judgment.

Now, the point isn't that we should not make promises. We need to make promises, but even more, we need to live up to them.

Think about some of the promises you make:

To be a faithful husband or a faithful wife, who will love and care for your spouse as long as you both shall live.

To raise our children in the faith when we baptize them.

To follow Jesus Christ as faithful member of his church.

For pastors, elders, and deacons to study the Bible, to know the confessions of the church, to grow in faith in Christ.

As a congregation, to respect the leadership God places over us.

Let me ask you: how are you doing with those promises? It's easy for us to make promises, but hard for us to keep them.

That was the problem of Israel. Jesus is saying, they had such promise, but they haven't followed through. He was saying Israel had been faithfulness, and their faith hadn't produced what God intended. They were God's people to bring blessing to the world (see Genesis 12:3) and they hadn't done that, but seen faith as a privilege for themselves. They were supposed to be the family through which God would bring the Savior for the world, but when Jesus came to save the world, Israel didn't believe. It's like John wrote,

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."
(John 1:10-11)

The danger of not delivering is that being fruitless leads to God's judgment. The fig tree was in trouble because it had no use. It was fruitless.

Fourth, the fruit Jesus wants from us is the good works that come from faith.

What kind of works does God want from us? He wants to see us love the people he leads into our lives. Like he says in Matthew 25, he wants to see us feed the hungry, visit people in prison, and give a cup of water in Jesus name to the thirsty. But before any of that, through all of it, most fundamentally, he wants from us faith. Simply trust. Because none of the good things we do can ever make us right with him, but can only be real if they proceed from a relationship with him, if they are an expression of gratitude for what he's already done in our lives. It's why Paul says,

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:8-9)

Notice the sequence there: God saves us, we trust, and that trust itself is a gift. Then we do good works. The problem is that when there *are* no good works, there is not faith, so there has been no salvation. Being saved, being regenerated, born again, repenting, is all a work of God in us, and if it's real, then we keep our promises, we do good works, we bear fruit, we practice what we preach.

That's why Jesus says in the last part of our passage,

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." (Matthew 21:21-22)

Jesus' words make a difference. He speaks judgment, and the tree withers. He speaks life, and we are healed.

And now he's telling us our words can have a moving effect on the world, and the mountain is a picture of that. I imagine that as he says that, he's looking over to the Mount of Olives, and he says, "You'll do amazing things, too, if you have confidence." Maybe the only prayer we can pray with complete confidence, and know it will always bring us wholeness, is the prayer "Thy will be done." To have fruitful, productive prayers, we need faith.

I like the acronym for "FAITH," and I think it helps us remember some things we need to know: "Forsaking All I Trust Him."

Forsaking—Putting aside what stands between me and God's call.

All—Whatever it might be. Anything that stands in the way, that compromises our connection with God, is worthless, no matter how enticing it might be.

I—We're each responsible. Yes, we're members of the household of God, the body of Christ, but we're also individuals, and not simply part of the crowd. We have to decide personally to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Trust—Without faith it is impossible to please God. The Christian faith is all about *faith*.

Him—He is the center, the object, the goal, of our lives, the *power* for our lives. It's like the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who taught at the University of Basel. There's a story that one day a student was sleeping during Barth's lecture, and the professor called the student's name and said, "What do you think?" The student responded immediately, "Jesus Christ." Barth responded, "Exactly! Good answer!" It's true—Jesus is the very center, and it's all about him. He's how we know God and enjoy a relationship with him.

I have a single friend who worked as the assistant to the chief of surgery in the school of medicine of a large university. A few years ago she was approaching retirement and she was praying about what God would have her do in the next stage of her life. Then she travelled to Rwanda on a short-time mission trip, and her heart was moved by the orphans she spent time with there. She fell in love with the people there, and she felt God saying to her, "This is what I have for you." She thought, "But I'm too old to do this!" And God told her, "I'm not too old." She

said, "But I don't speak the language!" And God said to her, "I speak every language." She said, "But I won't know what to do!" And God told her, "I want you to hold orphaned babies on your lap." She said, "It seems impossible!" And God said, "With me, all things are possible."

And so forsaking all, she trusted God. She moved to Rwanda at 68 years old, a white middle-class American woman, to live with orphaned Rwandan children of the genocide and care for them, and she found the power to do what God called her to do, and she's producing the fruit of faith. She said, "Everything I've done in my life has led up to this. It seems a bit strange, but I definitely feel I'm being carried forward." And she told me it's been hard, but she's never known such joy.

Won't you trust him in what he's calling you to do this year? Won't you pray in faith, and do the works of faith, and watch what God does in your life and in our church?