

## Chapter 86: “If You Have Faith”

*Matthew 21:18–22*

Now that Jesus has entered the final week of his life, everything he does takes on special significance. It is not that our Lord has wasted even one moment from his life up to this point. Even so, his actions were often characterized by waiting and delaying the very events that he must take up this week. For this reason, it is perhaps surprising to see Jesus in a dispute with an inanimate object: a fruitless fig tree. Even this disappointing encounter in the midst of his hunger, however, is something that Jesus uses to declare an important message to his disciples: *spiritual fruitfulness comes by faith, not by formalism.*

### **Fruitless Formalism (Matt. 21:18–19)**

After cleansing the temple, Jesus traveled the short distance to Bethany, where he spent the night (Matt. 21:17). The next morning, Jesus returned to Jerusalem, and, on the way, “he became hungry” (v. 18). This is a small detail, but it underscores the true humanity of Jesus, who experienced bodily hunger for food in the same ways that we do. Furthermore, it shows one aspect of the suffering of Jesus, as he hungers but cannot find food to satisfy his hunger from a particular tree that caught his attention: “And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves” (v. 19a). Here we see another reminder of Jesus’ humanity, where he does not make use of his divine omniscience to know that the fig tree was ripe before personally inspecting it.<sup>1</sup>

While it is fine to translate this as “a” fig tree, the Greek is a bit more emphatic: “And seeing *one* [μία; *mian*] fig tree....” As an explanation for why Jesus was drawn to this particular fig tree, Matthew notes that Jesus found “leaves” on the tree, “since in the spring the fig tree puts out its fruit first and lets its leaves gradually follow, the full foliage of this tree gave promise of fruit.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the presence of leaves suggested to Jesus that he should reasonably expect for there to be figs on this tree.

Yet, Mark also tells us in his parallel account of this story that “it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13). This is an important detail that fills out more of Matthew’s reason for describing this “one” fig tree that Jesus saw. By this, “Matthew probably intends to alert the reader that this tree,

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<sup>1</sup> “We are confronted with a mystery here: the secret of the interaction between Christ’s human and his divine nature. According to his divine nature Jesus was—and is—omniscient. That even during the days of Christ’s humiliation this divine nature at times communicated its knowledge to the human nature is clear from such passages as Matt. 17:27; Mark 9:33, 34; John 1:47, 48; 2:25. That this did not always happen appears not only from the present passage (Matt. 21:19) but also from 24:36 (Mark 13:32). Jesus, then, went up to this fig tree to see whether he could find any fruit on it. He found nothing but leaves!” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 774.)

<sup>2</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 822.

perhaps standing on its own, was unlike others which at that season would not have fully developed leaves. Its precocious show of foliage promised, but did not provide, the fruit which normally came with the leaves....”<sup>3</sup>

Even so, it is still a surprise to see Jesus declaring, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” so that tree withers immediately (v. 19b). Why does Jesus take this drastic action? To begin, it is important to see Jesus’ actions in the context of Old Testament prophets, who often acted out the message of their prophecies in bizarre, attention-generating ways.<sup>4</sup> Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years as a prophecy against Egypt and Cush (Isa. 20). Jeremiah put a yoke around his neck to warn Judah of the yoke that Babylon would set on the nation as God’s judgment (Jer. 27–28). Ezekiel created a model city and lay on the ground on his left side for over a year (and then his right side for forty days), eating the food and drinking the water of captives, in order to symbolize a coming siege against Jerusalem (Ezek. 4). Hosea married a prostitute to symbolize Israel’s spiritual unfaithfulness to the Lord (Hos. 1:2–3). In this context, Jesus’ action to curse a fig tree does not seem so unnecessarily destructive as it might appear at first. What, then, is the prophetic message that Jesus is communicating by withering this fig tree?

Again, the Old Testament context helps us to interpret Jesus’ actions, since God repeatedly critiqued his people for their fruitlessness (e.g., Hos. 9:16), and even for the lack of “figs” that God could gather from them: “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” (Jer. 8:13).<sup>5</sup> Even within the Gospel of Matthew, both John the Baptist and Jesus alike have regularly blasted Israel for their fruitlessness (Matt. 3:8, 10; 7:16–20; 12:33; 13:8; 21:33–44).<sup>6</sup> The leaves on this tree only exacerbate the problem, since those “leaves advertised that it was bearing, but the advertisement was false.”<sup>7</sup> In the same way, Israel “viewed themselves as the chosen people, as those to whom God had committed his law and as the servants of God in a way people of no other nation were. But they were not bringing forth fruit worthy of such a position.”<sup>8</sup> So, as Hendriksen summarizes, “The pretentious but barren tree was a fit emblem of Israel.”<sup>9</sup> Just as the Lord declares that he would wither even the leaves of his fruitless people in Jeremiah 8:13, so Jesus withers the leafy tree that provides him no fruit. Far from a reckless or arbitrary fit of rage, we must read this passage as a third symbolic action, following his triumphal entry and his temple cleansing, all of “which assert Jesus’ authority over the city and temple and its coming judgment.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 794.

<sup>4</sup> For this observation and these citations, see France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 791–92.

<sup>5</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 852.

<sup>6</sup> “...especially the parable of the vineyard which will follow in vv. 33–43 and which will emphasize that the failure of the Jerusalem establishment to produce the ‘fruit’ due to the landowner will lead to their expulsion and substitution of ‘another nation’ which *will* come up with ‘the fruits of the kingdom of God.’” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 792–93.)

<sup>7</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 502.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 530.

<sup>9</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 774.

<sup>10</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 793.

## Fruitful Faith (Matt. 21:20–22)

As rich as the symbolism of withering the fig tree may be, it is striking that Jesus does not give much explanation for his actions, even when the disciples marvel and ask him how the tree withered so quickly (v. 20). While it may be too much to expect that the disciples would have instantly understood the significance of this extraordinary action, we should nevertheless notice that the disciples are asking a question about Jesus’ *technique* rather than his *meaning*: “How did the fig tree wither at once?” That is, their question gravitates toward the method of Jesus rather than his message. Instead of explaining the significance of the tree, Jesus almost seems to move to a new topic of discussion: “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” (v. 21). Jesus, however, is not distracted, and he has not moved on to a new topic of conversation.

On the contrary, Jesus is giving an explanation for why the leafy, but fruitless, tree had to be withered in judgment: because all the trappings of religion in Israel had deteriorated into an external show devoid of prayerful faith. Against such formalistic displays, Jesus urges his disciples to give themselves to prayer, by which they will lay hold of Jesus’ own power and authority in the world.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, then, Jesus does not intend for his disciples to toss mountains around for show, and he tells them that they will be able to cast mountains into the sea as a metaphor for the kind of power that their prayers will have.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin also captures the flipside of Jesus’ promise: “This passage shows also that the true test of *faith* lies in *prayer*.”<sup>13</sup> It is not only that we have access to power through prayers offered in faith, but it is also true that the genuineness of our faith is put to the test in our prayers. Are our prayers offered purely for show, or do we enjoy intimate communion with God in secret (Matt. 6:5–6)? All of Israel’s hypocritical, showy prayers were like a leafy—but fruitless—tree. By contrast, true prayers offered in genuine faith are fruitful: “And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (v. 22). Note that Jesus both began and ended his response to his disciples’ question with the qualification, “if you have faith.” The chief difference between fruitfulness and fruitlessness is the presence or absence of faith.

## Discussion Questions

1. What does the hunger of Jesus suggest to us about his humanity (v. 18)? What does Jesus’ unsatisfied hunger by failing to find figs on the tree remind us about his estate of humiliation as he approaches the cross (v. 19a)? Why does Jesus think that a leafy fig tree would have figs on it? How, then, does this leafy, but fruitless, tree reflect something about the hypocritical and barren nation of

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<sup>11</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 767.

<sup>12</sup> “There is no record of any disciple ever moving a literal, physical mountain; for that matter, Jesus himself is not said ever to have done such a pointless thing. But throughout the history of the Christian church mountainous difficulties have often been removed when people have prayed in faith.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 532.)

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:19.

Israel?

2. In what ways did Old Testament prophets act out their messages in bizarre and attention-gaining formats? How does Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree relate to those methods of proclaiming God’s warning of judgment (v. 19b)? What does Jeremiah 8:13 tell us about how God had specifically sought to find “figs” from his people unsuccessfully? How does that prophecy inform how we should understand Jesus’ actions?

3. What kind of question do the disciples ask when they see Jesus withering the fig tree (v. 20)? What should we infer from the way Jesus states the qualification “if you have faith” twice in his response, both at the beginning and the end of his answer (vv. 21, 22)? Why does Jesus contrast faith with the formalism of Israel? What exactly does he mean by critiquing formalism, and what does he want from the faith of his people?

4. When you come to worship, what would it look like to worship formalistically? What would it look like to worship by faith? How often are you tempted to go through the motions, and how much does your pride suggest to you that your being there is a significant sacrifice on its own? What does the Third Commandment teach us about how to worship? What do you need to repent from in the way you worship the Lord?