

The Cursing of the Fig Tree and the Cleansing of the Temple

Mark 11:12-26

Mark 11:12-26 – *“Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. ¹³ And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ In response Jesus said to it, “Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.” And His disciples heard it.*

¹⁵ So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹⁶ And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. ¹⁷ Then He taught, saying to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’” ¹⁸ And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. ¹⁹ When evening had come, He went out of the city.

²⁰ Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. ²¹ And Peter, remembering, said to Him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away.” ²² So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. ²³ For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.

²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.

²⁵ “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

Background Notes

When you read that “it was not the season for figs” (v13), don’t get the idea that the Lord didn’t know what season it was, and He was foolishly looking for fruit at the wrong time of year! No! It was early spring, and even though the season for figs was summer and fall, there was an early “fruit” when the leaves appeared. The buds of the fig tree were edible, and this was considered an early fruit. However, if there were no buds, there would be no regular crop of figs later in the year. So that’s what our Lord was looking for: the “early fruit.”

The cursing of the fig tree took place somewhere between Bethany and Jerusalem - probably on the Mount of Olives, or descending the Mount of Olives into the Kidron Valley, the valley that separates the Mount of Olives from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The setting of this miracle is important, because most likely the “mountain” that the Lord mentioned in his application (v23), was the Temple Mount. The Temple Mount would have been clearly visible from either the Mount of Olives or from the Kidron Valley.

The Temple Mount was where all the buying and selling in the name of religion was going on - all of the religious activity that our Lord was denouncing. The moneychangers that the Lord threw out of the Temple courts were taking in money from all over the Roman Empire and exchanging it for the “right” coins for “Temple use.” Roman coins had human images on them, and that was a graven image that was unacceptable for Temple use. The moneychangers, of course, took advantage of the people – they made a handsome profit from the exchange. Thus the Lord’s label, “You’ve made my house a robbers’ den—a den of thieves!” All this changing of money was being done in the name of “worshiping God,” so that the people could use the “Temple coins” to pay the Temple tax, and so they could buy sacrifices for the worship of the Lord. But ***it wasn’t worship!*** It was sordid business that was being conducted in the Lord’s House – a place that should have been a House of Prayer! Our Lord denounced this commercialism, chased the moneychangers and animal sellers out, and cleansed the Temple.

This was the second cleansing of the Temple. In John 2 we read about the first cleansing. It occurred near the beginning of our Lord’s ministry. Don’t listen to the critics who say the Gospel writers got everything mixed up and confused their dates! No - there were **two** cleansings of the Temple. There are some notable differences, when you compare the early cleansing (John 2) and this second cleansing, that is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Doctrinal Point

Israel’s history is pictured by the fig tree.

Some critics have found fault with the Lord for cursing the fig tree. “Oh, the poor little fig tree. That wasn’t nice of the Lord to do that. That wasn’t fair! Was it the fig tree’s fault that there was no fruit?” And so forth. All of these comments are eliminated when we understand that the Lord was dramatizing or picturing God’s dealings with the nation Israel by this miracle. This, by the way, is true of all the miracles of our Lord Jesus. They ***all*** contain teaching.

So what’s the teaching in this miracle? The fig tree represents Israel. In both the Old and the New Testaments, Israel is likened to a fig tree. In Hosea 9:10 we read, *“I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstfruits on the fig tree in its first season. But they went to Baal Peor, and separated themselves to that shame; they became an abomination like the thing they loved.”* God was likening Israel to a fig tree way back in the writings of the minor prophet, Hosea.

In the New Testament, the Lord gave this parable in Luke 13:6-7 – *“He also spoke this parable: “A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, ‘Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?’”* In that parable, it’s obvious that the Lord was referring to Israel as the fig tree. Why the three years? Well, it’s quite obvious, isn’t it? The three years represent the Lord’s three years of ministry to the nation Israel. Like the fig tree, the Lord expected Israel to bear fruit. But they didn’t bear fruit – they produced only “religious leaves.” And therefore they would be cut down, or set aside.

The cursing of the fig tree is a dramatization. Pictured here are the dealings of God with the nation Israel. The Lord Jesus came looking for fruit, but He found no fruit. John 1:11 says, *“He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him.”* The Lord found plenty of religious “leaves” in the nation of Israel. This was an indication that there *might* be some fruit - but there was none. Leaves only. Look at the “religious leaves” mentioned in verses 1-11. There was lots of religious activity – lots of glossy, showy religious leaves. All the religious activity that was going on in the Temple area - all the buying and selling for the sake of paying the Temple tax and the sacrifices - was only lip service. For the most part, there was no true worship – no real fruit. Therefore Israel would be cut down and set aside.

In Matthew 3:10, John the Baptist said, *“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* So Israel was “cut down.” The nation was removed from its place of the Lord’s privilege. In 70 AD the Temple was destroyed and the people of Israel were scattered.

The good news is that Israel will return to a place of privilege. Romans 11 makes this abundantly clear. In fact, I think we see that in the parable of the fig tree that the Lord used in His “Olivet Discourse.” In Mark 13:28 Jesus said, *“Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near.”* Now remember - a parable has a deeper meaning. It’s not just an illustration. In the Olivet Discourse the Lord was saying that if you want a sign that we’re nearing the end times, keep your eye on the nation of Israel. When you see the nation of Israel beginning to “put forth leaves,” you know that summer is near – that the time of the End is near. But notice that He didn’t say “when you see *fruit* on the fig tree.” Israel is now a nation once again. The glossy leaves of Judaism are there now. The fruit predicted for the nation of Israel in Romans 11 is not there yet. It is yet to come – and it will come!

The Lord didn’t curse the fig tree out of frustration or anger because He couldn’t find any figs! No! This miracle was designed and pre-planned, just like all of the Lord’s other miracles. In the cursing of the fig tree we have a picture of God’s dealings with the nation Israel.

Practical Application

By faith we can see certain mountains removed!

Look at verse 21: *“And Peter said to Him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered away!’”* Now notice what our Lord said in verse 23: *“For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.”*

What’s the connection between these Peter’s question and the Lord’s answer? What’s the connection between fig trees and mountains? It sounds like the Lord’s answer was totally out of context to the question! Back to our historical and

background notes. When the Lord said “this mountain,” He was almost certainly referring (and maybe even gesturing) to the Temple Mount, where all the outward show of religious activity was taking place. Remember, this mountain was clearly visible from the place where the fig tree was cursed.

The Temple Mountain with all its religious activity and hypocrisy was a barrier – just as a literal mountain is a barrier – to the Lord’s ongoing ministry and program. Therefore this barrier would have to be removed. So you can see the connection between the cursing of the fig tree - the meaning of that miracle - and what the Lord said to the disciples in application. He told them, “You can see mountains removed! If you pray in faith, you can see barriers to the ongoing work of the Lord removed!”

In the same way, when barriers to the ongoing work of the Lord confront us, we can see those obstacles removed. We can see the barriers removed if we pray in faith, without doubting (v23), and if we meet the other prerequisite of praying with a forgiving spirit. Verse 25: *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”*

Obviously the Lord was not talking about literal mountains. He wasn’t saying that if we get enough Christian skiers together and we pray with enough faith, we can get one of the Colorado Rocky Mountains moved to Chicago! That would be nice - right? But the Lord wasn’t talking about that! The mountain here is a barrier to the furtherance of the work of the Lord.

Judaism and Israel were barriers. All the religiosity going on at that the Temple Mount had to be removed, and thus only a few years later the nation of Israel was removed. It was removed from its place of privilege. The mountain barrier was removed so that the work of the Lord could move forward and the gospel could go out to the whole world.

We, too, can see mountain barriers removed. Remember – a mountain is an obstacle to the work of the Lord. It’s not just any problem that we may have, or some “thorn in the flesh” that God may allow us to have, or some test of faith that God may bring into our lives. That why our practical application says, “by faith we can see **certain** barriers removed.” Not just any problem that we may consider to be a barrier, but the barriers to the work of the Lord.

There’s a great promise here! If we confront some obstacle to the work of the Lord and pray in faith, that obstacle can be removed. A number of years ago some high school students came to me and told me that one of the teachers in their school was a witch. She actually practiced witchcraft, and she was holding séances in her home with some of the other high school students. I explained that this was an obstacle to the work of the Lord in that high school, and a barrier to the sharing of their faith. I explained the principle about the mountain barriers, and told them that if we as believers pray in faith, this barrier can be removed. So we prayed in faith, and within a month that teacher was removed from their high school!

God means what He says! By faith, we can see certain mountains removed!