

Fruitless Christians (Matthew 21:18-22)

The title of this morning's sermon is "Fruitless Christians". Right away, you should object to that, because there is no such thing as a fruitless Christian. If you stay grafted into the vine that is Jesus Christ, you will bear fruit for the kingdom. It's inevitable. It's why James says:

"You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (James 2:18)

You are saved by grace, not your good works, but if your salvation is authentic, it will produce good works. It will produce the fruit of the Spirit if you are truly grafted into the true Vine that is Jesus Christ.

So right off the bat, when I mention fruitless Christians, you should know that I'm talking about folks who are self-deluded. They may think they are Christians. They may go to a church that teaches all the right doctrines. They might even have the right bumper stickers and vote for the right political candidates, but if they are not bearing spiritual fruit, Jesus will ultimately curse them. They are branches that will be broken off and cast into unquenchable fire.

Now on Sunday morning of Passion Week, Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. And the people were fired up. They were convinced that He was Messiah – the promised King. This was the One who could heal the sick, cast out demons, control nature and even raise the dead. Lazarus had been dead four days, and Jesus brought him to life. So they welcomed their King with cheering Hosannas. According to their tradition, He was going to be a military/political King. He would lead a successful rebellion and throw off the yoke of Rome. He would establish Jewish society at the very head of the nations and all the wealth of the world would flow to them.

Jesus very quickly demonstrated that He was not going to follow their agenda. Instead of attacking Rome, He attacked the Jewish religious system. Instead of clearing out the Roman occupiers, He cleaned out the Temple.

Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER,' but you have made it a 'DEN OF THIEVES.'" (Matthew 21:12-13)

This was the second time Jesus cleansed the Temple. He did it once at the very beginning of His three-year earthly ministry and He did it here at the very end. The Jewish religion had strayed far afield of the worship ordained by God through Moses. This was an apostate religion based on the traditions of man. It was designed to heap burdens that nobody could bear and Jesus condemned it.

Now, before we get into our text this morning, I need to make sure we have the chronology straight. If you just read Matthew, you will get the impression that Jesus cleaned out the Temple on Sunday. But Matthew presents the events topically rather than strictly chronologically. We have to carefully compare and combine all the Gospels to get the chronology right. It's easier if we take a look at Mark. On Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem and entered the Temple. He looked around at all things, and then returned to Bethany. On Monday morning, He came back into Jerusalem, cursed the fig tree, and then cleansed the Temple. On Tuesday morning, the disciples noticed that the fig tree was withered.

Matthew doesn't contradict this; he just condenses the time frame. Let's take a look now at Matthew 21:18-20.

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. (Matthew 21:18-19)

Mark gives us a little additional information:

Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. 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. (Mark 11:12-13)

There are a couple things you should know to really understand what was going on. First of all, it was too early for figs. Fig trees would generally bear fruit twice a year but you would not expect to see fruit at the elevation of Jerusalem until May or June. This was early April. Secondly, the fig fruit would usually appear before the leaves, or at least at the same time. So if a fig tree had leaves this early in the year, you would expect to find fruit.

But this was an unusual tree; it was not the season for figs. In fact, I believe it was a tree that was prepared especially by God so that Jesus could give us this important illustration.

Jesus was hungry. I don't know why. He had been staying in Bethany with His good friends. I'm sure they would have served breakfast, but maybe Jesus had skipped breakfast and spent an extended time in prayer. He did so quite often. But when he saw the leaves on that wayside tree, it would be reasonable to expect to find fruit. But the tree was barren of fruit and as a result, Jesus cursed the tree.

Matthew seems to indicate that the tree withered immediately and I'm sure that it began to wither just as soon as Jesus cursed it. In Mark we learn that the disciples didn't notice it until the next day. Again, there is no conflict. The disciples heard Jesus curse the tree, but they didn't hang around to see what would happen. They followed Jesus as He continued into Jerusalem to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple. He overturned the money changers tables. These two events are closely related. Let me show you how.

The fig tree is a common Biblical illustration of the Nation Israel. It is a symbol of prosperity and God's blessing. In Deuteronomy, God described the beauty of the promised land this way:

*... a land of wheat and barley, of vines and **fig trees** and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; (Deuteronomy 8:8)*

In Zechariah, the blessing of the coming kingdom is described:

In that day,' says the LORD of hosts, 'Everyone will invite his neighbor Under his vine and under his fig tree.' " (Zechariah 3:10)

There is an interesting parable in Luke, chapter 13 where Jesus uses the fig tree as an illustration.

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?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also,

until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' " (Luke 13:6-9)

Jesus was speaking of Israel. It speaks of God's longsuffering. God was unbelievably patient with Israel just as He is unbelievably patient with us. He sent prophets to fertilize it, to testify and pray for revival. But ultimately, if didn't bear fruit, it would be cut down.

As Jesus came into Jerusalem, He found a spectacularly lavish Temple with all sorts of religious folks doing all sorts of religious things. Religion was everywhere. It looked good on the outside. But where was the fruit of righteousness? Lots of leaves ... no fruit. It was missing in action.

For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:44-45)

Jesus cursed the fruitless fig tree as a prophecy of what was going to happen to Jerusalem and her Temple. About 40 years later, in 70 AD, Titus would come to sack Jerusalem and level her Temple. Fruitless fig trees are cursed by God. Fruitless fig trees will be judged mercilessly.

So as Jesus came into Jerusalem on Monday morning, He did two things that had to be offensive to the religious leaders of the day. The cursing of the fig tree was a denunciation of the nation and the cleansing of the Temple was a denunciation of their religion.

I wonder what Jesus would do if He came into the parking lots of so many of our contemporary churches. You know, we have a lot of churches in this country that look really good on the outside. They have beautiful facilities. They have a ton of programs to appeal to every age level. When you come into the foyer, you can buy a latte at the coffee bar named "Heavenly Grounds". You can listen to a world class praise band. You can hear a short sermon about how much God loves you and wants you to succeed in this world. And if you judge success by the standards of the world, they seem to be doing everything right. There's plenty of money in the bank. The parking lot is full on Saturday, Sunday and Wednesday. They have a ministerial staff with lots of degrees and credentials. Lots of leaves ... but is there any fruit?

The measure of a church is not found by counting noses, nickels and noise. Jesus gave us the standard.

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

And Jesus expects the purest form of love: agape love. He reiterated the two greatest commandments: Love God with everything you've got. Love your neighbors as yourself.

I'm really thankful for many things. I feel so blessed to be a part of this church. But the thing I'm most thankful for is that we demonstrate love for one another. It's the greatest thing.

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Thank you for demonstrating your love for God by loving one another. But we must not rest on our laurels. We must constantly strive to get closer to Jesus. We need to get to know Him better. We must hang onto the true vine with everything we've got. Because unless we stay attached to the vine, we will wither and die and we will be cast into the fiery furnace.

The next day, as they were again coming into the city from Bethany, the disciples took note of the withered fig tree.

And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" (Matthew 21:20)

I find it really interesting that Jesus responded to the question with a lesson on prayer.

So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." (Matthew 21:21-22)

That's a pretty spectacular promise. The mountain Jesus was referring to was probably the Mount of Olives, that they passed by on their way to Jerusalem. That's a big chunk of dirt and rock. And they were miles away from the nearest sea. The name-it-claim-it folks, the prosperity doctrine teachers love to fixate on this verse. You can have anything you want, they say. If you have enough faith, God will be forced to give it to you. Cast a vision. Imagine great things and believe with all your heart and it will be yours.

Well first of all, they ignore the rest of scripture. If you prayed for that motor yacht and didn't get it, it's because you didn't have enough faith. That's their teaching. But James says:

You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:3)

In no way is Jesus telling us that we can satisfy our earthly lust by praying for more stuff.

"If you have faith, but do not doubt," says Jesus. Faith in what? Faith in prayer? Faith in faith? No. The implication is that you must have faith in God. You must trust in the promises of God, not your own carnal lust.

*Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything **according to His will**, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. (1 John 5:14-15)*

The purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we want Him to do. The purpose of prayer is to align us to His perfect will so that we want to do what God wants us to do. Thy will be done!

We have the wonderful privilege of petitioning the Almighty God of this universe. We can pour out the desires of our hearts and we most certainly should take advantage of the privilege. God will always answer according to what is best for us.

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. (Romans 8:26)

If you have faith in God, you should have faith in His perfect will.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

So you can pray with confidence. You can pray believing that you will receive the perfect answer from God. Pray the promises of God. Pray with perseverance.

And pray that you will bear fruit. A fruitless Christian is no Christian at all. Prayer keeps you plugged into the true vine and the Spirit of Christ will flow through you. It will bear the fruit

of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.
(Galatians 5:22-23) You won't be barren.

And when Jesus returns, He will will come to you and find ... figs ... the fruit of the Spirit.