

Cumbersome

Growing up I had a couple of fig trees in my backyard. The California summertime was the season when these trees would produce fruit, and the grass lawn also got thick and green. This time of year, the branches of the fig trees absorbed a lot of water and they became very supple; you could bend the smaller branches like rubber. We knew it wasn't long before figs would be ready to eat. Our largest fig tree extended out twenty feet in diameter. I noticed each summer that any grass or shrubs under the circumference of the fig tree's branches, would die. It seemed that however far the branches would extend, any life planted below was doomed, given how much water the fig tree needed. However, just beyond the breadth of the tree's branches, the grass with thick and green. Fig trees are cumbersome to plants within their reach, sucking them dry and making them devoid of life. This essay aims to highlight how the cumbersome nature of a fig tree became an object lesson that Jesus used, and how we can apply this lesson in our lives today.

In the Bible, we focus on a time when Jesus was with His disciples, traveling in and out of Jerusalem from the nearby town of Bethany. This was when the Passover was being celebrated. At Passover, all Jewish adult men, within a certain distance from the Jerusalem, were required to make a pilgrimage to the temple and celebrate the feast of the Passover corporately (with others, as a collective body). As a result, Jerusalem was bursting with people. Jesus and His disciples were likely staying in Bethany because lodging was scarce in Jerusalem. Perhaps they stayed with friends in Bethany, like the family of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Or maybe, Bethany was simply a peaceful place to escape the noise, busyness, and escalating tension in Jerusalem. In any case, there were three pilgrimage festivals annually, and their purpose was to redirect the hearts of the people toward righteousness. However, the Israelites were people of religion, not people of faith.

In these travels to Jerusalem from Bethany, Jesus encounters a fig tree, and uses it as a prophecy and symbol of the nation of Israel. Mark 11:12-14, ***"On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again!' And His disciples were listening."*** After this, Jesus and his disciples continue on to Jerusalem, and into the temple where Jesus would observe and condemn the activity going on there. You can read the details in Mark 11. At the end of the day, after the sun had set, they returned back to Bethany. The next morning, they left Bethany and once again head to Jerusalem. That's where we pick up again in Mark 11:20-21, ***"As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, 'Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.'"***

What's happened here? The previous day, Jesus condemned the tree to die, and, ***"His disciples were listening,"*** to what Jesus said to the fig tree. It seems though, that the tree didn't wither instantly as Jesus spoke, since the disciples give no reaction in the moment. Apparently, the tree withered after they'd left, perhaps withering throughout the night. The following morning, Peter's statement, ***"Rabbi, look,"*** gives the sense that this is the first time the disciples saw that the fig tree as dead. Upon seeing the withered fig tree, Peter, ***"being reminded"*** of what Jesus said the day before, is compelled to point it out to Jesus, ***"Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered."*** Saying, ***"has withered,"*** gives the impression that the tree didn't wither instantly the previous day, and now passing it a day later, it's ***"withered from the roots up."***

The same event is recorded in Matthew; however Matthew's version is condensed; not noting the 24-hour period between the two trips from Bethany to Jerusalem. Matthew 21:18-20, ***"Now in the morning, when He***

was returning to the city, He became hungry. Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered. Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?" At first glance, Matthew's account suggests that the tree withered instantly, at Jesus' words. This would appear to be a contradiction with what is said in Mark, but it's not a contradiction at all. In Mark's account, the disciples ***"were listening"*** as Jesus cursed the tree, but nothing suggests they saw anything happen to the tree until Peter's observation the following morning. In Matthew's account, it says, ***"at once the fig tree withered. Seeing this, the disciples were amazed,"*** which appears to mean the disciples saw something right then and there, as opposed to only hearing Jesus' curse of the tree. A closer look into the details gives clarity to the event, and purpose behind why Jesus brought this miracle about.

Here's how the two passages harmonize. Jesus curses the tree and, ***"His disciples were listening,"*** as He cursed it. However, the tree doesn't wither that instant; and they continue onward. The next morning, Peter is the first to notice the dead tree, and ***"being reminded,"*** of what Jesus had said yesterday, Peter calls attention to the withered tree, ***"Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered."*** Why would Peter proclaim that the tree ***"has withered"*** if they had watched it wither yesterday? Peter is astonished at both the nature of the tree, now being withered, and also the quickness that a tree can be ***"withered from the roots up,"*** in such a short amount of time. How could a tree wither from the roots up in less than a day? Even a tree that was cut down would still have green leaves the next day, and may take months for the roots to wither. This reality compels Peter to note the sudden nature of the withering, ***"at once the fig tree withered,"*** and the disciples also wonder, ***"How did the fig tree wither all at once?"*** The tree had withered supernaturally quick, but not at the moment Jesus spoke its condemnation the previous day.

The miracle that Jesus wrought with the fig tree is a unique miracle. It's the only miracle that Jesus performed that brought death, and not life. It was also an acted-out parable, as we can see when we read Luke 13:6-9, ***"And He began telling this parable: 'A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"*** In this parable, the lack of faith amongst the Jews is what is being highlighted. The vineyard owner is God the Father. The fig tree planted in His vineyard is the nation of Israel. The vineyard keeper is Jesus. In short, God is looking for fruit from His people. The fig tree represents the ministry of the Jews, specifically the ministry of the temple and of their religious leaders, who were supposed to be leading the Jews in the ways of righteousness. When Jesus came to Jerusalem, He found the religious leaders devoid of faith, being hypocrites, and the temple was turned into a house of business, not a place of worship. Israel was supposed to be the salt and light of the earth; having the Scriptures, having prophets, having advantages as God's special people. Yet, despite hearing the Word, they failed to embrace it with faith; hence the fruitlessness. ***"For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any,"*** the nature of fig trees is that they bear fruit in three years' time. If a fig tree is barren in three years, it is likely always barren.

"Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?" So, not only was the leadership unfruitful, the leaders and the temple ministry were cumbersome to the nation of Israel, responsible for keeping the people barren as well. ***"Use up the ground,"*** is a statement that emphasizes that it seizes the life from the ground. Barren professors of faith are not only useless to the kingdom, they zap the spiritual life from others under their

influence. Cutting down represents the judgment of God upon the nation. Jesus had a three-year ministry to the Jews, and saw little fruit. However, Jesus has a plan, and intercedes, ***“Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer.”*** This fertilizer is His ministry that would come about by His resurrection, and the ministry of the apostles to follow. In the year proceeding His resurrection, much fruit would be harvested.

Going back to Mark 11:12-14, there’s a subtle detail about how the fig tree was deceptive. It says, ***“Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.”*** At a quick glance, one might assume that the statement, ***“it was not the season for figs,”*** means that it wasn’t the time of year that figs should be expected to be on the tree. That is not the meaning, however. ***“The season for figs”*** means the harvest time for figs. In other words, if harvest time (the season for figs) had passed, then it would be logical that the tree was already plucked of its figs, and it would be wrong to accuse it of being barren. The text is actually highlighting the fact that the harvest had not yet happened, and being that the tree was in full leaf and hadn’t yet been harvested, Jesus was right to expect to find figs on the tree at that time. The tree was deceptive; presenting itself in full leaf, as though it was healthy and fruitful, yet it was barren. Hence Jesus condemns it; if it bears no fruit, then it will not bear leaves either, so as to not deceive others into thinking it’s healthy. Its withered state now leaves no doubt as to whether it is usefulness to man or not.

As a result, Jesus says, ***“May no one ever eat fruit from you again!”*** This was symbolic and prophetic. It was symbolic of the Jews who lacked faith, and as such, the Jews were a terrible testimony to the neighboring Gentiles. The Jewish religion became cumbersome to their Gentile neighbors. It was prophetic of what Jesus was about to do at the temple; hoping to find fruit and found none. The temple was found to be a den of thieves (Matthew 21:13), not a house of worship, and its opportunity to bear fruit had come to an end. Going way back to the Old Testament, we see in Numbers 17 that the Levitical priesthood was ratified and re-affirmed by the budding of Aaron’s dry staff. This stick that he had carried, bloomed; from dead to flourishing and alive. Here, Jesus gives the opposite omen against the Levitical covenant and the age of the temple. The priesthood is now expired, and the totally dead roots gave no room to wonder if the ceremonial Law and the temple rites would be revived and serve a purpose again amongst God’s people. And as prophesied, these things ended soon after. At Jesus’ death, the ceremonial Law and the earthly ministry of the temple ceased.

Application

If you would identify as a Christian, here are some questions for you to consider. Am I bearing fruit? Does my life reflect that Jesus is alive in me and that I’m abiding in Him? Jesus says that only those who abide in Him will bear fruit, as evidence that the Lord is alive and working through them. To abide means to derive your source from the Lord, that you cleave to Him, and that His Spirit is governing your life. If you’re not doing that, you can choose to do that today!

Am I cumbersome to others? Even though I claim to be a Christian, am I draining the life from others because of my hypocritical influence? When family, friends, and co-workers encounter me, am I spiritually refreshing to them, or am I a spiritual drain on them? What impact do I have on those around me? This indicates whether I’m being led by the Holy Spirit or whether I’m still governing my own choices.

Any who profess Jesus, yet who bear no fruit, have a damaging testimony; being cumbersome to others. Be warned by the Lord. Repent and turn back to Jesus. Ask Him to create in you a clean heart and to renew a

right spirit within you. Ask Him to refresh your faith and submit yourself to the Holy Spirit's leading in your life. Daily make the choice, as an act of the will, to let the Lord reign in your life, so that your profession isn't empty, and that your life has a positive testimony; helpful to those under your influence. Return to the Lord! He is not delighted with rituals and lip service.