

His Final Steps Led to a Fig Tree¹

✦ **A fig tree cursed to prove the danger of unfruitfulness. (vv.12-14)**

✦ **A fig tree used to prove the power of prayer. (vv.20-26)**

In the name of Jesus, our almighty Creator and Savior and Judge, dearly redeemed:

Did you find tonight's sermon text somewhat puzzling? Or maybe even shocking! This event took place on Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week, and it raises a lot of questions. Seems simple enough: **His Final Steps Led to a Fig Tree**. But this is **A fig tree cursed to prove the danger of unfruitfulness**. It's also **A fig tree used to prove the power of prayer**.

✦ **A fig tree cursed to prove the danger of unfruitfulness. (vv.12-14)**

Jesus was teaching an object, but you might wonder if He is cracking under pressure. Was He boiling over from frustration over enemy opposition? Was that for poor fig tree just in the wrong place at the wrong time? An unfortunate target of divine temper tantrum? Seems so out of character for Jesus.

You could understand why He'd be frustrated. Our tempers have boiled over a lot less. A few weeks of trouble – try three years of hatred from church people – Pharisees, chief priests, teachers of the law. Maybe James and John's Samaritan village solution would make sense: ***"Lord, shall we call down fire from heaven and destroy them?"*** Honestly, if we had that kind of power against that kind of opposition, might we possibly slip up and leave a crater where Jerusalem once stood.

Thank God, our Savior is not like us. Jesus never buckled under pressure. He never gave in even a millimeter to the satanic tempter's constant attacks. The writer to the Hebrew Christians assures us: ***"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin."*** (Hebrews 4:15 EHV)

So, why take those steps to that fig tree and curse it? It's Monday morning of Holy Week; Jesus knows everything that's going to happen. His 20/20 vision can see there are no figs under all those leaves. ***"It was not the season for figs,"*** Mark says. So why, when Jesus found nothing, nothing but leaves, did He curse the tree? ***"May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"*** ***And his disciples were listening.*** That last sentence you can tuck away for a moment. That will help when we come back to it.

A famous German Jewish scholar/pastor named Alfred Edersheim stopped writing his classic work, *the Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, to travel to Israel and answer the question about the ***"season for figs."*** He found fig trees with leaves from the previous autumn, and round, gray buds that looked like lozenges. He kept asking until he found someone who spoke German and was told that travelers would eat those little gray buds to hold off hunger until they could reach an inn. "Unless you find those on the tree branches in the spring," he was told, "the tree will not bear fruit in the summer." Apparently, the Lord of Creation did not even find the beginnings of another season of fruit, only worthless, showy leaves. God wants to see the fruits of faith in our lives – especially one particular fruit.

When Jesus saw no fruit, he cursed the tree...completely. Peter noticed the next day that the tree had withered to its roots. Jesus switched off the life in that tree, proving ***"it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*** (Hebrews 10:31) No divine temper tantrum. No need for a snack. Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness without cracking under Satan's onslaught. This fig tree was an object

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lesson, an action parable. ***“And his disciples were listening.”*** Jesus wanted them to see, to hear, to learn. And they kept watching for what he was about to do until they could see the fruit God wants for us all.

We heard last week, how **His Final Steps Led to His Father's House**. Jesus cleaned house in the temple of the Lord. Remember how He found a whole lot of action there, like leaves on a fruitless tree, but the fruit of faith that he was looking for was missing. The temple was supposed to be ***a house of prayer for all nations*** (Mark 11:17), but God's people had made it into a ***den of robbers***. ***“For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.”*** (Hosea 6:6 EHV)

You might wonder if this is allegorizing to compare the leaves on a fruitless fig tree to the lack of good works in a showy temple. But the context indicates that this is the lesson Jesus was showing. Mark reports cleansing the temple right between the verses of our text. Jesus walked into that wonder of the ancient world and found no fruit. Lots of people going through the motions of worship. Worship leaders bowing down to the almighty shekel of Tyre with its Baal image. Jesus reveals God's angry love when He cleansed the temple. The Lord of grace is also the God of righteous justice: ***“Vengeance is mine. I will repay. And again: The Lord will judge his people.”*** (Hebrews 10:30 EHV)

His Final Steps Led to a Fig Tree that was cursed to prove the danger of unfruitfulness. The dear Holy Spirit has brought us here to see the Gospel from New Year's Eve. ***He told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. So he said to the gardener, ‘Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?’ But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.’ ”*** (Luke 13:6-9)

In the season of Lent it's time to ask ourselves some hard questions. Our Lord is patient. Our Lord is gracious, but he's also righteous and just. He expects fruit from us. He revealed through the prophet Hosea (9:10) His feelings related to a fig tree. ***“I regarded Israel like grapes found in the wilderness. I regarded your forefathers like the first ripe fruit on a fig tree in its first season, but they went to Baal Peor, and they devoted themselves to a shameful thing, and they became as disgusting as the thing they loved.”*** So, are we bearing fruit for our Lord? Or have we grown so complacent in our faith, that whenever the call goes out for volunteers, we are relieved that somebody else steps up. But then instead of offering our help too, we stay silent and just let them do it. We need to remember Jesus cursing the fig tree! We need to understand why the apostle Paul begs us from God's holy Word: ***“As fellow workers we also urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says: At a favorable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. Look, now is the favorable time! See, now is the day of salvation!”*** (2 Corinthians 6:1f EHV) Our gracious God, our Creator, wants a particularly special fruit from our faith.

✦ **A fig tree used to prove the power of prayer. (vv.20-26)**

You can see the main fruit that the Lord wants in these last verses: ***Peter remembered..., “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” Jesus replied, “Have faith in God. Amen I tell you: Whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, everything that you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”*** (Mark 11:21–24 EHV)

Prayer works! The Lord's half brother James got it right: ***“So confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, in order that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is able to do much because it is effective.”*** (James 5:16 EHV) Prayer is powerful. Elijah prayed, and there was a drought for 3 ½ years. He prayed again, and the Lord opened the showers of heaven. When Jesus cursed the fig tree, it withered instantly! Prayer moves mountains! Jesus taught that to his disciples that day.

But what about prayers for healing from cancer? Saving a marriage? For a pandemic to be wiped out? Does the Lord answer those prayers too?

Our Lord knows all things! He alone can see how everything fits together through all time and for eternity! Jesus even knows how the terrible attacks of the devil can be turned to good to further His plan of grace. And that is why sometimes our dear Father in heaven hears our prayers in Jesus' name, and answers: "No." Remember how Paul prayed three times to be healed? Yet the Lord answered, "***My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.***" (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Sometimes people get hung up on Jesus' shocking statement about how prayer can move mountains. Imagine if you physically moved a mountain and made a YouTube video. Wouldn't that go viral? Post it on Facebook. Get a gazillion *Likes*. But it would just be for show. All leaves, no fruit. We have massive earth movers that move mountains and build highways.

Jesus is illustrating to grab our attention along with the apostles who all too often argued about who was the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Jesus finally explained what's really important when **His Final Steps Led to a Fig Tree**. That fig tree was **used to prove the power of prayer**: "***Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. But if you do not forgive, your Father in heaven will not forgive your sins.***"

What should be at the top of your prayer list and mine? Forgiveness of sins – for others and for ourselves. That's the real reason why Jesus took all **His Final Steps** – whether to the tomb of Lazarus, a dinner party in Bethany, his Father's house, or a fig tree. All **His Final Steps** were heading to the center cross on Golgotha's hill. There He would suffer. There He would bleed. There He would die. All for the forgiveness of sins. All for all people. All for you and me. Amen.