

# **Figs, Faith, and Forgiveness** -- Mark 11:12-14, 20-26

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

*Lord, we are about to open Your Word. As we continue this journey through the book of Mark, may our hearts be drawn out towards our Savior Jesus Christ. May we see Him, love Him, and follow Him. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

Today's story highlights a fig tree. Fig trees don't grow in Ohio. In fact, there are a lot of trees in Israel that don't grow in Ohio. Since most of us have never been to Israel, we're going to take a few minutes to see what kinds of trees and crops were growing around Jerusalem in Bible times. I invite you to turn with me to Deuteronomy 8:7, 8. Notice how Moses describes the land to the Israelites as they get ready to go into the Promised Land. (Read) Sounds like a nice place to live, doesn't it? Israel at this time was a very fertile land. It was a land of abundance and prosperity. One of the crops mentioned is figs. Fig trees are very unique. Those found around Jerusalem grew anywhere from ten to thirty feet high. They would lose their leaves in December and would remain barren through end of March. Incidentally, our story today took place around the end of March or perhaps the first of April. These trees offered a dense shade in the summer and fall. Many people, such as Nathanael in John chapter 1, would find a cool spot on a hot day under a fig tree. Fig trees are also unique in that they produce two crops of figs every year. The first crop is harvested in the spring, while the second crop is harvested in late summer or fall.

The first crop is more significant for understanding our story as it occurred closer to the time when this story takes place. Perhaps, as Jesus walked down the road to Jerusalem, the fig trees were just beginning to put forth their buds. The leaves and fruit would develop together. By the end of April to the first of May the fruit would be the size of cherries. Often, though, they would be blown off of the trees by the wind. So people would pick them up and sell them in the marketplace. The fruit that remained on the tree would fully ripen towards the end of spring. In our story we discover a very unique fig tree. It stood out from all the other trees.

So, with that let us consider now a summary of today's story:

*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was hungry. He approached a fig tree hoping to find some figs. When He couldn't find any, He pronounced a curse upon the tree. When Jesus and His disciples passed by the tree the next day, it was already dead. Jesus responded to the disciples' surprise by calling them to a faith that could move a mountain into the sea. He further instructed them that faith is evidenced by a willingness to forgive others.*

We're going to begin by considering what Jesus experienced in this story. We've started by talking a little bit about trees. But this story is not so much about the fig tree as it is about our Savior Jesus Christ. I invite you to follow along with me in your own Bibles as we go through this passage of Scripture. It is found in Mark 11:12-14, 20-26. In the pew Bibles you will find this story on page 895.

First of all, Jesus experienced being hungry. Mark 11:12 mentions that Jesus left Bethany. It is likely that He had spent the night there. You may remember that Lazarus (whom Jesus had recently raised from the dead), Martha, and Mary lived here. They were some of Jesus' closest friends and He enjoyed staying at their house. But for whatever reason, on this particular day Jesus left without having breakfast. Mark records that Jesus was hungry. It seems that He was the only one hungry upon this occasion. At other times Jesus and His disciples had all been hungry. You may remember a previous time when the disciples were hungry and ate some grain out of someone's field on the Sabbath. Multiple times Jesus and the disciples had been so busy they had not had time to eat. But on this occasion the disciples don't give any indication of being hungry. Only Jesus did.

In Mark 11:13 we read that Jesus saw a fig tree with leaves. This, as we have learned, would have been very unusual at this time of year (early spring). For some reason this tree seemed to be ahead of all the others. It had formed its leaves earlier than all the other trees. Maybe somebody dumped a pile of manure on it and given it a head start. We don't know why, but it gave every indication that it was the product of some very special care. (Just like the Jews) But when Jesus went and looked among the leaves for the figs, He found nothing. Remember that the leaves and fruit grow together. With the leaves completely formed, the fruit would normally be present as well. Can you picture Jesus looking expectantly? This is a real picture of Jesus' humanity. He who created the fig tree has taken humanity. And as a human He was hungry and dependent upon others for His food. He looked and looked. Perhaps the figs were just well camouflaged, as they would have been the same color. But the figs were nowhere to be found.

Second of all, Jesus experienced pronouncing a curse. In Mark 11:14 Jesus talked to the tree. He didn't throw a fit. He didn't yell out in frustration. He speaks to the tree as its Creator: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." What strong words! They are both intriguing and dreadful. Why was Jesus so harsh towards this tree? It does seem strange for Him. Notice how the disciples responded. In Mark 11:20 Jesus and His disciples once again passed by this tree the following day. They notice in particular the roots. Apparently it was a tree whose roots were visible on top of the ground. Amazingly, they were already dried up. It would be one thing if the leaves had started to wilt. But for the roots to be shriveled up is another matter completely. Notice Peter's reaction, "Rabbi, Look!" Do you think he was amazed and surprised? Was he filled with awe or dread? Certainly Peter had never seen anything like this before. It must have been strange and also frightening. Certainly it was a demonstration of supernatural power. Jesus, who had shown authority over the wind and the waves, now demonstrated Himself as the One who was the source of this tree's life. At His word all life left this fig tree, from the roots to the leaves.

Last of all, Jesus experienced calling for faith. In Mark 11:22 Jesus gives an interesting response - "Have faith in God." The preposition used here that is translated, "in", is usually translated "of" or "from". So there are several possible ways to understand this. And the ambiguity here may be intentional. Jesus could be referring to a faith that is from God. It is a gift that comes from Him. He is the source of this faith. Another possible understanding would be that this faith belongs to God. As a gift it does not belong to us. God gives us this faith and so it belongs to Him. And yet another possible understanding would be that this faith is a godly faith. It's a certain kind of faith. It's the kind of faith that the world doesn't have to offer. It's a faith that is unique to God alone.

In Mark 11:23 Jesus illustrates how this faith affects reality. (Read) What mountain was Jesus referring to? Well, He could very likely have pointed to the Mount of Olives which would have been directly in between Bethany and Jerusalem. And perhaps the sea that Jesus referred to was the Mediterranean. Jesus says that with the faith He called for in verse 22, something as impossible as this could be done in response to a command. Truly this faith is a means of supernatural power. In verse 24 of Mark 11 Jesus restates His point. And yet this time the person is not commanding but asking. And the person is not causing something to happen. He or she is receiving something from God. And so it becomes clear that the power that comes with this faith is not from us or the faith. It is from God. So, does this mean that if I believe hard enough, I can speak to Mount Pleasant and it will move out of my way? Well, Jesus reveals in Mark 11:25, 26 that there is more to this faith than just power. (Read) Forgiveness is a major evidence of this faith. Where there is faith, there will be a heart of forgiveness. This faith changes your heart. It sets you free from bitterness and hostility. So, in our story Jesus didn't just get mad. He didn't kill the tree in His anger and frustration. The power He revealed came from Someone whose heart was filled with love, peace, and forgiveness. More amazing than His ability to work miracles was His ability to forgive.

We have now considered what Jesus experienced. Let's now consider our own experience. How do our lives compare with that of Jesus Christ? Jesus is revealed as our example in this story. He shows us what it means to be a healthy Christian. So how does this story reveal Jesus as our example?

First of all, Jesus is revealed as our example in that He sacrificed a tree in order to teach a spiritual truth. The fig tree had an appearance of fertility. Any other fig tree with leaves would have also had figs. Its outward

appearance was deceptive. In the same way the Jews had an appearance of spiritual life. The same day that Jesus cursed this fig tree He went into Jerusalem and cleared out the temple. It was full of activity. The people were engaged in religious duties. They weren't out getting drunk. They were in the right place. They were spending time in God's house. But they had no spiritual life. They were filled with greed. Their religious appearance was deceptive. Jesus knew that the salvation of His disciples depended on them understanding true faith. He was willing to sacrifice the life of a fig tree in order to save the lives of His disciples.

And so Jesus reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who realizes the value of a soul. Trees have received a lot of attention in our society. "We need to save the trees" is a common expression. We now have air dryers in bathrooms instead of paper towels. Tree farms are quite popular now. Once a year we have Earth day where everyone is encouraged to plant a tree and do something to preserve the earth. I remember when you would go through the grocery line and the person bagging up your groceries would ask, "Paper or plastic?" Now they don't even ask. Plastic is your only option. But these changes are all attempts to preserve our trees. Now don't misunderstand me. I love trees as much as anyone. I spent three years in New Mexico in a place where there were very few trees. And I came to appreciate trees a lot more than I did already. But it's sad that so many people that have spent their lives saving trees have never thought about saving someone's soul. What are we willing to sacrifice in order to preserve someone's soul? Sometimes we're too careful about causing someone trouble or offending them. Sharing the gospel requires confronting people with their sin. Telling people that there is no other name under heaven that can preserve our life than that of Jesus Christ might not be what people want to hear. Jesus was willing to sacrifice the life of a tree in order to save His disciples from deception. In fact, He was willing to give His own life so that one person might be saved.

Another way in which Jesus is revealed as our example is that His words carried supernatural power. Jesus' words to the tree produced a supernatural death. This tree did not experience a natural death of gradually drying up. Jesus' words affected this tree in a powerful way. And so He reveals that a healthy Christian is someone whose words carry a power. Notice Jesus' choice of words in Mark 11:23, 24. (Read) Notice in verse 23: "whoever SAYS...those things he SAYS..." And then in verse 24: "whatever things you ASK..." The focus here is clearly on what we say. Verse 24 gives us a clue as to where this power comes from. It's not in our words. This is no magical faith. And these are not magical words. The power and authority comes from the One we talk to. It comes from the Creator of the tree, the mountain, etc. Faith, though, is what frees God's power to act in our lives. When we speak the Word of God into a person's life, it releases the power of God into their life. The power of prayer comes from the Word and power of God.

As an intern chaplain I would often pray with patients in their hospital rooms. Some carried loneliness. Others carried guilt. Many are simply anxious. There were many times when they would experience a calm, a relief, or a feeling of peace. There was a power that came into the room as I prayed that was not from me. It came in response to a prayer of faith that took a hold of God's Word. And through my words the power of God came into people's lives.

As we close, let's turn our thoughts back to the fig tree. This tree was alive but it was infertile. Jesus' response to this discovery, in essence, told it to be infertile forever. He didn't tell it to die. He told it to remain forever barren. And what happened? The tree died. It seems that bearing fruit was the only purpose this tree had to live. Did you catch that? It seems that bearing fruit was the only purpose this tree had to live. If it would never bear fruit, then there was no reason for it to live. I invite you to turn with me to John 15:5, 6. (Read) So what is the purpose for our lives? We live to bear fruit. In essence, we live to bring pleasure and glory to God. He picks our fruit as it were, and it brings Him delight. Even if we are alive, if we are barren, we have no purpose for living. If our lives do not bring glory to God, then we will be thrown into the fire. Does that sound harsh? Is it sobering? This was a stirring thought to me this past week. I encourage you to chew on it for a while.

What is God looking for? What brings Him glory and pleasure? A heart full of a godly faith that is able to forgive. I want to be in Christ moment by moment. He is a never-failing source of godly faith and forgiveness. If this is your desire as well, I invite you to stand with me as we sing the song, "Moment by Moment", for our closing hymn.