

# Sermons on Matthew

## The Withering Fig Tree

*Matthew 21:18-22*

*Part I*

*With Study Questions*

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8/27/2007*

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Part I

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.  
-19- \_\_ 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.

-20- \_\_ And when the disciples saw *it*, they marveled, saying, “\_ How did the fig tree wither away so soon?\_”

-21- 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.

-22- And \_\_ whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:18-22)\_.

## Introduction

Bad Religion is a band. Their music style is called ‘wall-of-sound punk’. Their shirts and bumper stickers color the landscape and they tout themselves as a “sound of reason” “in a world ruled...by superstition and intolerance.” Their songs are “anthems of a bittersweet idealism and a guarded hope.”

I don’t know that much about what they sing but I’m in hearty agreement that religion (and I suspect their creating their own) can be very bad. And nobody has less tolerance for bad religion than Jesus.

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. -7- 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?\_’ -8- But he answered and said to him, ‘\_ Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize *it*. -9- \_\_ And if it bears

**fruit, well. But if not, after that you can \_\_cut it down (Luke 13:6-9).**

For three years Jesus has been looking for fruit in Israel and finding none. The winnowing fork of God's judgment was in His hands (Matthew 3:12); the axe of God's indignation was at the root of the tree of a religion that had forsaken the true God (Matthew 3:10). Judgment was coming and the carcass of the dark religion Jesus was born into would soon be surrounded by eagles and razed to ashes (Matthew 24:28).

Warnings of judgment fill chapters twenty-one through twenty-four of Matthew: The cleansing of the temple (Matthew 21:12-17) The parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14); the conflict with the Pharisees over taxes (Matthew 22:15-22); the conflict with the Sadducees concerning the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33); the "woes" to the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23, how they "devour widows" and how they "travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won...(he is) twice as much a son of hell as (they)". Jesus, speaking to the Pharisees, prophesies,

**Therefore I say to you, \_\_the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. <sup>-44-</sup> And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, \_\_it will grind him to powder (Matthew 21:43).**

In chapter 24 Jesus will speak of the destruction of the Temple (the nucleus of their religion) which had become a den of thieves (Matthew 21:13). Judgment was coming.

Jesus' encounter with this fig tree would serve to illustrate His point.

**Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry (Matthew 21:18).**

### **Hungry and Faithful**

Jesus was returning to Jerusalem from Bethany and He was hungry. Matthew recorded Jesus being hungry once before. In the wilderness the devil sought to tempt Jesus because He was hungry (Matthew 4:2-4). But Jesus would never use His own physical or psychological needs to justify

disobedience. His own infirmities would always serve as a tool to glorify His Father in heaven.

Let us learn that it is precisely in our weakness, our brokenness, that we are more equipped to honor Christ because we become more aware of our frailty.

**And the LORD said to Gideon, “\_The people who *are* with you *are* too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel \_\_claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘\_My own hand has saved me” (Judges 7:2).**

**\_\_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 21:19).**

## **Leaves But No Fruit**

It would be a mistake for us to think that Jesus is functioning out of mere frustration. The fig tree would become an object lesson.

My neighbor had a fig tree. I didn't see any leaves on it but only fruit. I only noticed it while painting my fence in the back yard. I accidentally got some overspray on it. I offered to buy him a new fig tree but he had brought it from Greece. Apparently good fig trees produce the fruit first then the leaves after. This fig tree had leaves but no fruit. The leaves served as a deceptive banner, advertising fruit, promising fruit, but there was no fruit to be had.

I periodically counsel people in bad relationships. They seek happiness, fulfillment or joy from someone who leaves them angry, empty and frustrated – like a thirsty man continually seeking to draw from a well of dust, he walks away thirstier than he arrived. But the empty well of bad religion has much more severe consequences. The robes, tassels, steeples, collars and market-driven mass production of bad religion don't merely toy with one's psychological or emotional well-being, it fidgets with men's souls.

## **Figs**

Figs and their leaves were significant emblems used in the Old Testament for a variety of reasons.

## Hiding Shame

The leaf of the fig tree was used by Adam and Eve in their effort to hide their own shame.

**-Then the eyes of both of them were opened, \_\_and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves \_\_coverings (Genesis 3:7).**

## A Sign of Plenty

We also see that the fig tree was a sign of plenty and blessings from God to those who walk in obedience.

**-Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, \_\_to walk in His ways and to fear Him. <sup>-7-</sup> For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, \_a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; <sup>-8-</sup> a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey (Deuteronomy 8:6-8).**

## Healing

**\_They were used by God for healing.**

**Then \_\_Isaiah said, “\_Take a lump of figs.” So they took and laid *it* on the boil, and he recovered (2 Kings 20:7).**

## Curse

A figless tree exemplified the curse for following false teachers.

**I will surely \_\_consume them,” says the Lord. “\_No grapes *shall be* \_\_on the vine, Nor figs on the \_\_fig tree, And the leaf shall fade; And *the things* I have given them shall \_\_pass away from them (Jeremiah 8:13).**

## Blessed and Cursed

Figs were a sign of those who were blessed or cursed by God.

The LORD showed me, and there were two baskets of figs set before the temple of the LORD...<sup>-2-</sup> One basket *had* very good figs...and the other basket *had* very bad figs...these good figs...I will set My eyes on them for good...I will build them and not pull *them* down, and I will plant them and not pluck *them* up.<sup>-7-</sup> Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I *am* the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.<sup>-8-</sup> And as the bad figs which cannot be eaten, they are so bad ' – surely thus says the LORD...<sup>-9-</sup> I will deliver them to trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, for *their* harm, to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse, in all places where I shall drive them.<sup>-10-</sup> And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence among them, till they are consumed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers " (from Jeremiah 24:1-2 and 6-10)

## Spiritual Adultery

They were a sign of God's curse for spiritual adultery.

And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees, of which she has said, ' *These are* my wages that my lovers have given me.' So I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall eat them (Hosea 2:12).

## Encouragement

Yet we also hear of encouragement in the midst of judgment.

Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls –<sup>-18-</sup> Yet I will rejoice in the

Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. <sup>19</sup> The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like *deer's feet*, and He will make me *walk on my high hills* (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

The reason for the rejoicing is the removal of iniquity by Jesus.

Hear, O Joshua, the high priest, you and your companions who sit before you, for they are *a wondrous sign*; for behold, I am bringing forth *My Servant the BRANCH*. <sup>9</sup> For behold, the stone that I have laid before Joshua: *Upon the stone are seven eyes*. Behold, I will engrave its inscription, *' says the Lord of hosts, ' and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day*. <sup>10</sup> *In that day, ' says the Lord of hosts, ' everyone will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree* (Zechariah 3:8-10).

## Bad Religion

In our present context the fig tree served as a symbol of bad religion – dead religion, giving a false hope through an impracticable or unfeasible method.

There are few things more pernicious than a religion of false hopes and promises. Religious systems with promises of tranquility of soul or victory over sin through proper diet, exercise and discipline can fall into this category. It unnerves me when I witness church services promoting the religious experience of connecting with God through worship or righteous endeavors or the disciplines (fasting, solitude, quietude, etc.) rather than realizing and proclaiming that the connection (if I can use that term) with God is purchased by the blood of Christ and belongs to those who by the grace of God call out to Christ in sincere faith – regardless of what the experience might feel like. So many come to that well of promise and leave parched.

## A Gracious Curse

It is an act of supreme grace for Jesus to curse this fig tree and have it wither away. The fig tree was already ruined. Jesus would merely make it

evident that it promised no fruit to those in need of sustenance. No hungry person would now mistake this tree as a source of nourishment.

Fruitfulness is a great blessing. There appears to be a uniform desire (though no doubt corrupted by the fall) to somehow bring aid to others. These efforts can manifest themselves in ungodly coalitions designed to promote licentiousness in the name of liberty or they may appear very generic, seeking to grant relief to victims of natural disasters of political oppression.

But any religion or system of thought which seeks to exclude the kingship of Jesus is, of necessity, embracing the alternatives of the world, the flesh, or the devil. Periodically God will graciously dismantle these figless trees. And it is the responsibility of the Christian to expose these falsehoods which seek to win the affections and allegiance of the souls of men.

Jesus found Himself in vicious confrontation with a religion whose priests were children of the father of lies, the devil (John 8:44). God was about to divorce them as His covenant people (Jeremiah 3:8) because of their hard-hearted resistance to the truth (Matthew 13:15; 19:8; Mark 3:5; 10:5; 16:14; Acts 28:27).

It is often proposed that people should be able to believe what they want and it shouldn't matter to others. But ungodly systems of thought (whether we want to call them religions or world-views) have dire consequences. They had killed John; they would kill Jesus, Stephen, Paul and the rest of the apostles (save John). When apostate Judaism had lost its power and influence to inflict persecution and death, it continued with Rome. The persecution has continued to take place wherever figless systems of thought and religion bear their ugly heads.

But God is gracious and powerful. His love for humanity is evident in that He will not suffer the lies to continue to prevail forever. In our present context it is Israel that the fig tree represents. But we can be confident that He will continue to overcome the powers that take rank against Him and His Anointed One. This is why it is critical for us to continue to preach Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). This is the means by which God redeems the world and protects souls from the vain thinking that has become so dominant in our current society.

In part two of this sermon will examine what role the apostles will play in, not only doing what Jesus did to the fig tree, but casting mountains into the sea.

## Questions for Study

1. Are all religions good (page 2)?
2. How does Jesus handle bad religion (pages 3, 4)?
3. What does Matthew seem to be addressing in chapters 21 through 24 of his gospel?
4. How did Jesus utilize His own hunger to honor God (pages 3, 4)?
5. Do our weakness or personal or psychological needs ever justify disobedience (pages 3, 4)?
6. What are different things figs represent in the Bible (pages 4-7)?
7. Why was it a gracious act of Christ to curse the fig tree (pages 7, 8)?