

## Empty Religion and Real Faith

Matthew 21:18-22

October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Big idea: Empty religious activity if separated from faith-filled fruit is condemned by Christ.

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### Intro

I'm not a great basketball player but there have been seasons of life when I played way too much basketball. My first couple years in college I was at Reed Gym at ISU playing pickup ball for 2 hours a day. Why wasn't I working or studying? That's a great question. At pick up games there's a type of guy that can often be found. He shows up with all the gear (\$200 shoes, official Lebron jersey, head band, sleeve on his arm) but can't play.

It was the appearance of skill but not the presence of skill.

Another analogy, it's a sweltering August day and you've been working outside in the sun. You look to the horizon and see clouds coming and you can picture the relief of the rain. Instead, it never quite drops rain where you are and only makes the air muggy and humid.

The appearance of relief from the rain but the rain never materialized.

Jesus will come across a fig tree in this passage that appeared to have fruit on it but it didn't. Because of the context we can see this as an analogy for the religious who appear to have spiritual life but it's just an appearance. There's a warning for us here as well. He'll also use this as a teachable moment about prayer and faith.

#### 1. Cursing the fig tree: A visual *parable* (21:18-19)

##### a. The fig tree

- i. Mark 11:13 says this isn't the season for figs. The fully mature figs wouldn't come for 6 more weeks. But along with the appearance of the leaves should have been the appearance of an underdeveloped fruit named *taksh*. They were green and about the size of almonds and didn't taste great. But for the hungry and the poor, they were a source of food.
- ii. Because the tree had leafed out, Jesus had every reason to expect *taksh* on the tree. But there was no fruit.

##### b. The cursing

- i. We can understand why Jesus would be disappointed. But why does He respond by withering the tree?
  1. Is this like a petulant child who throws a fit when he finds out all the ice cream is gone?
  2. Bernard Russell, who wrote an essay titled "Why I Am Not a Christian," cited this narrative as one of his reasons for repudiating Christianity. He said this incident displays Jesus as a man who expressed vindictive fury to an innocent plant, manifesting behavior that was not that of a righteous man, let alone the Son of God.
  3. No! Something very different is happening here.
- ii. Consider the context – He has just left the temple after running out those who had made the temple a "robber's den" instead of a "house of prayer." Jerusalem was teeming with religiosity. Pilgrims from all over Israel have crammed into the city for Passover. The temple complex was massive and beautiful. There were lots of "leaves" but the fruit of faith in the Messiah was

absent. They were indignant that He wasn't stopping the children from calling out "Hosanna to the Son of David."

- c. A visual parable warning about those who appear religious but lack fruit.
  - i. Common way for OT and NT prophets to communicate their message in a memorable way.
    1. Jer 19:1-11 – Jeremiah bought a clay pot, gathered the elders from Israel in a public place, indicted them for their love of other gods, then smash the pot as they watched as a visual portrayal of God's coming justice.
      - a. **Jeremiah 19:11** and say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Just so will I break this people and this city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel,
    2. Ezekiel built a small model of the city of Jerusalem and besieged it as a picture of the attack that would come (Ezekiel 4)
    3. Agabus to Paul in Acts 21
      - a. **Acts 21:11** And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"
  - ii. Jesus had already used the fig tree analogy in an earlier parable about
    1. **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. <sup>7</sup> "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?' <sup>8</sup> "And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; <sup>9</sup> and if it bears fruit next year, *fine*; but if not, cut it down.'"
  - iii. Fig tree as a symbol of Israel in the OT
    1. **Micah 7:1-2** Woe is me! For I am Like the fruit pickers, like the grape gatherers. There is not a cluster of grapes to eat, *Or* a first-ripe fig *which* I crave. <sup>2</sup> The godly person has perished from the land, And there is no upright *person* among men. All of them lie in wait for bloodshed; Each of them hunts the other with a net.
- d. Like religious *hypocrites*, the fig tree appeared full of life but was *fruitless*.
  - i. The need for fruit in a person's life that is more than just profession of belief is a repeated theme for Jesus.
  - ii. **Matthew 7:18-20** "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. <sup>19</sup> "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> "So then, you will know them by their fruits
  - iii. **Matthew 13:23** "And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."
  - iv. **John 15:5** "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.
- e. This applies to all those who make a show of bearing fruit but are spiritually barren.
  - i. The temple was cleansed and the religious leaders put on warning, but the Jewish children praised Him, and the Jewish blind and lame came to Him and He healed them.

- ii. On this very day a lively business was being transacted so that sacrifices might be made, while at the same time the priests were plotting to put to death the very One apart from whom these offerings had no meaning whatever. Plenty of leaves but no fruit. (Hendriksen)
  - iii. The mandate to bear spiritual fruit continues today.
  - iv. **Galatians 5:19-23** Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.
  - v. **Philippians 1:9, 11** And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment . . . <sup>11</sup> having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.
  - vi. **James 3:17** But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.
  - vii. A Christian by definition must produce spiritual fruit, even if they are the equivalent of the small, early buds and not yet the fully formed figs.
  - viii. Greg Lanier - So let us be warned. Our personal lives can look like “in leaf.” Our leaves may look like those of a supermom, a winner, a perfect family, an A-team Christian with an overstuffed schedule of ministry activities. But the root may be withered. There may be no fruit of holiness and no intimacy with God. What’s worse—our leaves may even fool us.
- f. What is the difference between the appearance of spiritual health (the leaves) and the reality of spiritual life (the fruit)?
- i. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But true saving faith is never alone.
  - ii. **2 Corinthians 13:5** Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test?
  - iii. “Leaves” that may or may not accompany “fruit”
    - 1. Outward, visible **morality**
      - a. **Matthew 23:28** "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
    - 2. Intellectual **knowledge**
      - a. **Romans 1:21** For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.
    - 3. A **profession** of faith in Christ
      - a. **Matthew 7:21** "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*.
      - b. **Luke 8:13** "Those on the rocky *soil are* those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no *firm* root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.
    - 4. Active **ministry**
      - a. **Matthew 7:22-23** "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name

perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup> "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

iv. "Fruit" that accompanies true saving faith

1. **Sorrow** over sin not mere sorrow over consequences

- a. **2 Corinthians 7:9-10** I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to *the point of repentance*; for you were made sorrowful according to *the will of God*, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. <sup>10</sup> For the sorrow that is according to *the will of God* produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.

2. **Sensitivity** toward sin and a willingness to confess it before God

- a. **1 John 1:8-9** If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

3. Growing **obedience** from the heart

- a. **1 John 2:3-4** By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. <sup>4</sup> The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;

4. New **desires** from a transformed heart

- a. **2 Corinthians 5:17** Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.
- b. **Jeremiah 31:33** "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.
- c. For the believer with a new heart, if we stop and think, especially in community, about what would make us most deeply happy, we will almost always do the right thing. (Gerry Breshears)
- i. Loaded with caveats – assumes a new heart, assumes we stop and think rather than just react, deeply happy in the long run not merely temporary pleasure, and even then \*almost always\* do the right thing.

2. Cursing the fig tree: A teachable moment about **faith** and **prayer** (21:20-22)

- a. Interesting that they asked a "how" question not a "why" question.

i. "how did the fig tree wither?" not "Why did you do that?"

ii. Jesus took this opportunity to teach them about faith and prayer.

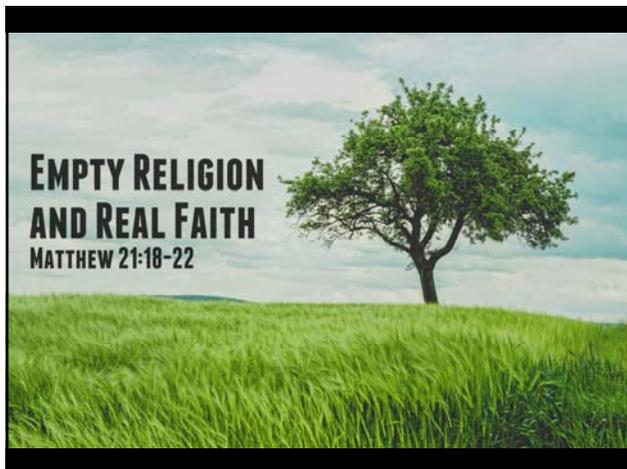
iii. True, from-the-heart faith was what the religious establishment described as trees without fruit was lacking.

- b. This appears to be a blanket promise without nuance – "Just believe and you'll get whatever you want!" but this is contextualized in all of scripture so we need to compare this promise to other promises and instructions on prayer.

i. **Mark 11:22** And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God.

1. Faith is to be in God, not your own dreams, desires, aspirations, or ideas of what you think life should be like.

- ii. **James 4:3** You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.
  - 1. Motives matter. Are we praying for selfish things or things that honor God and bless others?
  - 2. “Lord, make me a millionaire so I can drive a sweet car and make my neighbor, Bruce, jealous.” Vs “Lord, will you provide a good job so that I can provide for my family and have money to give to advance the gospel around the world.”
- iii. **1 John 5:14-15** This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.
  - 1. We need to pray in line with God’s will – does God value the thing I’m asking for in the same way I do? Might God have a different purpose for this suffering that He is allowing?
- c. Casting mountains into the sea was likely a figure of speech to refer to things that appear impossible to us rather than a literal promise that we can move earth with our prayers.
  - i. My experience as a new Christian at 16, reading this passage, looking out the window at the continental divide and praying for the mountain to be moved. No consideration for the people on the mountain, the devastation from the massive landslide, etc.
  - ii. Do you know people who don’t know Christ and you think, “they would never be interested in the gospel. They would chew me out if I even bring up spiritual things”? Pray for them.
- 3. Applying Jesus’ words to our lives
  - a. Does my life have ***spiritual*** fruit or just ***religious*** activity?
  - b. Do my prayers expect and ask God to do ***amazing*** things?
    - i. Are they specific enough that I would even notice if He answered them?



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**Acts 21:11** And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

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