

# “Of Figs & Thistles”

Mark 11:12-14, 20-33 <sup>1</sup>

What comes to mind when you see the title of this sermon? When I think of figs, I think of Nabisco’s famous “Fig Newton” fig bars, though Nabisco long ago dropped the “fig,” and they’re just “Newtons” now.

When I think of thistles, I think of Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh*, whose favorite food was thistles. If I think a little harder, I remember that the thistle is the national symbol of Scotland; but I also remember my father telling me from his days on the farm that thistles are a sign of a poorly-kept field. Dad’s point was that thistles are pretty, but they’re worthless. They reduce the usefulness and productivity of a field.

This morning, I’m using “figs” to represent desirable outcomes, while “thistles” represent undesirable outcomes. Let’s look at this somewhat prickly vignette in our text once more.

Our text this morning is a challenging one that many people really wish wasn’t in the Bible at all. Interestingly, one principle of New Testament interpretation is that the more difficult the text, the more likely it is to be original. This is based on the presupposition that if the text were edited—which it generally has been, at least to some extent—difficulties would be edited out, not edited in. This pericope, or vignette, appears in all the copies of Mark that we have, so there is no reason to doubt it.

This only deepens the problem, though, because at first glance, this story makes Jesus look irritable and petulant, using His miraculous power destructively in a fit of anger. We find it difficult and awkward that the Jesus we know from the Sermon on the Mount would be so bad-tempered as to put a withering curse on a poor tree that failed to satisfy a hungry moment.

Can the same Jesus who knows what people are thinking and who can foresee that a donkey’s colt will be tied up in a certain place not also know ahead of time that a particular tree has no fruit? This is a “miracle of destruction,” and it is the last of Jesus’ miracles that Mark recorded.<sup>2</sup> The whole scene is A.W.K.W.A.R.D. Happily, a longer look provides a different angle of vision.

Jesus was crucified on April 3, 33 A.D., so this encounter took place on Monday, March 30. In that part of the world, fig trees begin to leaf out toward the end of March, with full foliage developing in about a week. While the first crop of figs doesn’t appear until June, with the leaves comes a crop of small, sweet early figs called *taqsh*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 16, 2018. Parallel and related passages include: Matthew 21:18-27; Luke 13:6-9, 20:1-8.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

<sup>2</sup> It’s worth noting that both of Jesus’ “miracles of destruction,” here and the destruction of the pigs in the region of the Gerasenes (Luke 8:26-39), were directed toward the created order (animals and plants) but not toward humans.

<sup>3</sup> See Micah 7:1.

About the size of green almonds, taqsh are not nearly so good as ripe figs, but they will do in a pinch. If the leaves appear without taqsh, there will be no figs from that tree this year.

Jesus knew all this, of course, and He also knew ahead of time that there would be no fruit on this tree. It's crucial to notice that this tree encounter brackets Jesus' "cleansing" of the Temple. Trying to understand either of these events in isolation from the other causes us to misunderstand them.

It's also useful to note that the word Mark used for "the season of figs" was not the usual botanical term. He used the word "kairos," which is often used in the New Testament to designate time related to the Kingdom of God.

On this particular Monday morning, Jesus was on His way to overturn tables in the Temple, and on Tuesday, the leaders of the Temple would challenge His authority to do so. A little later, as Jesus overturned the tables, He made reference to Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon" from centuries before.

Jesus' reference to the Temple as a "den of thieves" referenced Jeremiah's accusation, "*Has this house, which bears my name, become a den of robbers in your view? Yes, I too have seen it,*" says the Lord (Jeremiah 7:11). Jeremiah's prophecy continued, "*Do not pray for these people. Do not offer a cry or a prayer on their behalf, and do not beg me, for I will not listen to you.*"

The leaders of the Temple knew their Bible, and they knew what Jesus was saying. It was not, then, an inappropriate question for them to ask, "By what authority do you do and say such things?" We'll come back to that.

The point of this acted parable with the fig tree is that the tree's leaves "advertised" that there would be sweet early figs, but it was false advertising. What Jesus was about to act out in the Temple was that the Temple "advertised" that it was a place of prayer for all nations, but that was false advertising, too.

The next day, the disciples saw that the fig tree had withered "from the roots up." Time was up for that tree. And Jesus' actions in the Temple, bracketed as they were by this acted parable, were not so much to "cleanse" the Temple for further service as to demonstrate that "the Temple's time was up."

Remember that Jesus wept when He came to the top of the Mount of Olives and looked out over Jerusalem. "If only you could see what would bring peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. This Temple and this city will soon be destroyed, because you did not recognize the time when God visited you" (Luke 19:41-44).

The tree advertised fruit but didn't deliver. The Temple advertised faith, but didn't deliver, either: "*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me*" (Mark 7:6; Isaiah 29:13).

In this Holy and Awesome Week, God's path of salvation was about to be transformed. Just three days hence, the 30' curtain that marked off the Most Holy Place, the symbolic dwelling place of God, would be torn in two, *from top to bottom*, and the way to God would become clearly, absolutely and forever open to any and all who would come.

The point of both of these acted parables highlights judgment on those who make a show of "bearing fruit" while there is none. We'll come back to that, too.

The next morning, when the disciples exclaimed about the withered tree, Jesus used the tree to make comments about power in prayer. Commentators have a variety of ideas about what Jesus meant by these comments. Here's what He said:

*Jesus replied to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if anyone 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 you pray and ask for—believe that you have received it and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you your wrongdoing" (Mark 11:22-25).<sup>4</sup>*

Some commentators think that by "this mountain" Jesus referred to the Mount of Olives, where they were standing at the time. Some think that He was referring to the Temple Mount. Some think He was talking about Jerusalem itself.

Similar statements to these occur several times in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament, so these general ideas must have been things Jesus communicated fairly often.<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that Jesus was making several points, and that there were several points He was not making.

In the first place, Jesus wasn't talking about moving a literal mountain. This was a figure of speech, hyperbole, similar to His statement about putting a camel through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25).

Nor was Jesus encouraging magical thinking, as though we can obligate God to act through a certain kind or measure of faith. It's true that we have a tendency to use prayer like a vending machine, but the Almighty will not be treated so.

**Prayer is not about getting things we want. Prayer is about a personal, conversational relationship with God and about partnership with God in accomplishing what God wants done. Prayer is not about what we want. Prayer is about God's purposes.**

It's certainly not wrong to talk to God about what we want, but prayer is not about imposing our will on God or persuading God to endorse our purposes. **Prayer is about opening our lives and wills to God so that God's work can be done in the world.**

Paul repeatedly asked God to remove what he called "a thorn in the flesh," but God's answer was, "Deal with it. My power is made perfect in your weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Jesus passionately asked God to make His crucifixion unnecessary, but Jesus' final position was, "**Not my will, but your will. Father, glorify your Name**" (Mark 14:36; John 12:28).

Prayer is rather like a great cable that a sailor uses to pull a boat to its mooring place. The sailor does not try to pull the shore to the boat, but the boat to the shore. And we pray, not to move God to our position, but to move ourselves to God's position.

As always, we have to understand these verses in terms of their context. Here, Jesus was commenting on the New Covenant that was coming to its fulfillment. This New Covenant would not be dependent on the Temple and its rituals but would be based firmly in faith in God (v. 22). This faith would overcome insurmountable odds (v. 23). It would be sustained by God's grace (v. 24), and it would be empowered by forgiveness (v. 25).

<sup>4</sup> v. 26 is an interpolation from Matthew 6:15.

<sup>5</sup> Cp. Matthew 6:14-15, 17:20; Luke 17:6; John 14:13-14, 15:7, 16:23; James 1:6; also Zechariah 4:7, 14:4.

When Jesus and the Twelve arrived at the Temple with this conversation still in their minds, He was confronted by the Chief Priests, the Scribes, and the Elders, who, still stinging from their humiliation the day before, got in His face and demanded, “*By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do these things?*” (Mark 11:28).

The challenge was an ominous one, because it was given by the same men who would shortly sentence Jesus to death.<sup>6</sup> At one level, the question had a point. Jesus had no formal training, was not officially a rabbi or a prophet, and as far as they could see, was a complete outsider to their “Swamp.” They, on the other hand, had been in charge of the Swamp literally for centuries. What right did He have to do all this?

The fact of the matter is that they didn’t really care about Jesus’ answer, except to the extent that they hoped to trip Him up before the adoring crowds and begin to clear the way for his execution.

Jesus’ answer appears at first to be a dodge, but it was actually a deft counterstroke that put His attackers instantly in “checkmate.” John the Baptist had repeatedly announced to the crowds that Jesus was God’s promised Messiah.<sup>7</sup> If the Temple leaders acknowledged that John was a legitimate prophet of God, then they had their answer about Jesus, too.

On the other hand, if they denied that John was a prophet, then, rather than bringing the crowd over to their side, they’d alienate the crowds, who loved John. The men knew they were trapped, so they refused to answer; but they and the crowds knew what the answer really was. They intended to do away with Jesus, and the facts would not stand in their way.

Well, that’s our text; and the point of it all is essentially the question, “Are we—are you, am I—producing figs or thistles?” Are we all show, nice leafy branches, but no fruit? And, perhaps worse than no fruit at all, are we producing thorny thistles that get in the way of what God is doing in our time?

As the Apostle Paul reflected on his ministry, he wrote, “*According to God’s grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder, and another builds on it. **But each one is to be careful how he builds** on it. For no one can lay any other foundation than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one’s work will become obvious. For the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one’s work. If anyone’s work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward. **If anyone’s work is burned up, he will experience loss, but he himself will be saved—but only as through fire**” (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).*

So let me ask these questions again: **“Are we—are you, am I—producing figs or thistles?” Are we all show, nice leafy branches, but no fruit? And, perhaps worse than no fruit at all, are we producing thorny thistles that get in the way of what God is doing in our time?**

Lamar Willis, the Minister of Music in the church where I grew up, frequently told us in the youth choir, “Just one life, t’will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” That’s another way of talking about “figs and thistles.” What are you doing with your life that really counts for God’s Kingdom?

One more story, and we’re done. Jesus told another parable about a fig tree that needs to be added in here:

<sup>6</sup> Cp. 8:31, 14:43, 14:53, 15:1.

<sup>7</sup> John 1:19, 26-27, 3:25-30

*“A man had a fig tree that was planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He told the vineyard worker, ‘Listen, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it even waste the soil?*

*“But he replied to him, ‘Sir,’ leave it this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. Perhaps it will produce fruit next year, but if not, you can cut it down”* (Luke 13:6-9).

So now we have two fruitless fig trees. For one, the time is up, and judgment comes. For the other, judgment is postponed, and another chance is given. As we sit here this morning, we do well to remember that there will come—there always comes—a time when the door is shut; but **while the door is still open, Hope remains.**<sup>8</sup>

The Apostle Peter had some things to say about how to respond while the Door is still open: *Dear friends, don’t overlook this one fact: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.*

*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness as you wait for the day of God and hasten its coming. [That is, be “figs,” and not “thistles.”] Because of that day, the heavens will be dissolved with fire and the elements will melt with heat. But based on his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells* (2 Peter 3:8-13).

Amen, and Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 25:1-13