



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

Jim Taylor tells the following story about his friend, Ralph Milton: One morning Ralph woke up at five o'clock to a noise that sounded like someone repairing boilers on his roof. Still in his pyjamas, he went out the back to investigate. He found a woodpecker on the TV aerial, "pounding its little brains out on the metal pole." Angry at the little creature who ruined his sleep, Ralph picked up a rock and threw it. The rock sailed over the house, and he heard a distant crash as it hit the car.

In utter disgust, Ralph took a vicious kick at a clod of earth, only to remember - too late - that he was still in his bare feet breaking two toes. Uncontrolled anger, as Ralph learned, can sometimes be its own reward.

This morning you will have gathered that we are looking at the next section in our study of Mark. Mark chapter 11 verse 12 onwards. I don't think I give any of my sermons titles as many men do but if this sermon was to have a name it would have to be called, "What makes Jesus angry?" Within this passage we get two very clear examples of what it means when we say Jesus was angry – but not without reason. Ask anyone about Jesus being angry and they will automatically think of the account we read this morning of him clearing the Temple. But in doing so you almost miss this tiny little account of his anger being expressed against the fig tree! Two accounts of anger and yet only a few verses apart. The significance is important.

Today I want to just look at the issue of the fig tree and leave the clearing of the Temple for another day.

¹²The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.

I think it is important that we note this small almost insignificant detail here. We tend to forget that Jesus was fully God while at the same time being fully man. He felt hunger and tiredness, he knows the full range of human emotions that we feel. There is never a time in your life when you can turn to Jesus and like the stubborn teenager say to him, "you don't understand what it is like!" He does understand. That was one of the reasons God allowed him to come into this world as a little baby and be born into a family and experience the full spectrum of our emotions so that he would know and so that we could go to him in the confidence that not only does Jesus know, but he cares deeply for us too.

¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴Then he said to the tree, **"May no one ever eat fruit from you again"**. And his disciples heard him say it.

Let me tell you a little bit about this fig tree as Warren Wiersbe explains it to us: The fig tree produces leaves in March or April and then starts to bear fruit in June, with another crop in August and possibly a third crop in December. The presence of leaves could mean the presence of fruit, even though that fruit was "left over" from the previous season.

Hendriksen writes: *“But Jesus notices that this particular tree, growing by the side of the road and thus in a sheltered place as we read in Matt 21:19, was something special. It had leaves and was most likely in full foliage, and could therefore be expected to have fruit Yet it had nothing but leaves! It promised much but delivered nothing!”*

It is significant that in this instance Jesus did not have special knowledge to guide Him; He had to go to the tree and examine things for Himself. If He had power to kill the tree, why didn't He use that power to restore the tree and make it produce fruit? Apart from the drowning of the pigs (Mark 5:13), this is the only instance of our Lord using His miraculous power to destroy something in nature. Why did he do it? It wasn't simply because he was hungry and there was nothing to eat. Was it a fit of anger because his blood sugar was low. No - He did it because He wanted to teach us two important lessons.

First, there is **a lesson on failure**: Israel had failed to be fruitful for God. In the Old Testament, the fig tree is associated with the nation of Israel (Hosea 9:10; Nahum 3:12). Like the fig tree our Lord cursed, Israel had “nothing but leaves.” Note that the tree dried up “from the roots” (Mark 11:20). Three years before, John the Baptist had put the axe to the roots of the tree (Matt. 3:10) let me just remind you of that passage:

⁷But when he, (that's John the Baptist) saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

But we know from Mark's account that the religious leaders would not heed his message. Whenever an individual or a group ‘dries up’ spiritually, it is usually from the roots. The disciples would probably connect this miracle with the parable which Jesus gave some months before (Luke 13:1-9), we read there:

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ⁸“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down””.

Surely the disciples would see in the miracle a vivid picture of God's judgment on Israel. They might also recall Micah 7:1-6 where the prophet declares that God is seeking “the first ripe fruit” from His people. Christ is still seeking fruit from His people, and for us to be fruitless is sin.

John 15:16: ¹⁶“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name”.

This is a crucial verse, as we shall see in a few moments.

As John de Wild has written: Jesus wants us to know there is no place for such a church

in His kingdom. Scripture is clear my friends, that if you truly love the Lord, then it will be demonstrated in your life by fruits of forgiveness, by fruits of love. There will be a change in your behaviour, there will be a change in your attitude, there will be a change in your heart to do good things. Oh, I know that we are not saved by our works, but our works are an evidence that we are saved. When you come to know Jesus, when you see Him on the cross, and realize the cost, something happens inside.

You begin to change your old ways. You become connected to the root of Jesus, you feed on His word, you drink from His fountain. The end result, you bear good fruit. This is what the Bible teaches!

You see when God plants and nourishes, He expects fruits. In other words, when you become a Christian, it should be demonstrated in your lives. Being fruitful means...

You do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. For as long and ever as you can!

You see friends, as followers of Jesus we cannot simply maintain the status quo. There must be character development in the community of saints. We are not preparing for death, we are preparing for translation.

In other words, as you allow Jesus to work in your life, something happens. The old self begin to fall away. The good news is that Jesus wants you to be...

Genuine, not a counterfeit. He wants you to be real, not a phoney. He wants you to be authentic, not questionable. He wants you to be true, not false. He wants you to be fruitful, not fruitless. We must carefully cultivate our spiritual roots and not settle for "leaves."

Jesus also used this miracle to teach us **a lesson on faith.**

²⁰In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

²¹Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" ²²"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. ²³"I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins".

The next morning, when the disciples noticed the dead tree. Jesus said, "Have faith in God," meaning, "Constantly be trusting God; live in an attitude of dependence on Him." In Jewish imagery, a mountain signifies something strong and immovable, a problem that stands in the way (Zech. 4:7). We can move these mountains only by trusting God.

Is it possible Jesus isn't speaking literally? Is He using hyperbole? Of course, how often do we need a mountain moved? There is no doubt God is capable of such, but how can we believe it will happen? Obviously, Jesus is speaking of helping us meet the everyday needs of our lives.

The mountains are illness, financial reverse, bereavement, etc. We may not understand why He doesn't always give us what we ask for, but we can know and understand some things: God loves us and wants to meet our needs. He has the power and resources to do so. He knows what we truly need better than we can ever know it. He wants us to come to Him in faith with our needs.

I know of people who come to me and say I cannot believe in a god who does not answer my prayers! I have prayed to God about such and such and he didn't answer my prayer. I had a faith that was at least the size of a mustard seed but now I just don't know. How can I believe in a God who doesn't answer my prayers? In Matt 17:20 we read Jesus saying:

"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you".

Tell me - what is the fruit of the mustard tree? The answer is the mustard seed which can be used in a variety of ways. The smallest seed of that day but it was still the fruit produced by the mustard tree. How much fruit is your life producing?

Let's go back to this verse I mentioned a few moments ago, John 15:16

¹⁶"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name".

Do you understand the condition that is contained in this verse? It is huge. HUGE! Jesus said that if you are a Christian then you are, because he has chosen you. Not my words – these are Jesus words. This means that there is no such thing as someone "finding God" as we often hear. "Oh so and so has found God, they have become religious." Rubbish – no one can decide to find God, no one can decide of their own free will to be a follower of Jesus this **can only** happen when Jesus calls us to him and we respond in faith. We do not choose Jesus – he chooses us. This what it means when we sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

We can only be amazed at Jesus when we understand that we did not do the choosing – Jesus did. But more than that this verse says that if you are indeed a true follower of Jesus then you have not just been saved but you have been appointed to go a bear fruit. I hope I don't need to remind you of the fruit you have been appointed to bear...

Galatians 5:22: ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Fruit that will last. Not flashes in the pan. Not days of joy and days when we fail to produce that joy etc. If this is the life we are prepared to live - since we have the amazing privilege of being chosen by Christ - then we need to be showing this fruit to the world – not just the leaves of self-righteousness! That's what makes Jesus angry – us pretending that we are the people he wants us to be and yet it is all show – no fruit to prove it. And we wonder why are prayers aren't answered?

In the last part of John 15:16 Jesus says, **"Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name".**

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Then, then the Father will...

My friends it is conditional.

There is a challenge here for each one of us.

Are we simply going through the motions of our faith or are we producing real spiritual fruit that will last.

If we are playing at Christianity then we deserve Jesus anger and we have no right to expect to receive the answers to our prayers but if we are willing to trust him and repay his love for us in faithful service then the fruit will come and we will fulfill what we have been appointed to do.

Let us pray.