

Matthew 21:18-22

Preached by Greg Lundstedt at Vancouver Bible Fellowship Church on 5/27/2012

You Look Good, But Are You Bearing Fruit?

Prayer

Father, we are so thankful for Your tremendous love and Your tremendous mercy and Your kindness towards us – that You were so gracious and merciful to send Your Son Jesus to die for our sins. We are so thankful that He willingly came, that He bore our sins in His body on the cross. We are so thankful for Your love that is continually demonstrated in what You have done through Christ. Father, we thank You that You used Your Word, Your powerful Word, to convict us of sin and to reveal Your Son Jesus, the only Savior. We are so thankful that You use Your Word to make us like Your Son, that You use it grow us in respect to salvation. And I pray today, as we look into Your Word, first and foremost we would confess sin, we would have clean hearts and hands before You, and then we would receive Your Word implanted: we would allow it to do its work, we would humble ourselves before Your mighty hand and let Your Word work in our hearts. I pray we would not only be just hearers but because of Christ, we would be doers of Your Word, that we would by Your power and strength - because of a redeemed life - do what You say. You are a great God and a merciful God! And we are so privileged to look into Your Word, and we pray You would bless us as it goes out now. In Your Son's precious name. Amen. Amen!

Sermon

It is wonderful, wonderful music we were singing. I hope you were singing from the heart. What a blessing it is! I share at times that I used to go to church and sing and stand there and do the "church thing;" and yet I was always doing something else on my own apart from that time. My heart was not there. And the Lord convicted me of sin and when that happened, it gave me – He gave me – a great desire to sing these hymns that praise Him and glorify Him. And I hope the same is true with you.

Now we live in a Christian culture that is almost appalled at the fact or notion of someone challenging someone's faith. We live in a culture these days that is almost resistant to challenging to see if someone is really in the faith. I am not talking about those who presumptively believe they could see in someone's heart and then make judgments on the person. Only God sees the heart. What I am talking about is this current culture - evangelical culture – we live in where if anyone challenges someone's profession, they are immediately, immediately put down or put away. You see, God is a gracious God; God is a good God. And God is not going to allow anyone of us to name His name and not truly know Him. He is going to convict with His Word; and He uses His body to graciously do that. That is what a loving God would do – that not one of us would be misunderstanding the reality of a true relationship with Christ, that not one of us would be self-deceived and on that day say, "Lord, Lord" and He would say to us, "Depart from Me; I never knew you." God is a gracious God and a merciful God. And God

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throughout His Word challenges us to see if we are truly in the faith. Let me share a couple passages. First Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 9 and 10. The apostle Paul writes the Corinthian church; he says,

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindler, shall inherit the kingdom of God. [1 Corinthians 6:9-10]

Do not be deceived if that identifies you, if that is your life. You are not saved! First John 3:7. I will read this for you.

⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices (or literally does, continually, habitually) righteousness is righteous, just as He (speaking of Christ) is righteous; ⁸ the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. [1 John 3:7-8]

We are not to be deceived. Ephesians 5:3:

³ But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; ⁴ and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. ⁵ For this you know with certainty (Paul writes to the Ephesian church), that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not be partakers with them... [Ephesians 5:3-7a]

You see, God is a gracious God. God is a good God to not allow us to be self-deceived into our eternal state. And there are those, as we see in Scripture, who live a life of sin; and God clearly says if that is their continual, habitual habit, that they are not His. Do not be deceived! Now we see that through Scripture.

But we also see in Scripture that there are those who may not live an outward life of continual, habitual sin – those who live and act a very religious life, those who on the outside appear to be beautiful, appear to be following the Lord completely in every way. But God is also gracious to point out what is going on in the heart through His Word that they might be saved and not enter into eternity and eternal punishment. You see today we are going to see that the Lord God comes to His people; and they are in darkness and yet they claim to follow Him. And He is going to reveal that although they look beautiful on the outside – and if you were to look at them from a distance, you would believe they were His. But when you come up to them, there is nothing. There is no fruit at all. And I believe we are going to be confronted with the question, “You look good (and I am not speaking about how we look; you may look good religiously), but do you have fruit?” Do you have fruit? Is your life producing genuine fruit? Please

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turn with me to Matthew, chapter 21, and we will be looking at verses 18 to 22. We are going to be seeing the account of Jesus cursing the fig tree, a very difficult account to interpret; but yet I think the principles are really clear and plain. And we are going to see and have an eternal warning for the fruitless, an eternal warning for the fruitless.

Now in the book of Matthew, as we begin here, we have seen King Jesus introduced. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the rightful King of the Jews. He has come to His people and when He came into the world and took on human flesh, they were to call Him Jesus because He will save His people from their sins. The Lord is salvation – God in human flesh is salvation. And we saw the reality that He was confirmed through the Scriptures as the Messiah. We saw John the Baptist preparing the way for Him. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” We saw the Lord Jesus being tested and also preaching and teaching and sharing the same thing: “Repent.” We saw that He came to His own, a people “sitting in darkness and they saw a great light.” They were sitting in the shadow of death. We saw very clearly His teaching revealed His personhood as the Christ, the Messiah, the Lord. And the miracles affirmed those realities. We saw the rejection of Jesus Christ by the present, apathetic generation where Jesus would say, “Woe to you, Chorazin and Bethsaida! For if the miracles that had occurred here had occurred in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, therefore it will be more tolerable for them in the judgment.” More tolerable for Tyre and Sidon, or Sodom than for those who had been in the presence of the living God convicting them of sin. And they did not repent! Now they were apathetic; they believed He was prophet or a religious person, but they did not believe He was God in human flesh.

We saw the Pharisees and the leaders who wanted to destroy Jesus. And we saw the Lord Jesus turning His attention away from the multitudes, although He would interact and He would still heal. He turned away, speaking to them in parables so that “seeing they would not see and hearing they would not hear.” God had given them over. They had a chance to hear; they had a chance to see. And they had rejected it so God gave them over. As Isaiah rightly prophesied that “... these people honor Me with their lips but their heart is far from Me.” We saw the Lord Jesus very clearly focusing on His disciples and facing toward His ultimate goal: to go to Jerusalem to die under the hands of the leaders, to be raised on the third day. And we saw those lessons within the context of His focus on dying for our sins.

And a few weeks ago we came to a turning point: the last week of our Lord Jesus’ life on earth, a turning point in the book of Matthew that is extremely important. The Lord Jesus has come down through Galilee (or come down through Perea) through Jericho, approaching Jerusalem before He would be crucified. We saw what we call the Triumphal Entry where He came in sitting on a colt or a donkey. We saw the humble King (Luke 19) weeping as He came in, as people were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Save now, we pray. Hosanna!” And yet the Lord was weeping. We saw very clearly that the same people – and we will see as we study – will be the same people who yell out, “Crucify Him.” We saw the Lord Jesus came to His destination and He entered His house, the temple. And there were those who were merchandising and extorting a relationship with God; they were charging and changing

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money and making exorbitant profits for people to relate to the living God according to the requirements that He had set in His Word, those shadows of sacrifices which would point to Christ. We saw Jesus kick them out – every single one! We saw Him also prevent people from just crossing through the temple lightly. And we saw that the religious leaders could not stop the worship of the Living God, Jesus Christ, that He had full authority over His temple: full authority ultimately over the nation of Israel, full authority over all. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. We saw that He has full authority to confront sinful behavior in us. And yet He is merciful. Those who recognize their need were healed.

And now we come to a passage where I believe He is going to point out the reality of where Israel really was. Matthew 21:18,

¹⁸ Now in the morning, when He returned to the city, He became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered. ²⁰ And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" ²¹ And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it shall happen. ²² "And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive." [Matthew 21:18-22]

Today, I believe, we are going to see a warning: that God will judge those who bear no fruit. And secondly, that the only way to bear fruit is in the context of a relationship with Christ through faith, through faith. So first of all, friends, you claim to follow Jesus and I pray that you do. The nation of Israel claimed to follow the Lord of Scripture. They were a nation that should have been a light to the world. We saw the last few weeks that even the court of the Gentiles was for the prayer for the nations. And they had turned it into a house of merchandise, or a den of thieves or robbers. Israel was to be a light revealing a true relationship with the living God. Now Jesus comes as their King and He cleans out their wickedness. And now we will see today He clearly reveals where they really stand. And there is still time. There is still time for them to repent. There is still time for them to turn and there is still time for you if you do not know Christ.

Today we come to an extremely unusual incident, an incident that has been widely misinterpreted by those who do not have faith. This is the cursing of the fig tree by our Lord Jesus. There are many unbelieving scholars and pastors of dead denominations who would go so far as to say that Jesus was acting like a spoiled child because He was hungry and He did not get what He wanted. Or that He had a bad attitude and was irresponsibly using His power. There are some who are mad at Him in an environmental sense. How could He hurt an innocent tree? Yet, we will see very clearly that that is not what this passage is talking about. And I believe the Lord Jesus is giving His disciples and us a visual and vivid illustration of Israel's hypocritical state and ultimate judgment. They looked very good on the

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outside; they were focused on the right God, the God of the Bible, the Truth. They were doing the things that He had commanded them to do. They looked good, but yet they were fruitless.

And maybe some of you look good. You listen to sermons. You are around church; you serve – whatever it might be. You are doing everything the Lord would say for you to do. But yet there is no fruit. There is something wrong. And God is gracious to warn us. God is gracious; He is a good God. He does not desire that any should perish but all come to repentance.

Let me briefly go through the context here. Notice in verse 18, he says, “Now in the morning, when He returned to the city, He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only...” And now let me just really quickly review how we got to this point; I have already shared it basically, but I want to get us to this point where He is. We see very clearly that the Lord Jesus came to Jerusalem on Sunday, what we call the Triumphal Entry, down the Mount of Olives. He wept over the city; He came (Mark shares that He went to the temple). He looked around and then He went back to Bethany and lodged with Lazarus and Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters. And we see the next day that Jesus is coming into the city and our event here in Mark is broken into two places. We have the first portion of the cursing of the fig tree in the first day when Jesus was on His way to the temple to cleanse it. And then the next day, we have them responding. Matthew has condensed both things together here; and I believe for the point to make it clear that Israel is being revealed for who they really are, those who look good but are really truly barren.

We see here very clearly that Jesus looked around the temple, and He went back to Bethany to lodge, as I shared. And the next day, He is coming to Jerusalem where we have this event which actually takes place over two days but is revealed in one situation here in Matthew. We have the cursing of the fig tree, and then we have the disciples’ question as they walked by. Let’s take a look at Mark and we can see this a little more clearly. Mark, chapter 11. Mark, chapter 11, and this will help us. We are going to start with verse 10. I did not need to explain it; I just should have read it for you, right? Mark, chapter 11:10. This is the Triumphal Entry. We see in verse 10:

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David; Hosanna in the highest!” (These are the people shouting as Jesus enters Jerusalem.) **¹¹ And He entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking all around, He departed for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.** **¹² And on the next day** (That would be Monday), **when they had departed from Bethany, He became hungry.** **¹³ And seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.** **¹⁴ And He answered and said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” And His disciples were listening.** (Very important; remember that.) **¹⁵ And they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple** (This what we saw last time) **and began to cast out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; ¹⁶ and He would not**

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permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. ¹⁷ And He began to teach and say to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a robbers' den." ¹⁸ And the chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for all the multitude was astonished at His teaching. (Then look at verse 19.) ¹⁹ And whenever evening came, they would go out of the city. ²⁰ And as they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. ²¹ And being reminded, Peter said to Him, "Rabbi, behold, the fig tree which You cursed has withered." ²² And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you. [Mark 11:10-24]

Now if you need to leave early, do not leave thinking you can just pray and get anything you want; we will talk about that. It is in the context of God's will that we have this statement, as we will see. So we have a little better picture of what is going on. We have a two-day event condensed into one account in Matthew, and it makes sense because of what Matthew – inspired by the Holy Spirit – is attempting and desiring for us to hear. We saw that Christ has authority over His temple and thus, His nation. He is the King of Jews. And it is from this condemnation of the hypocritical Pharisees, who were hiding like robbers behind their religiousness to make money, that Matthew now shares clearly their destiny because of their hypocrisy. And that is the flow that I believe we have in the book of Matthew. So back to Matthew, chapter 21, verse 18, "Now in the morning, when He returned to the city, He became hungry." This is the morning of the Triumphal Entry; this is the Monday morning when Jesus returned to the city. The text says, "He became hungry." And I think this is an amazing statement: we have God in human flesh subject and limited to the limitations of humanity. He became hungry. Have you ever become hungry? You bet! Right? We all have. Jesus Christ was fully God but also fully human. And He became hungry. The text in Mark seems to elude to that this was very early in the morning he returned to Jerusalem, and He became hungry. What an amazing statement to think God who took on human flesh, who came in the form of a bondservant, being found in the likeness of man, humbled Himself to the point being just like us. He became hungry.

And what happens? Verse 19, "And seeing a lone fig tree by the road..." Notice He says, "... a lone fig tree." It is by itself by the road. And it is my view, based on what we read in Mark (because Jesus saw it at a distance) that this was probably a fairly large tree, a fairly large tree. And if you have known anything about fig trees (All I know about fig trees are Fig Newtons! Just kidding.), but if you know anything about fig trees, if you have looked on the internet, you see them and they are pretty large when they are in growth and they have a lot of leaves. They are big trees; they are big trees. And he says it is by itself on the road. And being on the road - it said that because it was probably on no one's property. It was basically public property, we would say. And it says, "...by itself." And it is also well

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known that because of the rocky soil that was in the Jerusalem and Judea area, there would be those trees that would just grow one by itself. You would see a clear area. And evidently he is coming down the road; He is hungry and He sees this large fig tree in the distance. And we see here, very clearly, it is a lone fig tree. So what happens? He sees it and as Mark says, it is in leaf. Now again, most of us do not know much about fig trees. And I do not know much about them, but what we do need to understand about fig trees is the fruit would appear before (now they would have two harvests per year depending on the climate or culture) – the fruit would appear before the leaves would come. So you would assume if the leaves were on the tree that there is fruit on that tree. And so the Lord Jesus, in His humanity, is hungry and He goes. Let's see verse 18: "Now in the morning, when He returned to the city, He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves." Only Mark says it was "...in leaf. "

Now by the way, some people will say, "Why didn't Jesus, being God, know that there were no figs on this tree? Why did He try to attempt to satisfy His hunger on a tree that did not have any figs?" Well, first of all, as I have shared before, remember Jesus is fully God, but He is also fully human. And although God is omniscient – God knows all things – Jesus (and Jesus Himself being God) did reveal this quality as we have seen in Matthew knowing their thoughts. At times we see Jesus completely dependent on the Father in His humanity. We see Him limiting His deity in that sense. We see a humility in Him. And I do not think you will find a place anywhere in Scripture where Jesus takes care of His own needs using His own deity. And this was one of His own needs, and He was going to get food the way any one of us would get food. We see here very clearly Jesus in His humility – humanity – became hungry, and He did not snap His finger and have a sandwich like some of you kids do with your parents! He was dependent on God the Father to provide through natural means in this situation. And here, there was a fig tree. And He sees it in full leaf. And He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves. And I think we can understand the picture: He is walking along; He is hungry. There is a large fig tree. You see all the leaves. It is in full leaf. It is a beautiful tree. Every expectation for that tree would be that there would be figs on that tree.

Now, we are going to see very clearly what He does here. Verse 19. And actually, let me go back to Mark, chapter 11, for a second. Mark 11:13. This is an interesting statement Mark makes. He says,

¹³And seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, (That means it is full leaves.), He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, (and Mark says) for it was not the season for figs. [Mark 11:13]

Very interesting statement: it was not fig season but yet this tree had leaves which would indicate it should have figs. There is a lot of speculation concerning this idea of not being the season, concerning Israel's season and God's plan – their disobedience to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles and then their obedience. But all I see here very clearly is that this tree has leaves and no figs, no figs.

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So what does Jesus do? Verse 19, in the middle of that. “And He said to it, ‘No longer shall there be any fruit from you.’” Mark goes on to recount Peter’s words where He talks about cursing the fig tree – that Jesus had cursed this tree. Why would Jesus curse this tree for not having figs? And I think I have already shared it; I think we already understand it, but let’s see it from the Word of God. I believe He is symbolically revealing Israel’s state: that they look really good on the outside and they should be bearing fruit; but there is no fruit at all.

And you say, “Well, how can I say that? What biblical evidence do you have that that is really the case of what the Lord Jesus is sharing?’ Well, a couple things I want to share. First of all, I believe this event and His cursing of the tree was for the disciples’ benefit. In Mark, chapter 11, verse 14, He says, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” And it says, “And His disciples were listening.” His disciples were listening. It was for their benefit. This is for the benefit of us and the disciples obviously. Secondly, it is well-understood in Scripture that Israel was at times symbolically compared to a fig tree in the Old Testament. Let me share; there are a few passages. Let me just share one. If you want to turn to Hosea, chapter 9. And God will do this in the Word of God; He will use figurative language to point out realities. Hosea, chapter 9, and let’s look at verse 10. This is a condemnation of Israel before they were ejected from the land. We see their wickedness. Israel is like an adulterous wife. We see this pictured out in Hosea’s life as an example. Hosea 9:10,

¹⁰ I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first season. But they came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame, And they became as detestable as that which they loved. [Hosea 9:10]

If you go down to verse 16,

¹⁶ Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up, They will bear no fruit. [Hosea 9:16]

You see, God has used this example. There are other passages, we see, where God uses, an example of Israel as a fig tree.

And lastly, I believe, the context is what solidifies it for me. We have Jesus speaking for His disciples’ benefit, we have Israel certainly having been called a fig tree in that sense, and lastly we see the context. Remember Jesus has condemned the religious rulers for their hypocrisy. They are using religion to hide their wickedness; they have made His house into a den of thieves or robbers. They have turned it into a house of merchandise. Jesus has condemned the wickedness going on in the temple, and He has condemned the religious leaders obviously. And He has taken the full control, and now we see one other element of that condemnation: Israel’s fruitlessness and, as we will see, their faithlessness and their imminent judgment. And I believe, really clearly, it is a graphic illustration of the true condition of Israel at the time of Christ. If you looked at a distance, they look really good. They looked like they were following the right Lord, the One revealed in Scripture – the Scriptures that they followed. They looked beautiful – full in leaf. But when you get close, you realize that is just deception; there is no fruit at all.

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There is no fruit at all. They are actually bearing no fruit in relationship to the Living God. And God Himself symbolically curses this fig tree, representing their imminent judgment, as we will see.

Folks, we have seen this throughout already that Israel was full of hypocrisy. We saw their religious hypocrisy back in Matthew, chapter 6. Let's look at that for a second. Matthew, chapter 6. As Jesus shares the teaching on the mount, as He warns those He is teaching who would eventually reject Him – they did not get it. Matthew, chapter 6,

¹ "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. ² When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ⁴ that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. ⁵ And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; (That is not a nice term!) for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." [Matthew 6:1-5]

I mentioned it earlier – if you skip up to Matthew, chapter 15, verse 7. The Lord God condemns the hypocrites. Verse 7 of Matthew 15:

⁷ "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ⁸ 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. (And maybe some of you are like that. You come and you honor the Lord with your lips, but your heart is far. You want to get out of here! You could care less. "I can't wait until this is over." Maybe your heart is far, maybe you do not love the things of Christ, but you put on an outward show and if people were to look at you, they would see the leaves and it looks like you are following Christ. He says,) ⁹ 'But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'" [Matthew 15:7-9]

And lastly, if you look up to Matthew 23, we see the Lord's vehement condemnation of the hypocrites as His finale of His condemnation before they would crucify Him. And we will see this, Lord-willing, in a couple weeks. And I am not going to read the whole chapter, but I am going to read bits and pieces of Matthew 23.

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ³ therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. ⁴ And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. ⁵ But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen

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the tassels of their garments. ⁶ And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷ and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. ⁸ But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. ¹¹ But the greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (And then there is a lot more condemnation – I do not have time for it, but go down to verse 25.) ²⁵ ***"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.*** (Maybe you have got a clean outside and you come and you do the things of Christ, the things that are truly of Christ, you are around His people, you are serving Him but on the inside you are full of self-indulgence; I pray that is not the case. And if it is, I pray that you recognize it because God is a gracious God, not wanting anyone to perish, not wanting anyone to be self-deceived to their eternal destiny. He says here,) ²⁷ ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful (beautiful), but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."*** [Mathew 23:1-12, 25, 27-28]

You see, there are those who live a life of sin, and God says, "Do not be deceived." If that is their lifestyle, they are not saved. They have not been changed. But there are also those who live a life of outward righteousness according to God's Word, but yet on the inside are not changed. And that is what Jesus is saying about Israel. He is saying they look beautiful, but there is no fruit. There is no fruit.

Hypocrisy is not and was not limited to Israel. Maybe there are some of you here who look good on the outside but on the inside, there are dead men's bones. It is dead. It is selfish; it is self-focused. Maybe you are listening to sermons, praying, and singing and doing the things that those who know Christ would do, but your hearts are far although your lips may praise Him. Some of you say, "Well, what is fruit? What would fruit look like for Israel? What is fruit? What would the Lord see? What would He want to see? What would be fruit that is from Him?" And I think the idea of fruit bearing is very simple, and I think we can understand it very clearly. We see a great example in John, chapter 15, and we are probably very familiar with this. And would you turn with me to John, chapter 15. We see good fruit is produced from a good tree when the branches abide and rest, simply drawing everything from the vine. Then they will produce fruit. It is the reality of faith. There is only one who is good; it is God. And we have been created for good works. If you have a true relationship with the Living God by faith, if you will abide in Him and trust Him (That is what we will see - have faith in God.), then you will produce good fruit. If you truly do not believe and do not trust Him – you may have a said faith, a profession – but if you do not trust Christ, you will produce zero fruit. Jesus says in John 15:1,

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¹ **"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already clean** (Now He is speaking of *clean*; He is talking about being saved. He is talking to His disciples. This comes earlier from John 13 where He talked about those who were clean. They had received His Word. "You are already clean...") **because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide (or remain) in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵ I am the vine (Jesus says), 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.** (And if you do not know Christ, if you are severed from Him because you do not have faith because you are in your sins still, you cannot bear any true, genuine fruit. You can do a lot of good deeds; you can have a lot of nice leaves.) ⁶ **If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.** (This is pretty vivid language. He says,) ⁷ **If you abide in Me, (And look at this!) and My words abide in you** (They remain in you.), **ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.** (Do you see the connection, as we will see a little later, that when we abide in Christ, whatever we ask according to His will, He will do? If we are abiding in Him – that is the connection here.) ⁸ **By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."** [John 15:1-8]

When you have a true relationship with the Living God, when you have truly humbled yourself before Him and believed in Him – not just raising your hand but truly recognizing your sin, crying out to Christ for salvation – when you have been redeemed from darkness to light, when you have been saved, when you trust in Christ, you will manifest the life and righteousness of Christ. You will manifest fruit; you will bear much fruit if you abide in Christ. If you have never abided in Christ, you will bear zero fruit. You may look good; you may look great. Everything may look right from the outside; but on the inside, that is not the case. As we heard earlier in Matthew, chapter 7 – I will not repeat it– but good trees do not produce bad fruit; bad trees do not produce good fruit. There is many on that day who will say, "Lord, Lord, didn't we do stuff?" And He will say, "Depart from Me; I never knew you, you who practiced lawlessness."

We see in Luke a parallel passage to Matthew, the passage that Dennis read. Luke, chapter 6. Turn there for a second. Luke, chapter 6, verse 42. (We have a lot of passages today.) This is really parallel to what the Lord had shared in Matthew 7 which you heard earlier. Let's look at verse 42. Luke 6:42:

⁴² **"Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite** (He is talking about non-believers. If you heard the word *hypocrite*, He is not speaking of people who know Christ. He is speaking of religious people who are going around and they are doing this and that, but they have got this huge log in their eye. They are

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not saved. Once they are saved, then they can see clearly to address sin. He says, “You hypocrite”) **first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.** ⁴³ **For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit; nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit.** ⁴⁴ **For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush.** ⁴⁵ **The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.** ⁴⁶ **And why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? ⁴⁷ Everyone who comes to Me, and hears My words, and acts upon them, I will show you whom he is like... [Luke 6:42-47]**

The true believer will hear God’s Word and respond to God’s Word and will produce fruit. The non-believer: one who cannot respond, one who cannot respond because they do not have the Spirit of God. We will see that in a minute. Good fruit is manifest in the life of the one who abides in Christ through faith, believing what He said, which will result in obedience if you are truly saved. We see the fruit of God’s Spirit in the believer’s life. Galatians, very clear. Galatians, chapter 5,

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. [Galatians 5:22-23]

In Ephesians 5, the fruit of walking as children of light consists of all “...goodness, righteousness, and truth...” Philippians 1, verse 11, “...the fruit of righteousness ...comes through Jesus Christ...” You cannot do anything good or righteous apart from depending on Christ. If you live your life making decisions (“I am going to do this; I am going to do that.”) and you are not trusting in Christ, there is no fruit in that situation. And we believers have fruitless times, don’t we? But non-believers will have zero fruit. Colossians, chapter 1, verse 10. As the Word works in our heart, we have the knowledge of Christ. We should be bearing fruit in every good work. Believers who are legitimate children (not illegitimate children) are going to be disciplined by God (Hebrews, chapter 12). And those who have been trained by discipline, we see afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Do you have fruit in your life? Righteousness – the righteousness of Christ manifest in your life? Or are you all worried and upset about everything? Do you think about your own life all the time? Do you see others, as we will see, as more important than yourself? Do you want to truly obey His Word? You see, when you become a child of God, you become a new creation in Christ. You now have the ability to depend on Christ and obey His Word and from that will manifest real, genuine fruit. We have been created by Christ for good works that we would walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

Now we are not glorified yet, brother and sister. But in the life of a true believer, there will be fruit! There is going to be a softness towards sin. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” There is going to be a hunger and thirst for righteousness as Jesus would say. You are going to hunger for the things you should be doing, not mourning over the things you are not doing or are doing. There

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is going to be a desire for God's Word; there is going to be an obedience to it. Paul talks about the obedience of faith in Romans. There is going to be a love for the body of Christ, a self-sacrificial love. That is genuine fruit instead of your own desires. If you have never had that, I would examine yourself. The life of Christ is going to be manifest in the true believer, and Israel was dead even though they looked good. Let me share a passage: James, chapter 1. Let's turn there together. James, chapter 1. James is addressing how believers should deal with trials; and in that context, he is going to reveal that maybe some of them who were in these trials maybe did not know Him. He is going to give them a test. James, chapter 1, 21:

²¹ Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. ²² But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. (Remember what Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount? He said the one who is founded on the rock is the one who hears His Word and does it. And the one which was on the sand who will be destroyed is the one who hears it and does not do it. An evidence of being saved, as we will see, is the ability to trust Christ and then do what He says. He says,) **²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.** (You come to the Word of God. You come hearing. You get convicted. And you walk out of here and you forget everything you have just heard about yourself. He says here,) **²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty,** (That is God's Word.) **and abides by it,** (remains with it) **not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does. ²⁶ If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. ²⁷ This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress,** (to love the body of Christ) **and to keep oneself unstained by the world. [James 1:21-27]**

Let me share one other passage: 1 John, chapter 2. Turn there with me. 1 John, chapter 2. John writes,

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. (Isn't that great? Having problems with sin, believer? Read God's Word. I am writing you these things that you may not sin.) **And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;** (Praise God! That is not in the Word; I just said, "Praise God!") **² and He Himself is the propitiation** (the satisfaction) **for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.** (Now listen to this. Verse 3.) **³ And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments** (Not the Ten Commandments. The word means *command*. It is His commands. It is His Word.) **⁴ 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; ⁵ but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of**

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God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: ⁶ the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. [1 John 2:1-6]

If you know the Lord, you will obey Him because you have His Spirit and the ability to do so now. That is genuine fruit. That is genuine fruit. Do you obey from a redeemed heart? Does your life reveal the genuine marks of a true believer? And I am not saying the external things – the leaves that look great. I am talking about the fruit that comes from a real relationship with Christ. And kids, this is the dangerous thing for you. You hear the Word of God. You hear this Truth. You come externally at times, hearing the Truth; and on the inside, you know it is not the case. And the reason is because of sin. And Jesus Christ died for our sins. And if you call out to Christ, “Lord God, I am a sinner. I have failed. My heart is wrong. This is just all external.” Cry out to Christ! He will save you. He will save you. Israel, if they had truly come to know the Living God, they would have borne fruit. They had no fruit, no fruit at all. Zero. How about you?

Notice He symbolically shares their judgment – back to our passage in Matthew, chapter 21. And we will move through pretty quickly at this point. Matthew 21, verse 19. “And seeing the lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, ‘No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.’ And at once the fig tree withered.” Now in the gospel of Mark, we see Jesus cursing the fig tree and His disciples were listening. We have a bold, symbolic statement concerning Israel. There is a point where you will be condemned; God will give you over to judgment. If you have rejected His Truth, He will give you over. We see very clearly that Jesus knew this would happen, obviously being God. Luke, chapter 19. As He was coming in the Triumphal Entry, we see that God did give over Israel to judgment. He did give them over. Luke 19:

⁴¹ And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ "For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, ⁴⁴ and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation." [Luke 19:41-44]

He curses the fig tree, and Israel itself in this situation is being disciplined. And we see in 70 AD everything Jesus predicted happened as Israel’s temple was destroyed. “...not one stone...” The city was demolished and we see Israel scattered. The heart and center of Israel was the temple.

Now some, on a side note, have made this (used this) theology to say, “Hey, Israel doesn’t exist anymore.” And you cannot say that if you read the rest of the Bible. I am not going to get into it; but very clearly, God does curse this generation and there is never anymore fruit from them. But we see in Scripture that God will eventually save Israel. Let me share from Romans, chapter 11. Let’s turn there

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just for a second, just so that we do not allow someone to mislead us to think because of this situation, Israel is a “done deal.” Israel, as a nation, is not a “done deal.” This generation is a “done deal.” Individually, if you reject Christ, you are a “done deal.” You are in trouble. Romans 11:25:

²⁵ For I do not want you, (Paul writes) brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, (My paraphrase is that you are the “smarty pants.”) that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶ and thus all Israel will be saved; (Not all of all time, but Israel at one time) just as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob." ²⁷ "And this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins." [Romans 11:25-27]

And you can read on there. It is very clear: Israel has not been cut off, but Jesus cuts off this generation (very clearly) because of their sin. Israel, as a nation, is nationally cut off until their salvation, until their salvation. We have a vivid illustration: Jesus coming on the road, seeing this beautiful tree from a distance, and He is hungry. And there are no figs on it, and He curses it for the disciples to hear – a living illustration of Israel, and maybe some of you.

Remember what John the Baptist said to the Pharisees who came out to be baptized. They were playing; they were doing a show. He said, “Bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.” And he said, “The axe is already laid at the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” If you do not bear fruit, it is evidence you do not have a relationship with the Living God, and you are still in your sin. And there is judgment for sin. But Christ came. The same God who is pronouncing judgment here would die for our sins.

So notice what happens as we finish here. Look at verse 20 in Matthew. “And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, ‘How did the fig tree wither at once?’” How did this happen? The disciples did not get it, did they? They are interested in the fig tree withering; they did not get what Jesus was trying to share. How did this fig tree wither at once? Mark says it withered from the roots up. This is a big tree! This would be miraculous. It is a miracle! How did it wither at once? And Jesus answered and said to them, “Why, I cursed it, of course!” No, He does not say that, does He? He says something that does not make sense: “Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.” I find this very interesting. In the gospel of Mark, He answers and says to them, in verse 22 of Mark 11, “Have faith in God.” That is His answer.

And I think the key to understanding this is that Jesus does not answer what they ask; He answers what they should have asked. Why did Israel not produce fruit? They looked so good. “Have faith in God.” The issue is a faith issue. They did not respond. They should have asked, “Why did this not produce any fruit?” They did not get it, and Jesus answers what they should have asked. And He says, very clearly.

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Now this is an interesting portion because the disciples never moved any mountains, did they? And the Lord Jesus never moved any mountains either- it is a figure of speech. We saw back in Matthew 17, it was a figure of speech. It was a Jewish idiom. A mover of mountains was one who could overcome obstacles. And He says if you have faith in God, you will overcome these things. Nothing shall be impossible in that sense. Have faith in God, and He says, "Do not doubt." Biblical faith and doubting are mutually exclusive. If you are doubting, you are not trusting God. That is just the reality of it. Apart from abiding in Christ, trusting in Him, you will not bear fruit. Israel did not repent of their sins; they were disconnected from the Lord God. They did not produce fruit. And Jesus tells His disciples, "Have faith in God."

And we see prayer and faith are inseparable. "All things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive." These Israelites had turned His house into a house of merchandise. It was to be a house of prayer. Representative of a relationship with the Living God, prayer reveals a dependence on Christ; it is integral in faith. If you are not a praying person, you do not know the Lord. We pray and that reveals we are totally dependent. We have a relationship with the Living God. "All things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive." It is not a blanket statement; it is according to God's will. Genuine faith in Jesus Christ will be manifest in the context of prayer. And God will produce much fruit in you according to His will. Jesus has given a vivid illustration, a vivid illustration of Israel's hypocritical state. They looked really, really, really good on the outside; yet they were fruitless and they were faithless.

Do you trust Christ? Have you trusted Him for salvation? Do you trust Him every day in everything you do? Or do you just "do your thing?" "I've got this plan. I have got to go." Do you trust Christ? Are you dependent on Him, praying? Do you trust that whatever He has called you to do, He will do? If He were to say to you that mountain could move... if you trusted Him, it would? Do you believe that? Do you have that true genuine faith that you just believe what Jesus says? Hypocrisy is not limited to Israel. There are some of you here who look good on the outside – you have a said faith. You do all the stuff of Scripture. You hear the Word of God. You listen to sermons. You pray. You sing. You worship the Lord with your lips. You serve His body. But yet your hearts are far. There is no fruit; there is no genuine righteousness in your life. If that is the case, God is gracious to show you that. He loves you and He sent His Son Jesus to die for you. And if you call out to Christ, "Lord, I am such a hypocrite. I am such a sinner. It is all a sham; it is all external. It is not true. Lord God, I have sinned so greatly. I have believed that Your Son died for my sins, that You rose from the dead. Lord Jesus, save me." He will save you. And He will then produce fruit in your life when you trust Him. He will produce fruit. The axe is at the root.

How about us believers? Do you have faith in God? Certainly we have or we would not be true believers, right? But we waver, don't we? We waver; we do not believe truly like we should. We doubt. We need to believe what God has said. If God says that you could move that mountain (that is an illustration) then we believe that that is the case. If God says He will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, we believe that. Whatever God says, we believe. We step out in faith and obey Him in the context of dependent prayer.

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I want to finish and just read through John 15. Let's turn there together. John 15 again. Jesus says,

¹ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine-dresser. ² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it that it might bear more fruit. (He is speaking to the disciples, and now He says,) ³ You are already clean (That speaks of being saved – chapter 13) because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, (You know, you just cannot do anything apart from trusting Christ. Do not forget that!) so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 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. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, (Notice how this is so similar to our passage.) ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples." [John 15:1-8]

Prayer

Lord God, thank You for Your Word. You are so gracious to unveil the reality of where people who name Your name stand. I thank You for this illustration of where Israel was in unbelief and this warning. I pray that those here who do not know You are warned, that they may look good on the outside but You see the heart. And if they do not know You, they will not produce fruit and they will be thrown into the fire. Lord, Your desire is that no one perishes. Your desire is that all come to repentance. And I pray they would today. No more charades. No more hypocrisy. No more fakeness. Just an open repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And Father, I pray for those of us believers. We, by Your nature, have trusted You. We have obeyed You, but yet we fail and we do not trust You at times. And there are times when we do not produce fruit. I just pray You would convict us: that we would depend on You, that we would be praying about everything, that we would be walking in the context of total dependence, that we would humble ourselves before Your mighty hand – that in everything we do, we would be reminded that apart from Your Son, we can do nothing. I pray for us believers that if there is anything in our lives we have been planning or doing or whatever it is, that if You have not been part of it, we would just repent and we would place You as the priority in everything, trusting you, abiding in You. Thank You so much for Your Word. Thank You so much for Your Son Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.

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