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## *Ready to Rumble: Who Gives a Fig?* Matthew 21: 18-22

OK....I've changed my title for this morning's message. Sorry 'bout that. And since we needed to publish the bulletins two weeks ago because our office was closed last week, that means the title, text and sermon questions are all wrong. Other than that, I haven't changed a thing.

My new title is, "Who Gives a Fig?" How many have ever eaten a Fig Newton? (Great fiber!) How many have ever eaten a dry fig? How about a fresh fig? OK...here's where I have you: How many have ever owned a fig tree? I did. In my backyard in Bakersfield. It wasn't very large but it produced nice, fresh figs and I loved eating them. Apparently, so did Jesus. Listen to the next part of Matthew's story. (18-22)

All right, last week I gave you some architecture lessons about the temple. I hope it helped you to understand what Jesus was doing when he chased out the money-changers. This morning, I want to give you an agricultural lesson. Are you up for that?

The fig tree is a valuable plant in the Middle East. In addition to producing a fruit that can be eaten fresh or dried, it also produces big leaves that provide wonderful shade in a very sunny region. The fig tree also plays an important role in the Bible. Here's a test: When is the fig tree first mentioned in scripture? Genesis 3. After Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, they realized they were naked and covered up with what? Fig leaves! In fact, some Jewish traditions think that the forbidden tree **was** a fig tree--not the fictitious apple tree--and that Adam and Eve tried to cover themselves with their own sin.

The fig was one of the seven species of trees mentioned in the Promised Land. It was also a symbol of the peace and prosperity that would occur when the Messiah came. Listen to the prophet Micah: "[In that day] every man will sit under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken." (4:4) There was even a prophet who was a fig farmer. Can you name him? Amos.

So, the fig tree is a big deal in the Bible. Now...back to our story. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey...almost daring the religious leaders to take a swing at him. Then he turns up the heat. He walks into the temple and clears out the money changers who are gouging the worshipers. We had never seen anything like this from Jesus before... but we can certainly understand it. The religious rulers were exploiting their people. Taking advantage of folks who wanted to worship God and had no other place to go. So...we can understand why that would make Jesus angry enough to turn the place upside down.

But answer me this: **what did that poor fig tree ever do to Jesus?** Don't you wonder? The morning after his temple slap down, Jesus is walking in from Bethany. He was hungry and spotted a fig tree that was covered with nice, bushy leaves. But when he got closer, he discovered that it was barren; it had no fruit. Then Jesus did something we've never seen him do before: he used his miraculous power to destroy something! He says to that bushy, barren fig tree, "May you never bear fruit again!" And immediately, the fig tree withers up... and dies.

This is called a "penal miracle." Like penal colony... it penalizes something. There were many of these in the Old Testament. Remember the ten plagues on Egypt? God used those miracles to punish Pharaoh to convince him release the people of Israel.

But that was the Old Testament. We've never seen anything like this from Jesus. He has performed miracles to heal, to cast out demons, to multiply food, to calm storms, to raise the dead. But this? It's almost like he's having a tizzy fit. He wants his figs and he wants them "wight now!" And if he can't have them, he will zap that nasty old twee.

Is that how it was? Was Jesus throwing a tantrum? Wow...maybe he really WAS ready to rumble? Well, that's ONE way to look at it. Would you like another?

This was a parable.... a live-action parable. Jesus was using this barren fig tree to make a spiritual point about judgment...and about fruitlessness. First, judgment. I shared with you several Old Testament references about the fig tree. Here's one more. It comes from Jeremiah. Those of you in the Nehemiah Project will recall that Jeremiah warned the people of Judah what was going to happen to them if they didn't shape up. He warned them that the Babylonians would come, wipe out their city, burn their temple and take them into exile. Listen to what he said:

5:17 “They will devour your harvests and food, devour your sons and daughters; they will devour your flocks and herds, devour your vines and **fig trees**. With the sword they will destroy the fortified cities in which you trust.”

And then this word of judgment in Jeremiah 8:13: “I will take away their harvest,” declares the Lord. “There will be no grapes on the vine. **There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither.** What I have given them will be taken from them.”

Why did God send Babylonians to wipe out ancient Israel, burn her temple and drag them off into exile? Because they betrayed God...and they betrayed God’s world. God called them to be his people so that they could be a witness and a blessing to the entire world. He even put them on a tiny chunk of land that was the intersection of all the continents so that every time people marched through from Europe to Asia to Africa...they would get a glimpse of God’s people living God’s way; they would see the blessing that comes from obeying the one true God.

That was the plan. But Israel became as corrupt as the nations surrounding her. They did the same dreadful things the rest of the lost world did: they built idols, they worshiped other gods, they even sacrificed their own children in fire. In other words, the one nation that should have known better...the one nation that had been specially called by God to bless and to save the rest of the world...turned their back on him. They wouldn’t obey him. They lived in a way that was shameful to him and scandalous to those on the outside. So God brought judgment. He sold them into exile. He allowed their temple to be destroyed and their entire way of life with it. Or... as Jeremiah puts it, **he caused their fig trees to produce no fruit and caused their leaves to wither.**

But God wasn’t done. 600 years later, He makes a personal appearance to his chosen people. He invites them to be a part of God’s salvation. But the religious leaders have no interest in joining forces with Jesus. They hate his plan! They are sure that God’s plan involves loving them and saving them and judging and hating the rest of the wicked world. So, they don’t welcome Jesus, they don’t worship him. They turn their backs on him, they hate him, try to trap him...and in the end, they will kill him.

But Jesus isn’t going down without a fight! His march into Jerusalem is proof of that. His cleansing of the temple is proof of that. And now, his live-action parable with a fig tree is proof of that, too. Now WE read about this and it seems weird to us. It seems petulant. Environmentalists would be even more offended. They might chain themselves to the rest of the fig trees along the road to protect them. It is just an odd story.

But remember, the people in this story knew their Old Testament. And just as Jesus had quoted Jeremiah in the temple—remember, “a den of robbers...” —now he acts out in parable what Jeremiah had predicted. “Because you have again rejected God when he came to you, I pronounce a curse upon you. As a nation, you are like this fig tree: barren, withered and dead.” It is no coincidence that Matthew puts these stories together. You have a barren temple that is failing to produce the kind of worship that pleases God. And now you have a barren fig tree that represents the fruitlessness of a nation that had been chosen, loved, called and sent by God to bless the world...and had failed on every count. And so, Jesus pronounces judgment. Not upon one tree; but upon an entire corrupt, fruitless nation.

Now we might be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief and say, “Well, that’s very interesting and unusual. Too bad for them.” But not so fast. The fig tree is also a warning to us! Refresh my memory. Jesus gave two signs ...two ways that people would know whether we were his disciples. Do you remember what they are? First, that we would love. Here’s Jesus in the upper room. **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** John 13:34

Now, what is the **other** sign of true discipleship? Fruitfulness! If you are a disciple of Jesus, you will bear fruit. John 15:16: You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Let me tell you a little more about fig trees. Unlike most fruit-bearing trees, the fig tree usually bears fruit before it produces leaves. Even though the tree Jesus zapped was outside of its normal fruit-bearing season, fig trees actually produced as many as three crops per year and could have fruit on their branches 10 out of the 12 months. If you saw a fig tree full of leaves, you could reasonably expect to find some fruit on it.

But this fig tree was a phony. It was covered with leaves...it gave the promise of fruit... but upon closer examination, was found to be barren. Again, can you see how this would be a helpful illustration for this parable? The nation of Israel with its temple, its rituals, its regulations...its religiosity... sure looked like it ought to produce fruit. But upon closer examination, Jesus declared that it was a phony. All show and no go. ... covered with the leaves of the appearance of religion...but barren and fruitless.

But didn’t Jesus say something about fruitfulness to his disciples, too? Oh yeah...how about that same upper room sermon in John? Jesus goes on:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.... <sup>8</sup>*This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.* John 15:1-2; 8

Jesus could not be clearer on this and he repeats himself again and again in all four gospels: **His true disciples bear fruit.** If they do NOT bear fruit, they are dead wood and what does he do? He lops them off and throws them into the fire. And even if we DO bear fruit, he still prunes us...cuts us...shapes us to bear more fruit. **Fruitfulness is a non-negotiable, essential sign of Christian discipleship.**

This also helps explain what Jesus says at the end of the fig tree incident. *“I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”*

I think Jesus is still talking about fruitfulness. He isn’t teaching us to do magic tricks. “Having faith” is not about being certain of my ability to pray for anything I want and getting it. Faith...according to Jesus...is complete, utter, surrender to him. John calls it “remaining” in him...making his will your will, his desire your desires, his passions your passion. When you are **that** aligned with Jesus’ and his fruit-bearing purpose, then...you can ask for anything...you can do anything. And...as John warns...when you are apart from him, what can you do? Nothing!

This is bad news for the “Jesus is just my savior” crowd. You know, the ones who pray to receive Jesus as their savior so that he can take away their sins and they won’t go to hell...and then go on and live any old way they want to. Who doesn’t want to dodge hell? But it doesn’t work like that. Savior and Lord...it’s a package deal. Salvation and fruitfulness ...they go together.

Jesus’ fig tree parable is both judgment and warning. Judgment against the religious establishment that had all the appearance of being fruitful...but was in fact, barren. And a warning to his disciples, a warning that their lives not be all leaves and no fig.

So...how are your figs? Not your leaves; not your outward religious appearance. What kind of fruit are you producing? This week, I’ve asked myself that question a lot. What is the fruit of my ministry? What will be the legacy of my ministry at Chapel Hill? The easiest things to point to will be land and buildings. We built a great campus together during my time of leadership. But the easiest thing to point to in Jesus’ time was the temple and its courtyards. That didn’t do much for them, did it? And it didn’t last long. In 70 AD, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and the temple burned to the ground.

These buildings, wonderful as they are, will not last. The question of me when I stand before the Lord will be: did I bear fruit for Jesus? Lasting, eternal spiritual fruit? Will there be more people who know God and love Jesus and live their own disciple-making, fruit-bearing lives because of our ministry? Jesus says...in his teaching and in the fig tree parable...that is the **only** thing that counts. Fruit. Whatever legacy I leave, the only one that will matter...the only one thing that will count in God’s eyes...is that more people were fruit-bearing disciples of Jesus when I was done with my life than when I started.

And guess what...that’s same standard that will be applied to every one of you, too! To this entire church. Will we continue to hear from Chapel Hill folks who are taking God’s love to distant parts of his world? Will we continue to produce Barnabas Leaders who are leading and loving LifeGroups? Will we continue to welcome back high school kids who are discovering that Jesus loves poor Mexican kids as much as he loves upper middle class white kids? Jesus finds no delight in bushy, barren trees. He is not pleased with lives that look good from a distance...but the closer you get, the more you realize that it’s all pretense.

Here’s the question for the morning: **are you all leaf and no fig?** If you are...and if you refuse to move close enough to Jesus so that his life-giving power can flow through you to others... then you are at risk of suffering the same fate as that fig tree. A withering...and I mean that literally... word from Jesus. A trip to the burn pile.

What is the fruit you are bearing that proves you belong to Jesus? Forget about the foliage...the religious decorations... what fruit do you have to show for your spiritual life? <sup>8</sup>*This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

## Sermon Discussion Questions

1. The theme of the sermon series is “Ready to Rumble.” Beginning with Jesus “Triumphal Entry” in Matthew 21, can you point to ways that Jesus is challenging the religious establishment to a “throwdown?”
2. Pastor Mark spoke of the prominence of the fig tree in Old Testament literature. Can you recall some of those examples?
3. What is unique about Jesus’ miraculous encounter with the fig tree? Does it bother you? Why? Was Jesus throwing a tantrum or was there a point to this “live-action” parable? What was it?
4. What are two key ‘proofs’ of Christian discipleship? Read John 15: 1-8. How does Jesus’ teaching here match his actions with the fig tree? What kind of “fruit” is Jesus talking about?
5. On a scale of 1-10, how “fruitful” would you judge your life to be? How would you like to see that changed? When Jesus says that we must “remain (or “abide”) in him in order to be fruitful, how does that take pressure OFF of us? And how does it turn UP the heat on us?

