

April 5, 2009  
**The Day After**  
**Mark 11:12-23**

*The fig tree and the temple*

The day after Jesus entered Jerusalem - welcomed as king and Messiah by the masses - He goes toward the temple. It was the logical thing to do. The temple symbolized the heart and soul of the Jewish religion - of the Jewish people - at that time. The temple symbolized their cultural pride and identity. It was the heart of the Jewish nation. If Jesus is the true king, the authentic Messiah, the genuine Anointed One of God, then He must go the temple.

On the way, Jesus sees a fig tree. It looks beautiful. He goes closer to see if it had any fruit. It would not have any ripe figs yet, but the buds that would become the figs should be there (they form even before the leaves come out). The fact that there are not even any buds on the tree is troubling. On the outside, from a distance, the tree looked great: but on closer inspection it had no figs. It had no fruit. Jesus did not "curse" the tree - He simply affirmed what was already true: it wasn't doing anyone any good. The end result would be a sad, withered tree that fed no one.

Jesus used this as a metaphor for the spiritual life of the Jewish nation at that time. Jewish society and faith looked good from the outside - the temple, built by Herod the Great, was an amazing, impressive, beautiful building; the priests did all the right ritualistic things. But their religion was hollow and lifeless. There was no prayer, worship, spiritual education or godly conversation in the temple ... just business. The temple and rule-keeping wasn't doing anyone any good. The end result would be sad, withered lives that blessed no one. The soul of the nation was barren and without fruit (like the fig tree). All the rule-keeping and beautiful architecture in the world can't substitute for the life-giving nourishment that comes from a genuine relationship with God, a relationship that comes from inside out - from the heart.

*Feeling like a Fig Tree*

Are you feeling empty? Barren? Withered? Does your faith feel hollow and empty?

It is easy to blame others: it's the church's fault, my parent's fault, my employer's fault, my small group's fault, my pastor's fault, and so forth and so forth. Last June, author J.K. Rowling, gave the Commencement Address at the Annual Meeting of the Harvard Alumni Association<sup>1</sup>:  
*"There is an expiry date on blaming your parents (or anyone else) for steering you in the wrong direction; the moment you are old enough to take the wheel, responsibility lies with you."* She's right, isn't she? There's a point when "growing up" means taking responsibility for our lives. If our faith is not as it ought to be, we have to deal with it. It's easier - and makes us feel good -

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<sup>1</sup> <http://harvardmagazine.com/commencement/the-fringe-benefits-failure-the-importance-imagination>

to blame someone else. But an essential part of "growing up" spiritually - as in other parts of life - is to take responsibility and do the things that need to be done. No one can do it for us.

If you're feeling spiritually empty, dry, frustrated, etc., Jesus may have to come into your life and turn over a few tables. *"But"* - you protest - *"It's not me that has to change. It's everyone else ..."* That was actually what the Jewish leaders said: *"It's not us that has to change. It's the Romans. It's the Sadducees. It's the Pharisees ..."* Jesus inevitably starts with me. I really know, in my heart of hearts, that that is what needs to happen. But it's hard to admit that ...

- My priorities are wrong (what do I put first in my life, before the Lord ...)
- My attitude is wrong (trying to blame everyone else for my problem ...)
- My lifestyle is wrong (I need to change how I spend my time, my entertainment, my exercise, my diet ...)
- My expectations are wrong (I want to "feel good" spiritually right now, this instant, with no effort - just give me a "pill" [so to speak] ... I don't want to have to WORK at it; I don't want to hear that it will take time; I don't like the work "discipline")

Jesus may have to throw some of my treasures around and shake me up a bit. He may be trying to get my attention. Unfortunately pain is the greatest motivator in our lives - sometimes it's only when our health takes a hit, we lose our job - or we feel spiritually "fruitless" and barren - that we make the changes we need to make. Only when Jesus sees through the nice bushy leaves of our lives - the façade - and shows us how empty we are can He begin to deal with things.

It is VERY hard to admit that I have to change because that means admitting that I have problems. It's not all someone else's fault. I have failed. *"What I feared most,"* said Rowling, *"was failure ...I think it fair to say that by any conventional measure, a mere seven years after my graduation day, I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless. The fears my parents had had for me, and that I had had for myself, had both come to pass, and by every usual standard, I was the biggest failure I knew."*

*"Now, I am not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun. That period of my life was a dark one, and I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairy tale resolution. I had no idea how far the tunnel extended, and for a long time, any light at the end of it was a hope rather than a reality."*

When God deals with some of the issues in our lives, it is not fun. It can be a dark, difficult time. It may seem like there is no light at the end of the tunnel. But when we sincerely invite God to come into our lives and deal with the problems that are there, things change. But it takes work - hard work (no nice fairy tale resolution!). Jesus doesn't wave a magic wand and make things better. He works in us and with us to make the necessary changes. We can walk through some painful places as we deal with things that need to be turned upside down. It will take discipline - to read Scripture, to reflect, to pray, to develop relationships with more mature Christian people, to be humble enough to learn, to be willing to be corrected, to change ...

## *Good News*

The day after Jesus first saw the nice looking fig tree - the day after He turned the tables on the people who thought they had it all together but were really empty - they pass along the same road. There is the fig tree, *"withered from the roots."* This is not good news! Peter exclaims, *"Look, the fig tree you cursed has withered."* We have to remember, of course, that the fig tree represents the spiritual life of the Jewish people. Is it that dead? Is it that far beyond hope? Is the only prospect that, as a nation, they wither and die?

What about me? If I am feeling dry and barren, is this the future? Is there any hope?

But there is good news - great news: *"Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. But you must really believe it will happen and have no doubt in your heart. I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours."*

Jesus is NOT saying that I can pray for \$1,000,000 and expect to receive it! He is NOT saying that I can pray about my facial pain and claim that it is healed! That would make me the master of the universe. It would reduce God to a bank machine, dispensing whatever currency I want whenever I want it. That is exactly what the Pharisees thought (thus the rule-keeping) and how they ended up spiritually bankrupt. If I think I can tell God what he has to do, I'll find myself empty, barren, and dry. "Faith in God" means trusting God that He knows best ...

We have to keep these promises in context. What Jesus *is* saying is that what appears to be spiritually dead - the fig tree, the temple, even my own soul - can be resurrected to new life. I can be "born again" spiritually (John 3); I can become a "new creation" in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15); I can become dead to sin and alive to God (Romans 6:1-14); I can become one of a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God called out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9); I can be a child of God (John 1:12-13). If I pray, in humility and trust, *"Lord, take this dry, barren heart of mine and bring it to life again"* or *"Lord, take away this huge mountain I've been building to show the world how great I am,"* the Lord will answer those kinds of prayers.

With faith in God anything - that is in concert with God's will - is possible! Mountains can move. Fig trees can bear fruit. Pharisees could come alive. We can be renewed by God's Spirit ...

Pray! As King Arthur is dying (in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*), he speaks these words: *"... More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. Therefore, let your voice rise like a fountain for me night and day."* Pray is a powerful, powerful force in our world and in our lives. Pray for spiritual renewal in your life. Pray for others. Pray for our church. Pray that we would have a passion for outreach and mission in our community - and around the world. Pray that we may be inspired to find ways to bless our neighbours, to share with them the bread of life - Jesus. Arthur goes on, *"For what are men better than sheep or goats that nourish a blind life within the brain, if, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer both for themselves and those*

*who call them friend?" We have this power. Why would we not pray?!?!*

*Confessing failure is not the end. It's the beginning. Rowling adds, "So why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear had already been realised, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.*

*"You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all - in which case, you fail by default. Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way. I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above rubies.*

*"The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more to me than any qualification I ever earned. Given a time machine or a Time Turner, I would tell my 21-year-old self that personal happiness lies in knowing that life is not a check-list of acquisition or achievement. Your qualifications, your CV, are not your life, though you will meet many people of my age and older who confuse the two. Life is difficult, and complicated, and beyond anyone's total control, and the humility to know that will enable you to survive its vicissitudes."*

Your qualifications and your CV are not your life. Life is difficult, complicated, and beyond any person's control ... but we are in the hands of a Saviour who says, *"Have faith ..."* When we do take Him seriously He may overturn some of the tables in our lives. But in the process He will move mountains, bringing us new life, new hope, and new purpose. Fig trees are supposed to produce fruit. *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23). God can produce this kind of fruit -fruit that can feed a spiritually starved word - in us.

*No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me  
From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny  
No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from His hand  
'Till He returns or calls me home, Here in the power of Christ I'll stand*

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