

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 5, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MARK 11:14

“Nay no one ever eat fruit from you again.”

DID JESUS REALLY CURSE A FIG TREE?

In the Gospels we read many of what are called “The Hard Sayings of Jesus”; and the verse we are to consider this morning certainly is one of them: “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”

According to Mark, Jesus and His disciples spent the night following His entry into Jerusalem in Bethany, no doubt at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Next morning they returned to Jerusalem. On the way, Jesus felt hungry. It is not clear why He should be hungry on this Monday morning. Perhaps He had risen before dawn and gone out to the hills to pray, and thus had skipped breakfast. We simply do not know.

At any rate He was hungry, and, “Seeing 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” (Mark 11:13). Then come the words of our text, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again,” said Jesus to the tree.

They continued on their way into Jerusalem where that day Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple. In the evening they returned to Bethany. Next morning, as they passed the same place, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And “Peter remembered, and said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree You cursed has withered’” (Mark 11:20,21).

And immediately you ask, “Was it not unreasonable to curse the tree for being fruitless when, as Mark expressly states, ‘It was not the season for figs?’” Someone may say, “Whatever can you make of someone who curses a tree?!”

In the early Church many books about Jesus were in circulation which did not make it into the New Testament. One of them was called “The Gospel according to St. Thomas.” It is a document which the Church Fathers decided was not of sufficiently inspired quality to be included in Holy Scripture. In that “Gospel” some strange stories are told. In describing the childhood of Jesus, the writer relates an incident in which Jesus is supposed to have made clay sparrows, and then breathed on them, and made them fly away! On another occasion, a little boy with whom Jesus was playing pushed Him over, whereupon Jesus immediately cursed him with leprosy. So strange and so repulsive to us are these stories that we question them very seriously, as did the early Church.

Now, it may be that when you read this story of Jesus cursing the fig tree, you decide that that is rather like those stories in the “Gospel of St. Thomas,” and you may say to yourself, “That

is so unlike Jesus that I simply don't believe it!" But it is in the New Testament which we believe to be the inspired Word of God. If Jesus was, and is, the Person the Bible says He is, the Lord of creation; if "Through Him all things were made, and without Him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3), then it would be extremely presumptuous for anyone to say that He could not possibly speak to a fig tree and make it die. And if you say, "That would be outside the laws of nature," I reply by saying, "If He is in fact the Lord of nature, then what He determines becomes the law of nature, for He can overrule a law of nature at any time; and that was what He did when He performed many of His miracles."

Let me illustrate it like this. You might say to me, "You cannot make a burn on human flesh without something hot." And I would reply, "But a blister can be produced on the skin by touching it with a pencil!" And you say, "Nonsense! That is outside the law of nature." But it isn't. If a person is hypnotized deeply enough and told that the pencil of the hypnotist is a red-hot iron, then, if the pencil touches the skin, a blister will be produced, because the mind, in which the critical faculty is temporarily suspended, has accepted the idea of being burnt, and so the physical phenomenon of the blister follows.

So, then, who are we to say that when a mind like the mind of Christ is in operation, a fig tree cannot withstand the energies that proceed from that divine mind? So to rule out this incident as quite impossible would be the height of presumption. It is not very wise or clever to say, "I have never seen a thing like this happen; therefore it couldn't possibly happen."

How, then, do we explain this cursing of the fig tree by our Lord? The problem, I believe, is most satisfactorily cleared up by an article published many years ago entitled "The Barren Fig Tree" by Dr. W. N. Christie, a Church of Scotland minister who served in Palestine after World War I. He pointed out, first, the time of year at which the incident is said to have occurred. If, as is possible, Jesus was crucified on April 6, in A.D. 30, the incident must have occurred during the first days of April. "Now," wrote Dr. Christie, "the facts connected with the fig tree are these. Towards the end of March, the leaves begin to appear, and in about a week the foliage coating is complete. Coincident with this, and sometimes even before, there appears quite a crop of small knobs, not the real figs, but a kind of early forerunner. They grow to the size of green almonds, in which condition they are eaten by peasants and others when hungry." (Indeed they are sold by street vendors in the poor quarters of Jerusalem.) "When they come to their own indefinite maturity, they drop off."

These precursors of the true fig are called taqsh in Palestinian Arabic. Their appearance is a harbinger of the fully formed true fig. This second crop comes in August and is called the true crop. So, as Mark says, the time for the true figs had not yet come. But, if the leaves appear without any taqsh, that is a sign that there will be no real figs in August. So, since Jesus found "nothing but leaves" – that is, leaves without any taqsh – He knew that it was an absolutely hopeless, fruitless fig tree; and He indicated this when He said, "Nay no one ever eat fruit from you again."

Now, if that is the true explanation of our Lord's words, why should Mark trouble to record the incident as though it had some special significance? Because it did have some special significance. As recorded by Mark, it is an acted parable teaching the same lesson as our Lord's

spoken parable recorded in Luke 13:6-9 — the parable of the fruitless fig tree. In that spoken parable, a landowner came three years in succession, expecting fruit from a fig tree on his property; and when, year after year it proved to be fruitless, he ordered the man in charge of his vineyard to cut it down, because it was using up the ground to no good purpose.

So Jesus spoke the parable of the barren fig tree one day; and then, on that morning, on His way into Jerusalem, He acted out the parable by cursing a barren fig tree.

It is a very interesting fact that Jewish teachers were very fond of dramatizing their parables by action. For example, when Isaiah was prophesying the humiliation that he felt was going to fall upon Israel, when he believed that the land would be stripped by its enemies, and made naked, he took his clothes off, and went about naked! And when they saw this strange, unclad figure moving about, they said, “What on earth is he up to?”; and those with insight said, “He is prophesying the nakedness of the land.” You didn’t know that there was a “streaker” in the Old Testament, did you?! (See Isaiah 20:1-6).

In the same way, when Micah was prophesying the humiliation that he felt was going to befall Israel, he rolled himself about in the mud, in order to draw attention to his message. He did not just preach a sermon which people would no doubt forget (Micah 1:8-12).

Likewise, Jeremiah, when he was prophesying that Israel would fall under the tyranny of another nation, went about wearing an enormous yoke round his neck, the kind of yoke they put on the necks of oxen -- an unforgettable sermon. How impressive it must have been! He was dramatizing his message (See Jeremiah 27:2).

In a small way the disciples of Jesus did the same sort of thing as all Easterners do. They took off their sandals and shook the dust off them when they departed from a village where the people had annoyed them (Matthe10:14). We have forgotten that kind of thing to a large extent. We do it here and there in little ways. We do it every day in one way when we shake hands with someone. It is a dramatic action. It meant originally, “See, I have no weapon in my hand. I am not concealing a dagger. You can hold my hand and prove that I am your friend!” We don’t perform many dramatic actions like that now, but we must remember that it was very common in the East in Jesus’ day.

In fact, our Lord did that kind of thing Himself: He washed His disciples’ feet -- a dramatic action to illustrate humility. After that, in a most sacred moment, He gave them broken bread, and poured out wine -- not just bread and wine, but broken bread and poured out wine -- and said, “This means My body broken for you; and this means My blood poured out for you.”

So let us, in the light of all this, look at the story of the fig tree. It is impossible to believe that the curse which our Lord pronounced upon this tree was an act of punishing it, as if the tree as such was responsible for not bearing fruit, or as if, for this reason, Jesus was angry with it. The real explanation lies deeper. In both the acted parable of Mark 11, and the spoken parable of Luke 13, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the pretentious but barren fig tree was a fit emblem, a dramatic representation of Israel. They were God’s chosen people, but they were unresponsive to Jesus as He came to them with God’s message and God’s salvation. Elsewhere

Luke records how Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem because they would not recognize the time of God's coming to them (Luke 19:44).

Do you see now why I'm preaching about the barren fig tree on the Sunday nearest Independence Day? One cannot help but compare the state of our country today to that pretentious but fruitless fig tree.

Sixty-three years ago here in the USA one third of the nation's wealth vanished in a matter of months. Manufacturing declined 77% and one fourth of the labor force became unemployed. Many cities were forced to close their schools; and at one point 34 million men, women and children were without any income at all. Yet in the very midst of that disastrous economic depression Franklin Roosevelt could tell the nation in a radio address, "Our difficulties, thank God, concern only material things." Alas, that is a boast we can no longer make. Viewed from the vast panorama of human history, we, today, in spite of the current recession, are living in the midst of an economic golden age. We are the richest nation in the world, and in the decade of the 1980s well over 20 million new jobs were created. Our stock market has more than trebled since 1982, adding \$2 trillion in new wealth.

That's the good news. But the bad news is that we have a long laundry list of things that are far worse than economic depression.

What scares me half to death is the fact that some 62% of Americans now say that "there is no such thing as absolute truth," according to a recent survey entitled "What Americans believe." They are really saying that there is no ultimate standard of morality either, because morality is based on truth.

Morton Kondracke wrote recently, "For 20 years, for fun and profit, the media have soaked America in a bath of sexuality, doing their best to make Hugh Hefner's Playboy philosophy ('anything goes') the official behavior code of the United States." No wonder Judge Robert Bork speaks of America as "slouching toward Gomorrah" (a chilling observation indeed). No wonder either that J. Allen Smith, considered a father of many modern education reforms, concluded in the end, "The trouble with us reformers is that we've made reform a crusade against all standards. Well, we've smashed them all, and now neither we nor anybody else has anything left." He's dead wrong, of course, because the Church of Jesus Christ has lots left.

Listen to this story of a high school "values clarification" class conducted by a teacher in Teaneck, New Jersey. A girl in the class had found a purse containing \$1,000 and returned it to its owner. The teacher asked for the class's reaction, and every single one of her fellow students concluded that the girl had been foolish. When the teacher was asked what he said to the students, he responded, "Well, of course I didn't say anything. If I come from a position of what is right and what is wrong, then I'm not their counselor. I can't impose my views"! Yes, we're "slouching toward Gomorrah," aren't we?

- Television continues to provide an unending diet of seductive sexual images. It should therefore be no shock that one in ten teenage girls gets pregnant each year -- more than a million of them. In fact, teenage pregnancy has risen 621% since 1940, in spite of all the nonsense talked

about “safe sex.”

- The teen homicide rate has increased 232% since 1950.
- A third of high school seniors get drunk at least once a week.
- The average age for first time drug use is now 13 years old.
- Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among adolescents, increasing 300% since 1950.
- Only 30% of children born in 1988 will live with both parents until their 18th birthday. Half of all marriages end in divorce. In 60% of divorces children are involved. One study has found that 18 months after a divorce, children have a rate of sudden serious psychological problems comparable to “victims of natural disaster.” 65% of these children — who had been functioning well before the divorce — couldn’t concentrate in school, couldn’t eat or sleep properly, couldn’t make friends, were depressed, withdrawn, or hostile. Even ten years after a divorce, over 40% of these young people still had no set goals, a limited education, and a sense of hopelessness about their lives. The study’s author concludes, “Almost half of the children of divorce enter adulthood as worried, underachieving, and sometimes angry young men and women.” Children need love and discipline. They need mothers and fathers. A welfare check is not a husband, and the state is not a father. Indeed stable marriage and family responsibility is the best anti-poverty program of all.
- And who would ever have dreamed 20 years ago that a national movement would be established in an attempt to discredit and punish the Boy Scouts for “discriminating” against homosexuals? Do you know that today the world’s largest clothing manufacturer, Levi Strauss and Company, has cut off corporate donations to the Scouts; and the United Way chapters are now funding boycotts of Scouting? The powerful homosexual lobby is screaming because the Scouts believe that homosexual practice violates the Scout oath to keep oneself “morally straight,” and because Scout parents want their boys taught traditional moral values. Thank God, the Scouts are holding their ground. “Our values are not for sale,” says chief Scout executive Ben H. Love; “other people have a right to believe what they want to believe, but we have a right to set our own standards.”
- And consider this sobering fact -- there is no Communist Party in Russia today, but there is in the USA! Children may read the Bible and pray in the schools of Russia today, but not in the USA!

Now these are just a few sad and tragic examples of “the barren fig tree” that is America today. Historians remind us that many great civilizations, including those of Persia, Greece and Rome have fallen because in the end they turned out to be nothing but barren fig trees. And it could happen to America also. I keep reminding myself of the cynical remark of the German philosopher Hegel, who said, “The only lesson people learn from history is that people don’t learn from history.”

So as Christians, what are we to do?

1. We must remember that the Christian Church and the Christian family play a crucial role in the cultivation of moral worth. In American history the Christian faith has been the foundation for private morality and public virtue. This means that Christians must maintain as their first duty the establishment of truly Christian homes, with godly fathers and mothers who accept their responsibility before God to lead their children to Christ, and to instill in them the virtues of honesty, self-respect, compassion, self-reliance and moral restraint.

God holds Christian parents responsible for every aspect of their children's education, and this means that if public schools increasingly refuse to teach traditional moral values, and replace them by a "value neutral" philosophy, then Christian parents must turn to the Christian school, or home schooling, in order to protect their children from a God-denying environment in which they are held captive for 30 hours a week. Parents must exemplify every godly virtue in their own lives, and the Church must provide adequate programs of biblical instruction and nurture, so that children may grow up to fear God, to love their parents, to respect and help other people, and to be loyal citizens of our country.

2. Christians must increasingly involve themselves in the governmental process at the local, state and federal levels. Why have militant godless groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, the homosexual lobby, and the pro-choice advocates gained such unprecedented power in our country today? Because during the past 60 years the rank and file of Christians have sat back and done little or nothing to stem the tide of godlessness. Christians by and large have abdicated their political responsibilities because of a spurious pietism that thinks it unspiritual to get involved in the political fray. Folks, if we don't want our children and our grandchildren to grow up in a society infinitely worse than that of the former Soviet Union at its worst, we had better get busy, and get involved in every movement that seeks to reclaim our country for God and His moral values.

3. All the while we must pray -- that a mighty revival of evangelical Christianity may visit us under the power of the Holy Spirit, a revival that will cleanse and heal the nation of its mortal sickness. Would you pray every day that such a revival may take place?

I keep on reminding myself of the Breton fisherman's proverb: "He who will not heed the helm will heed the rocks."

I should be failing you very badly if I left out the note of doom that runs through the New Testament. I should be failing you very, very badly if I did not remind you that because what Christ says is eternal, unchangeable truth, then any way of life that denies His teaching and His Gospel leads only to eternal destruction.

What a mighty tree this Western civilization has grown to be! What a show of leaves! But if the Master finds it fruitless, then its doom is certain.

AMEN.