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Matthew 21:18-22, English Standard Version.

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?"

²¹ And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

Fig Trees and Pumpkin Vines.

When I was a boy growing in southern California, I loved to plant things in my parents' big corner lot. I planted potatoes, carrots, lots of vegetables in the backyard. I grew a sapling from an avocado pit and planted it; years later, it was a mature tree. I planted a lemon tree that got eaten by aphids. I loved to eat Corn Nuts, and once, I bought a pack of them, and attached to the pack was a handful of uncooked seeds. I ended up growing this bizarre giant corn which we ate. One Halloween, I had a great idea. I decided to plant the seeds from our several Jack O'Lanterns in the front yard. I will get back to this. Hint: this did *not* turn out optimally.

We're going to look at two passages that describe the same event. Remember

that it's widely believed that Mark wrote his Gospel first (although we have no idea who "Mark" was, and it is only tradition that tells us who wrote the four Gospels), and that Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels with the benefit of having Mark's Gospel on-hand. So, it's no wonder that the telling of this story in Matthew and Mark are so similar. Here is Matthew's version, from Chapter 21:

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.

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When this story unfolds, Jesus is crossing from Bethany to Jerusalem; when he comes across a fruitless fig tree, he curses it, causing it to immediately wither. To ground us a bit, notice that near the end, Jesus makes the statement *"You can even say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen."* The unspoken fact here is that while Jesus is saying this, his disciples are walking with him along a certain path, and as a result, they must be facing the Herodium, a giant palace fortress on the top of Mount Masada. It was built by the senior Herod, a ruthless ruler who went on a building spree constructing a number of magnificent buildings - in his own honor. The Herodium in particular was a hated symbol of Roman occupation, and so the idea of throwing the mountain and its giant

palace into the sea was a great visualization of the power of having faith in God. Jesus wasn't referring to just any old mountain: he was saying that faith could destroy even the great oppressor Herod. Perhaps someday we'll look at Herod and the Herodium more closely in a message.

But getting back to the broader context of this story, Jesus is in truth making a point that has to do with an incident that comes just before this fig tree story in Matthew's Gospel. Immediately before Jesus curses the fig tree, Jesus has overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple; these are people who charge a very hefty commission to turn Roman money into Shekels – because the Temple officials won't accept anything but Shekels as an offering to God in the Temple. But common people carry only Roman and Greek money, and so they're forced to pay this commission simply for the privilege of then giving the money to the Temple. Jesus is comparing the supposedly faithful followers of God who turn the temple into a rip off money changing business to a fig tree that's useless because it bears no fruit. The money changers, although they claim that they are serving God by working at the Temple, have as much true faith as the fig tree has fruit – i.e., none. They aren't serving God. They're being false, using their religion to make money, not to serve God. What's intriguing is that the Apostles don't seem to get the point. They don't appear to hear Jesus explaining this comparison between the fig tree and the money changers. They are simply captivated by the fig tree

withering so quickly, and they focus only on this. And so, since they aren't getting the point, Jesus seemingly turns this event into a lesson about the power of faith and prayer. If they don't understand what he's saying about the evils of false faith, he may as well make the point that true faith in God is a powerful thing. So, Jesus says: "Hey, just like I zapped this tree, faith and prayer could toss Herod's big old mountain fortress into the sea."

But is this really the point? Is it true that Jesus got caught off-guard by the disciples being so un-clever, or is this scene actually more elegant and more integrated than we might otherwise think? Maybe Jesus isn't trying to focus only on false faith, and he didn't change his focus when the Apostles didn't seem to follow him; maybe over the centuries we've tended to misunderstand this scene from Mark and Matthew. Consider this: In Matthew's version, Jesus first turns over the tables of the money changers. Then he curses the fig tree, and it withers. Then he tells the Apostles that just like he withered the tree, faith and prayer could toss Herod's mountain into the sea.

Now, let's consider Mark's version, from Chapter 11:

¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

¹⁵ And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹⁶ And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ And he was teaching them and saying 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 den of robbers.”¹⁸ And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.¹⁹ And when evening came they went out of the city.²⁰ As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.²¹ And Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.”²² And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God.²³ Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

Notice that in Mark, the order of events is a bit different. Jesus first curses the fig tree,

then he overturns the money-changers’ tables, and then, he takes us back to the

dead fig tree, and Jesus makes his statement about tossing a mountain into the sea.

The difference is that in Mark, the part with the money changers is carefully tucked

into the story about the fig tree, instead of the fig tree being a story coming completely

after the story about the money changers. It suggests a deeper, more integrated

relationship between the fig tree, the money changers, and tossing a mountain into the

sea. Importantly, this second version, Mark’s, was written before Matthew’s version.

If Mark has the sequence right, then the money changers scene is deliberately

positioned in the middle of the story about cursing the tree and tossing a mountain

into the sea. Perhaps from the very beginning, Jesus is trying to make a different point, and

it has to do primarily with prayer and faith, not with the money changers being as

worthless as the zapped fig tree. In this interpretation, Jesus starts out by cursing a fig tree that has no fruit. Then he turns over the tables of the money changers. Maybe Jesus first curses the fig tree so that when we see him turn over the tables of the money changes, we realize that the point is that Jesus has as much power over those money changers as he just demonstrated over the fig tree. Jesus ended the life of that fruitless fig tree. God could end the faith lives of the fruitless, that is useless, money changers at any moment, and symbolically, by turning over their tables, Jesus has done this. Next, Jesus talks about the power of prayer and faith so that he could make the following point: those money changers had their chance to serve God. Maybe they thought they would always have the future in which to do it. They could rip people off now and turn back to God later. But just like that tree will never have another season to bear fruit, those money changers might not have another chance to serve God. In this interpretation, Jesus doesn't change his mind about the point he's making when the disciples don't seem to catch on to his argument about the relationship between the money changers and the fig tree. They do understand. Jesus is simply finishing up his lesson by saying, yes, isn't that amazing what I did to those money changers, what I did to that fig tree that could not bear fruit? Well, said Jesus, God can free you from anything, but you must do something, you must take action. You must do it now. Remember that the biggest problem that the people around Jesus face is their colonial oppressor, the

Roman government. They were a much, much bigger threat than the money changers. Jesus is saying: hey, if you want your Roman occupiers thrown into the sea, then remember what happened to the money changers and the fig tree. They lost their chance to make a difference. Whatever you face in life, even if it's as horrible as being occupied by a foreign power, prayer can overcome it - because God will indeed listen. But you need to turn to God. Do not wait. You might not have another season to bear fruit. Pray now. Reach out to God - now.

The point is that the traditional interpretation of this story is that Jesus is saying that like the fig tree, these money changers and their false faith are worthless. It's a negative story really, one of Old Testament punishment. Jesus punishes the fig tree the way God will punish the money changers. And then, oh yeah, Jesus decides to tack on a more upbeat point about prayer and faith being as powerful as tossing Herod's mountain into the sea. But a different interpretation makes all these elements fall into line to make a single, focused point: The fig tree lost its chance to have fruit; it will not have another season to try because it is now dead. The money changers lost their chance, too, and we understand this because we just saw the fig tree get cursed and suddenly die. Indeed, Jesus symbolically ends their chances by turning over their tables. But look at what they could have done, if they had just acted. They could have borne fruit. They could have turned to God, shared in the power of God through

prayer, and even possibly thrown the Roman oppressors into the sea. Keep in mind that Jesus wraps up this story by saying: *“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”* It’s a story on how to claim that power that God gives us, not a story about God’s reprisal against people with false faith.

We can go a little deeper with this. Here’s an interesting point. Note that in Mark’s version, the version that was written first, when Jesus walks up to the fig tree, his thought is this: *When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.* What? Did you hear that carefully? It wasn’t yet the season for the tree to have figs. Well, the poor tree! It gets nailed for not having fruit when it wasn’t even time for fruit to appear on the tree. Get it? Our chances to turn to God could end at any time. Just like those money changers got caught off guard. There they were, making lots of money, when boom, they’re out of business forever by the hand of God. Here is a subtlety: botanists tell us that the fruit on a fig tree appears at the same time as the leaves, not after the leaves are formed. So, looking at this more scientifically, when Jesus sees that the tree has leaves but no fruit, well, the tree blew it. That fig tree grew a canopy of big, wide, gorgeous leaves. Fig trees are beautiful because of their immense foliage. But it was all show. Just like those money changers acting pious on the steps of the Temple, pretending to help people honor God by trading their Roman money for Shekels, the money demanded by the Temple. We shouldn’t get caught up in our

worldly ways and forget about praying to God. Finally, when this money changing scene happens on the steps of the Temple, it's Passover, and huge crowds have poured into Jerusalem to celebrate. There is great tumult and singing. Yet, it's all fake if we aren't sincerely turning to God and praying at the same time.

You know, Jesus was being very prescient here. This is roughly around the year 30. Just 35 or 40 years later, the Roman army would decide to crack down on and invade the Holy Land. It came at the end of a brutal four-year campaign against Israel. They destroyed the Temple along with much of the city. The money changers, who represent all people with false faith, people who are more concerned with worldly appearance and power than honoring God, would never have another chance. There would be no more seasons to bear fruit, very literally.

Don't see this story from Mark and Matthew as a punitive story. We might be tempted to conclude that God is yelling in our ear that we're worthless, that we are like a fig tree with big, beautiful leaves but no fruit. Matthew likes to pitch Old Testament stories of retribution. But I don't think that is what Mark is doing, and he wrote his version first. See this story as God telling us that he's there, waiting for us to turn to him. Our lives can be so much more fruitful, so much happier and secure, if we stop and pray.

Now, what about my pumpkin seeds? Remember that I took the guts of several large pumpkins and buried them in the front yard garden. That was in

early November. That summer, we left the house for a few weeks. When we got back, there were pumpkin vines all over the garden and the front lawn. My dad told me to dig them up, which I did. But they grew back the next season. I kept digging them up, but for as long as we lived in that house, we had pumpkins growing all over the front yard. As it turns out, those fig trees were so prevalent in the Holy Land, they were so important to the diet of God's people, that they are mentioned 16 times in the Bible. They are described as the most important fruit in the Holy Land. It turns out that those fig trees could live for 200 years. We are God's fruit. We are the fig trees of God's spiritual garden. We are meant to have a huge impact. We are meant to have a long-lasting impact. And like my pumpkin vines, what we do in this life, if we do it in God's name and we do it to serve God's people, will absolutely refuse to ever go away.