

DISEASED
MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

On Monday of Holy Week, Jesus headed, with His disciples, into the city of Jerusalem. The day before, Sunday, He had made His Triumphal entry riding on a donkey. The crowds had hailed Him as the Son of David and waved palm branches before Him. But today there would be no such parade. It was a quiet walk for Jesus and His disciples -- a time of conversation among them and an opportunity for the Messiah to bring His message and His presence to His people in a deeper way.

On the way in from Bethany, where Jesus was staying, to Jerusalem, His destination, Jesus does a puzzling thing. He sees a fig tree in the distance **with leaves on it** – normally an indication that there would be fruit on this tree since, unlike other trees, figs ordinarily appears **before** the leaves are in bloom. He is hungry and intends to get fruit from this tree, but when He gets there He finds only leaves, no fruit.

At that moment, Jesus pronounces a curse on the fig tree: “may no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And later on we learn that the fig tree withered as a result of Jesus curse.

Now, you hear this account and you immediately think to yourself, “that seems a bit harsh. What’s going on here? Why would Jesus curse this tree with leaves only because it didn’t produce fruit? And why does Jesus care at all about this simple tree when there are much bigger things to think about as He heads to Jerusalem?”

I would suggest that Jesus is using this tree as a symbol of the city of Jerusalem and its people. The time had come for them to welcome their God. The time had come for Messiah to appear. This was the fulfillment of thousands of years of prophecy – something they had been anticipating for ages and ages.

But what were they like? Were their hearts prepared like the bride for the bridegroom? Were their lives showing the fruits of repentance and faith? No, they are caught up in the world and its ways. Pride has overtaken the religious leaders so that they care more about their appearance than they do about representing God to the people. Similarly, many others had decided to turn the festivals of God, which were intended to point forward to the Messiah, as opportunities for profit.

So many people were not exhibiting love for God and faith in His promises. Rather they called themselves “children of God,” but were really children of their passions, self-centered, prideful, greedy and lustful.

They were like that fig tree. They produced no fruit of faith – no signs of love – no joy to receive the King of Kings. No. After thousands of years of prophecy, their lives were no different than those who preceded them: filled with themselves.

And so, Jesus displays, in His attitude toward the fig tree, that while God is extraordinarily patient and loving with His people, that He **does** desire a faith that produces fruit. And, ultimately, there will be a time when His patience runs out and He brings His judgment against those who have no faith and produce nothing.

The image gets further accent when Jesus arrives in the city. He goes to the temple – an extraordinarily beautiful building that should be the center of Israel’s worship life – and He finds it, instead, abuzz with merchandizing, profiteering, and other inappropriate buying and selling. And Jesus’ reaction is much the same as it is against the earlier fig tree. He sees that this building is not producing the fruit it should, but instead has become merely a façade of beauty while failing to accomplish its real purpose among the people.

And so, Jesus does a similar thing as He does with the fig tree. He enters the courts of the temple and begins driving out those who were buying and selling – turning over the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And, in righteous anger, Jesus shouts, “Is it not written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations,’ but you have made it a ‘den of robbers.’”

You see, it’s easy to look like a fig tree. It’s easy to have the façade of the Temple of God. Pretty leaves. Beautiful stones. But God knows which trees are healthy and which Temples are genuine. In His omniscience, He can cut away the veneer and see beyond the pretty exterior to what is actually the heart.

And He calls all those whose hearts have wandered from God, whose love for the Lord has grown cold, whose trees produce no fruit and whose temples are merely a stone exterior – He

calls them all to turn from their hollowness lest they be judged like the fig tree and driving away from God like the moneychangers were from the temple.

This is a relevant message not only for Jerusalem of Jesus' day, but also to us today. After all, can't we be like that fig tree too? Isn't it common for the people of God to fall prey to worldly thinking – to not bear the fruit of faith because we are so busy trying to make a buck and build a reputation, and raise kids, and have fun, and live the dream? Do we really take seriously, all the time, our relationship to God, our love for one another, our care and compassion for His people and His world? Or are we preoccupied with the here and now?

As we look in the mirror again tonight, we know that the truth convicts us and that we, like that fig tree, like that temple, like those Pharisees and Scribes, those buyers and sellers, those folks in the Palm Sunday crowd who later became an angry mob, we are deserving of the curse of Jesus. He ought to drive us from this temple. He ought to send us to our end in judgment. Is there hope for us?

It is my pleasure to declare to you that the answer is “yes.” And let me tell you why by sharing another of Jesus' teachings about the fig tree. From Luke chapter 13 we read:

⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' ⁸" 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Did you notice what happened here? A Vinedresser stepped in to rescue a damaged tree from judgment. A Helper intervened so that the unfruitful tree might be saved. And you know who He is. His name is Jesus. God in the Flesh. King of Kings, Lord of Lords. But He came down to us who were caught in the darkness and destined for the axe, and transformed us into something new.

It happened through a different tree. A tree set on Golgotha's hill. A tree where He would hang – the innocent, in place of the guilty – the perfect One, in place of the sinner – the healthy One, in place of the sick – the Lamb of God, in place of the wandering sheep. Through His sacrifice there, He transplanted us into new soil, and enabled us to be transformed by the Spirit He sends to be a people who care again.

So brothers and sisters, when we believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, our loving Savior comes to us with Love and rewires our diseased heart, -- He performs surgery on our troubled insides, scarred by selfishness and greed, so that they can beat again with love, with mercy, with compassion, with kindness, with faith, with obedience, and with joy.

Will we have setbacks? Of course. Without a doubt there will be many times when our love grows cold, for someone – when we have more aversion than compassion – when our arteries get clogged with resentment, with desire, with jealousy, when passion for God’s will melts into indifference.

You know what it’s like. It happens with other things too. Last year I was gung ho about losing weight and running a half-marathon. My running was regular, my diet intense. It was great. This year I’ve signed up for another one – in April. But I am less gung ho. The Milky Ways are more of a temptation – the diet is less attractive – running in the cold weather is not getting a warm reception. I’m hoping that signing up for the half-marathon in April will be my jolt to get back on track.

That’s how it can be with the fruit of our fig tree. The Tempter wants to disconnect all the rewiring that God has accomplished in our hearts. He wants to dismantle all the new thinking that the Spirit of God has brought to us. And so we come again to the foot of the cross and say,

“Lord, I need your help. It’s so easy to fall back into the ways of the world. It’s so easy to fall prey to the wiles of the Evil One. But You are my Rock, my Fortress, and My Deliverer. Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with Your free Spirit. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

And God, for the sake of Christ Jesus, is faithful to His promises. In grace, He forgives us. In love, He restores us. In power, He refreshes us. As St. Paul says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” And also, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

And so, sinners though we be, God sees our broken fig tree through His rescuing tree. And, by His grace, we walk forward in faith and in confidence.