

## 10-25 Fig Trees and Forgiveness Mark 11:12-14; 20-25

**Two airline pilots** overshot their destination by 150 miles. This would be like the D-day force landing on the coast of Spain. It's not just a miss. It's a huge miss. Most people assume they were asleep at the wheel, but the pilots say they were deeply engrossed in debate. Actually, it is possible. I've been known to overshoot the end of a sermon.

Most everyone knows how to steer a bike by turning the front wheel in the direction you want to go. We learned this riding a tricycle or scooter. When you turn the handlebars to point the front wheel to the right, you go right. You do the opposite to go left. You don't think about this. It becomes intuitive.

To ride a motorcycle, however, you must overcome this learned reaction or you'll be off the road. If you are cruising down the road on your Harley and you come to a right curve, if you pull the right handlebar back or push the left one forward, you'll drive off the road to the left. You have to unlearn what is already set in you mind.

That was Jesus' biggest challenge in teaching. It's not easy to change what is already set in your mind, especially if you hold it sacred. The world Jesus entered taught people one way to ride through life. Jesus presented them with another way; one that did not fit in with their previous understanding. He said to them "*the first shall be last; blessed are the poor; the greatest must be the slave of all.*"

Our reading from Mark 11 is one of those challenging passages. Cursing a fig tree that doesn't have figs in the off season doesn't seem like something Jesus would do. Then we have a confusing passage about having enough faith to toss mountains in the sea. What is this about?

Skeptics and cynics think they know. They love this text because it illustrates what they believe about God who curses and punishes in capricious and unjust ways. We see a cancer patient get well and we thank God for this divine power. They see cancer patients get well and others die a horrible death and they say *what kind of God helps some and not others, especially when both are good people.*

This cynical population says, "see, we told you God isn't just. The fig tree wasn't even supposed to have figs on it, and yet was cursed and killed. This is the true nature of your God," they say—he practices capricious judgment.

Believers can't agree on the meaning of this passage either. Many have said that this story emphasizes how much God despises fruitless lives or those that only have the appearance of faithfulness. The fig tree looked like a tree that would bear fruit, but it had none. When asked about the fact that it wasn't the season for fruit, these folks fall back on God's sovereignty and say that Jesus knew the tree would not bear fruit even in the fruit season. I think there is a better reading of the text.

Still others say that Jesus was demonstrating the power that God gives to his Son and his followers if they pray with true belief. Look at v. 24... "***Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.***" Jesus demonstrated this power on a fig tree so the disciples could see it up close. But Jesus had already given them so many positive illustrations of the power of prayer to heal, help and bless. Why would he need this?

Texts that promise you'll get what you ask for have created an entire movement and theological system over the past century. This movement is most often called ***Word-Faith or Positive Confession***.

One branch of this theology is the **Norman Vincent Peale/Robert Schuller** version which focuses on positive thinking. Joel Osteen would be one of the best known preachers in the other branch, but he is joined by many including Joyce Meyers, Ken and Gloria Copeland,

Kenneth Hagin and Robert Tilton. Their theology in a nutshell is, *If you think it and believe it, just speak it and receive it.* Mark 11:24 is to them what John 3:16 is to us; a defining text.

I don't think any of these interpretations of our passage are on target. They are too myopic, focusing either on the cursing of the fig tree, or a verse about the power of prayer. They fail to see the context of the story, so they miss the theme of the passage.

Jesus, very often, made his main point at the end of a discourse. I think that's what he does here. I believe his primary point has to do with forgiveness. **V. 25** states, *Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.*

If the main point of the passage is forgiveness, how does cursing a fig tree and the power and certainty of power fit into the theme?

First, if we looked at the image of a fig tree in all of Scripture, we would see that it was a powerful symbol of peace and friendship. Zechariah, speaking of a time of future prosperity said: *'In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,' declares the LORD Almighty.* The time of Solomon's reign was described as *a time when each person would sit under their own vine and fig tree.*

Fig trees were gathering spots for friends and family to get out of the sun; to eat and drink and to share stories; to rest, to laugh and to bond. They symbolized humanity living in shalom—wholeness and peace. It is no accident that Jesus chooses the symbolic fig tree to make his point about forgiveness.

The cursing of the fig tree was a *visual parable*, but the point of the parable was not about fig trees per se. The parable was about the destruction of what the fig tree symbolized in that culture, which was healthy relationships and peace.

Jesus told another parable about a fig tree. The owner of a fig tree had grown impatient with his tree that had yet to bear fruit. So he told the gardener to cut it down. The gardener pleaded with the owner to give him one more year to fertilize and water that tree. He asked the owner to *let it be*, which is the Greek term most often translated “**forgive**.” The parable teaches us about God's patience and desire for reconciliation with and among his children.

One parable showed what happens when forgiveness is practiced; there is another chance for love. But in this acted out parable in Mark, the disciples saw what happens when there is no forgiveness. In the death of the fig tree, we see the end result of bitterness, retribution or revenge.

James warned about this in the third chapter of his epistle: *no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.*

Jesus illustrated the deadly poison of the curse; what happens in human relationships when we curse, slander or bear false witness against others; when we refuse to forgive. Jesus answer is, *remember that fig tree? That's what happens.*

Broken relationships do not bear fruit. They do not produce love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness and gentleness. Unforgiveness sucks the creative life out of relationships.

Likewise, **Jesus' treatise on the power of believing prayer was about forgiveness.** He wanted his disciples to use the power of believing prayer to bring reconciliation to their relationships; with family, friends and community; even enemies. Jesus spoke about the great

power of prayer because humanly speaking most forgiveness is beyond our power; beyond our human reach; beyond our ability. It is too easy to curse; too difficult to bless.

What are the chances that the **Taliban** forgives those who drove them out of power in Afghanistan? About the same chance as tossing a mountain into the sea. If forgiveness were easy, it would be common. But forgiveness is more like moving mountains.

13 year old **Megan Meier** sometimes suffered from low self-esteem and was on medication for depression. When a cute boy named **Josh** befriended Megan on the social networking site MySpace, the two formed a quick connection during their month-long relationship. These internet relationships are quite common now.

Megan's mother asked the police to find out if Josh was a real person. He could have been a cyber stalker, trying to lure Megan into something dangerous. But the police could not get that information.

A month into this new computer friendship, however, the messages from Josh changed dramatically. Instead of sweet things, he wrote, 'I don't know if I want to be friends with you any longer because I hear you're not nice to your friends,'"

Megan thought that someone was using Josh's account to send cruel messages. The internet can function like one huge bulletin board and electronic bulletins were being posted about Megan saying things like, "Megan Meier is a slut. Megan Meier is fat."

Megan didn't know it but she had become a victim of cyber-bullying, which is like the regular kind only more insipid because it's done anonymously. Her bully was not a 16 year old named Josh; no such person existed. Her nightmare was the mother of a girl in Megan's neighborhood. This girl had told her mother that Megan was mean to her; this to cover why she was mean to Megan.

The cyber exchange devastated Megan, who was unable to understand how and why her friendship unraveled. The stress and frustration were too much. Megan's mother found her daughter hanged in her bedroom closet.

Not all verbal curses actually kill the person to whom they are directed. But they always kill something inside of us; some aspect of a relationship; or they terminate the relationship outright. Relationships can die just like that fig tree and only the power of true faith can cure that curse.

I know there is at least one person in your life that you cannot forgive. This passage was written for you.