

Jesus Curses a Fig Tree

DAVE BAST

Most of us have a pretty good handle on the basic character of Jesus Christ, right? He was gentle, meek, and mild. After all, that is how he himself described his own character. “Take my yoke upon you,” he said, “For I am meek and lowly of heart.” He was also warm and inviting, especially toward outsiders. He did not judge or condemn people. Think of the woman caught in adultery. “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more,” he said; and that is all wonderfully true. Jesus was like that, but there is also another side to his character, and it emerges in some of the hard things he said, and some of the harsh things he did. We will look at that side of Jesus today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are now in a series for the season of Lent on the last teachings of Jesus; the things that Jesus said and did, actually, during Holy Week—what we call Holy Week—the last few days, beginning with Palm Sunday and the triumphal entry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is our second program now. The first program we focused on the cleansing of the Temple, and we mostly looked at that in the first program from Matthew 21, but in this program we are going to go to Mark and look at something that happened right after the cleansing of the Temple.

DAVE BAST

And there is a little bit of a chronological difference in Mark’s Gospel, because he says... The implication of Matthew...I guess you would sort of naturally conclude that Jesus cleansed the Temple right after he entered the city, so on Sunday is when he did that; but Mark says no, Jesus actually visited the Temple on Sunday after he entered the city in triumph with the palms and the shouting and the hosannas, and he looked around, Mark says, and then he left again; and where he went was to the little village of Bethany, outside of Jerusalem, about two miles to the east of Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is almost like in Mark’s Gospel Jesus does a little reconnaissance. He goes to the Temple, looks around, sees what is going on. We find out the next day he does not like one bit what he sees, but he doesn’t do anything. He goes and stays with Mary and Martha and then comes back the next day and that is in Mark when he does all the normal stuff we associate with the cleansing of the Temple; and then, that leads then to this next incident.

DAVE BAST

So, on the way back into the city on Monday morning, we read this from Mark 11, beginning at verse 12: The next day, as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³Seeing 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. ¹⁴Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples

heard him say it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is curious. Jesus is hungry... I do not know why Martha did not cook him some breakfast or something...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They must have left the house early...

DAVE BAST

He needed a midmorning snack, I mean, come on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, second breakfast, I don't know; but, he sees a fig tree and it is in leaf; it looks like a healthy tree, but there are no figs on it. Well, Mark admits: Of course there were no figs on it, it was not the time for figs yet. It would be like in the Midwest looking for an apple in April. Apples are not ready until September or so; and yet, because it has no fruit on it to satisfy his hunger, he curses the tree; and that is sort of where he leaves it, but the disciples hear him say it...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They probably puzzled about it, but kind of kept it in mind.

DAVE BAST

And Mark draws attention to the fact that the disciples heard him, so obviously this is something... This is a detail we need to listen to as well, and make a note of it. So, at any rate, they pass on into the city and then comes all the business at the Temple.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

We looked at that in the last program, as you said, Scott; and then they returned again to Bethany, probably backing and forthing like this because Jerusalem...it was Passover week...Jerusalem would have been unbelievably crowded with pilgrims; they even slept out in the open air. So, Jesus and his friends—his disciples—are staying in the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. So then we read on Tuesday morning, they are going back into the city and this is what they saw.

SCOTT HOEZEE

²⁰In the morning as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered."

So, Peter remembers that. By the way, in Mark's Gospel, there are a lot of theories that Peter was the source of the material that Mark wrote down. Mark might have been like Peter's secretary. So, there are certain things in Mark's Gospel that only Peter would know or Peter would have remembered. That is part of why we think Peter is sort of behind the gospel of Mark's writing; but anyway, here Peter says: Rabbi, look! The tree you cursed, it has withered; and indeed, it was from the roots, it said. I mean, this was not just a little bit shriveled or had lost a couple leaves; this thing was dead in a very dramatic fashion; whereas, the day before we were told it was in leaf; but again, that is such...as you said...noted at the beginning of this program,

Dave, we think of Jesus as gentle, mild, humble, meek, approachable, not judgmental; and here this poor tree, which it was not even the right time to produce figs, it is dead as a doornail now.

DAVE BAST

It doesn't seem fair, does it? And it raises many questions that we often have about the things God does in our lives. Why does he do the things that he does? What is going on with this tree? What is Jesus up to, and what does it suggest to him about ourselves and our lives? Those are the things we will pick up in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program of a seven-part series that will take us across the season of Lent, and right up to Easter, where we are looking at things that Jesus taught at the very, very end of his life, particularly in the last week of his life; and now in this program, we are going to Mark's telling of that, which as we noted, is a little more segmented than what you get in Matthew, Luke, or even in John's Gospel, because Jesus keeps going in and out of the city. Staying, as you said, Dave...the hotels in Jerusalem were all booked; people were literally sleeping on the sidewalks...so Jesus is staying just outside of town in Bethany with Mary and Martha. So he goes into the Temple after the entry into the city, takes a look, leaves. Next morning he comes back in and on his way in he is hungry. He sees a fig tree...no fruit...curses the tree...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even though it really was not the right season for figs...

DAVE BAST

Rather gently...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He says, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again," but those words are pretty powerful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So then he cleanses the Temple; back to Bethany...next morning...back into the city, and Peter notices that that tree that Jesus had said that about is now withered from the roots on up.

DAVE BAST

So, we are wondering what is going on here. It seems like a strange combination of deity and humanity in Jesus actually, if you think about it. I mean, we do believe...orthodox Christians have all confessed right from the very start that Jesus is God...God in the flesh; but he is also truly human, and the fact that he was hungry actually points to that in this little story; so, why does he act like this, in a way he uses, to put it crassly...it seems like he uses his divinity to kill a poor tree, because in his human nature he is upset with it; he is bothered; he is peeved; he is put out; he is, you know, disappointed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if you want to think about his divine nature, you would think that the man who fed five thousand people from just a few loaves and fish, could make a fig if he wanted a fig bad enough; but he does not use his divinity to create food, he uses his divinity here to kill a tree; and again, if this were us, right, you might say: Well, of course, I mean, you get upset about certain things and you react. You know, if you went through a

McDonald's drive-through and then they said: No, we are out of fries; you might say: Oh, may no one ever eat Big Macs from you ever again, McDonald's, and we would not expect anything to come of it, but that would be the kind of thing you would hear through a drive-through speaker.

DAVE BAST

I could see myself doing that, but I have trouble with Jesus doing this; but now here, I think, is the key to the whole incident. Remember this is a series about Jesus' last teaching, and in his action with the tree, he is teaching—he is doing something for his disciples, and for us, to convey a lesson. We could call it an acted parable...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I think that is what it is.

DAVE BAST

A message to us. It is not about the tree. The point is not to feel sorry for the tree. After all, God made the tree; the tree served a purpose; it did what God intended it to do; and it has a lesson for us to convey. So, there are actually biblical precedents for this idea...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the book of Jonah is one. We did a series on Jonah a while back, and if you remember, at the end of Jonah, Jonah is upset that the people of Nineveh actually repented, because he was hoping they would get fried; so he goes out of the city sulking. God makes a vine—a gourd—to grow up to shade Jonah from the sun, and Jonah is so happy about the vine; and then God sends a worm and kills the vine, and then Jonah is upset about the vine. It was not about the vine, it was about the object lesson, because God will come and say: You are more upset about that vine than that whole city. You wanted to see the city burn. How can you be upset about a vine and not all of those people and cattle? So, that was an acted-out lesson for Jonah.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and there is another very powerful parable in the Old Testament, in Isaiah Chapter 5, usually called the parable of the vineyard, where it is a whole series of plants—a whole set of grapevines...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Which God addresses. Let me just read the first few verses from Isaiah 5:

¹I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard... (So, the vineyard is God's beloved—the vineyard is Israel—the vineyard is the people of God.) My loved one (that is the Lord) had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ²He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit—(stink fruit, as one translator said).

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then God, in a fury, digs up the whole vineyard, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He destroys it.

DAVE BAST

It is like, what more could he have done? This is not just an empty, barren tree. It is a showy, empty, barren tree. It has leaves. It is like the vineyard. It has everything it needs. It has been so beautifully tended and it has flourished, and where is the fruit? That is the point, where is the fruit?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why Isaiah 5, Dave, which a seminary colleague of mine once said, Isaiah 5 is God singing the blues, because he comes to sing a love song, and he does everything right; he does everything in the world to produce a bumper crop of grapes, and when harvest comes, it is just terrible and stinky; and the vineyard was Israel, of course; and this fig tree is Israel. I mean, that is the thing, as you said, Dave. It is not about the tree. You know, we do not want people to get upset about killing a poor little tree. The tree is a symbol for Israel. Mark tells us it was not the season for figs, but that is not the important thing either. It *was* the season for Israel to know the coming of its Messiah...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we mentioned in the first program that in Luke's Gospel, right in the middle of the Palm Sunday triumphal entry celebration Jesus weeps over Jerusalem because: You are going to be destroyed, he says; your children are going to be killed because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you. They did not see Jesus as the true Messiah. This is Mark's version of Jesus crying...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Israel should be producing spiritual fruit, and it is not.

DAVE BAST

It is also a tie-in to the cleansing of the Temple...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Because the great message there is: Don't have a Sabbath day religion that is not matched by a weekday morality...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Decency, goodness, fruitfulness, bearing the fruit of love, bearing the fruit of justice, bearing the fruit of peacemaking. So, you know, the same message is being reinforced in the lesson of the fig tree. It is not enough just to have the appearance or the pretense of life, you need real life; and specifically, the life that comes through faith in Jesus. I mean, the ultimate fruit that God is looking for in every human being is faith in Jesus Christ...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And here is the crowd...here is the Jerusalem crowd crying out: Hosanna, hosanna...waving their palm branches...and many of these same people no doubt were in the crowd on Friday, saying: Crucify him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Five days...five days from hosanna to crucify...five days; which is shocking, except I do not think it was so shocking for Jesus, because he recognized the hollowness of the hosannas and the raising of the palm branches. It looked like a healthy fig tree in leaf; it looked great...on the outside it looked great. They are saying all the right things, finally, finally; even the disciples thought finally he is going to get revved up here and go take on Pontius Pilate and Herod and Caesar, and reestablish a new Israel; but it was hollow; it was a good-looking tree, but it had no true spiritual fruit. They went from hosanna to crucify because as soon as the Jesus they thought they were singing to on Sunday turned into a suffering servant Jesus instead, they turned on him.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; I mean, and when he says to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world," that was enough for the crowd to say: Give us Barabbas; because he is a guy of this world. He is a guy who is willing to use force and violence to get what we want, which is our freedom, our independence, and this Jesus with his spiritual stuff and his truth and all that, we are not so sure about that. So, there is the key. It is about faith; it is about Jesus; and Jesus, too, will draw a lesson about faith from the fate of the fig tree. We said it already: It is a teaching...it is a teaching moment; but Jesus also has some words of teaching in this connection, and that is what we will look at next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are in Mark's Gospel in this program, Dave, and the events surrounding Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his cleansing of the Temple, and then this incident of the cursing of this fig tree. He curses it one day, the next day they happen to walk by it again and the fig tree is dead and withered; and we just said in the previous segment, Dave, that the fig tree, sort of like the vineyard in Isaiah 5, is a symbol—a symbol of Israel—a symbol of God's covenant people who have broken covenant with God because they were not bearing the true fruits, and they did not recognize the Messiah when he came to them in the person of Jesus Christ; and ultimately, of course, they do reject him; but Jesus himself, as you said at the end of the last segment, Dave...it is not just Peter says: Look, it is withered; Jesus has a response. So, let's listen to these words when Jesus is explaining to his rather confused disciples what this whole thing means.

DAVE BAST

Right; and he points to the importance of faith. So, this is what Jesus says: ^{11:22}"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. ²³"Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart, but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

I read that and I have more problems even than with the fig tree.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, yes; maybe we should have just left it at the fig tree.

DAVE BAST

More questions, I guess, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is one of several texts...you get it also in Matthew 6: Ask, seek and knock in the Sermon on the Mount after the Lord's Prayer...this is one of several texts where Jesus *seems to say* prayer is like a blank check; write in any amount you want; name it and claim it, as the TV evangelists say, and it will be yours; and as you say, Dave, all of those texts where Jesus says something like this are problematic. You know, another similar text involving a mountain from another part of Mark's Gospel and in some of the other gospels, if you have faith as tiny as a mustard seed you can say to this mountain, jump into the sea, and it will. They all seem kind of unrealistic, and there is so much evidence in our own lives, but also in Jesus' own life that you don't always get exactly what you pray for...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not quite this simple, even though texts like this make it sound like it is.

DAVE BAST

It does sound...and this illustrates, I think, the problem of isolating texts...what some people call proof-texting...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Just mining a single statement—take it out of the context of the Gospel, and just, you know, put it up on a placard or something and say: Look, see? God said it; I believe it; that settles it. Not quite so fast, maybe, with this. For one thing, I have a problem with it because it does not seem to be true. I do not think anybody ever gets anything they ask for; and this kind of application has caused untold hurt for ordinary Christian people. You know, I believed; I asked God to heal me and he didn't; now what? Is he not there? Is there no God? I was just teaching a Bible study recently, and there was a man in the group who had been blind from birth, like the guy in the Gospels, blind from birth; and he told a story of how one day a woman came up to him and said: Could I lay my hands on you and pray for you? I believe that God will heal you; and he said: Well, you know, I am a Christian; okay. So she did, and nothing happened. So, what do you say to that? It is hurtful to say to someone: You did not have enough faith. That is why you were not healed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and you know, constantly...when I am grading and discussing students' sermons at the seminary where I teach...I am constantly saying to students: You know, it is great if you celebrate in your sermon a story about, you know, the congregation prayed for little Lizzie and she got better from her leukemia, but the problem is, there is somebody else out there, and we prayed for little Billy and his leukemia and he did not get better, he died. You have got to be always careful because you do not want Billy's parents to say: Well, apparently we did not have the faith of Lizzie's parents because our prayer went unanswered...

DAVE BAST

Or we prayed somehow the wrong way...we didn't get it right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, what did we do wrong? And that leads to unending hurt, as you say, Dave, and certainly that is *not* Jesus' intention here. This has been a longstanding problem. C. S. Lewis wrote a lot about this. He had an

essay one time back in the 1950s: *Petitionary Prayer; a Problem Without a Solution*, he says is namely we pray for things...Jesus prayed for something: Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me; not my will but thy will be done; and God's will was that the cup did not pass from him...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So even Jesus did not get what he prayed for in one sense, but in the larger sense he did, but it is all very complicated; but the point here...now this is still in connection with the fig tree...that the fig tree looked healthy and wasn't, and that was sort of like Israel. It was kind of hollow, false at its core; and so, what Jesus is saying here is: Do not make this about whether or not prayer is a blank check, but you have to have faith. You have to believe; and Jesus never tells us to have huge amounts of faith; I mean, Jesus never said: If you had faith like a mountain you could say to this mustard seed...

DAVE BAST

Yes, go sprout, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But Jesus is saying just the essence of faith...having true faith...believing it *can* be done, whether whatever you pray for *is* done, that is so important because that is the heartbeat of having a loving, trusting relationship with God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, faith is the crucial thing; and faith does not mean somehow screwing yourself up by willpower to believe more strongly, and not letting doubt creep in. Faith is that sort of simple, childlike trust that God is good, that God will do all the things he has promised, maybe at his own timetable. I love a line from the great theologian John Calvin, Scott, someone important to both of us, I know, and to our tradition, who says that faith does not insist on the adverb *now*. So, we do believe that God will heal us ultimately. We do believe that God will make all things new. We just do not insist on *now*. We allow God to be God and do it in his way and in his time.

So I think another thing that maybe is going on here in Jesus' lesson about faith and prayer is, he is inviting us to reflect on the question: What do you really want to ask for? Whatever you ask, he says, whatever you ask; but what is it that we want? What is it that we would truly ask for? I mean, do I even know what is best for me, in particulars, to ask for that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

We always think we do, but in the end, did we? I think almost all of us, if we have lived long enough, anyway, can look back on our lives and say: it is good thing God did not give me what I prayed for. I really thought she was the one. I really thought that was the job I needed to take. I really thought...and now I know it would have been a disaster. Faith is what makes you want to ask God for things, and to do it boldly, believing that he loves you and believing when it is all over and done, and we look back from the kingdom of God's perspective...in our Father's kingdom...we look back on our lives, we look back on the life of the Church, we look back on the life of God's covenant people clear back to Abram, we are going to see that God really did work everything together for good. That is not a namby-pamby thing to say, but it is to say God ultimately is in control. Have faith in him. Ask for what you need and want; do it boldly; you know he loves you. It might be a no, it might be a wait, it might be something you did not expect; but for Jesus, prayer is always first of all about that loving relationship with God; and for the rest, we leave it up to the Holy Spirit as well.

DAVE BAST

We do, and that is a wonderful pointer to one of the great passages on prayer in the New Testament, from Romans Chapter 8. You know, if you are not sure what to ask for, James, to take another example, says ask

for wisdom and God will give you wisdom. We could ask for faith—ask for more faith. We think of the man in the Gospel: Lord, I believe; help my unbelief; but in Romans 8 there is a wonderful passage that says even if we do not know what to say...even if we do not have the right words...God will help us through his Spirit. So, this is Romans 8:26:

In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness, we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans,²⁷ and he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. Wonderful promise!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is the life of faith that Jesus wants for all of us, thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study Jesus' parable of the tenants to discover his warning, and determine its relevance for us yet today. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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