

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

One device I dislike in modern movies is the unspoken rule that they have to start with an attention grabbing bang. The game I play is to try and guess what the words will be on the screen after the opening scene ... “Twelve hours earlier”, “Three days earlier”, “One year earlier” or even “Ten years later”. Having complained about that, I’m going to do the same here: Why is it that we never see or hear of mountains being moved, like Jesus said they would?

We will come to this all in good course.

First, let’s start with what seems, on first reading, to be one of the most out of character things Jesus did, or at least one of the most unexpected: The cursing of a fig tree. It is described by both Mark and Matthew. The context is that, having persistently avoided publicity, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem to a burst of adulation. It is the start of week that will end in his crucifixion. Jesus and the twelve have then left Jerusalem to spend the night in Bethany.

[Mark 11:12-14](#) describes the next morning when Jesus is heading back to the city. He is hungry and, seeing a fig tree in leaf, looks for figs. He finds none. This should have come as no surprise as it would have been March or April and figs would not have been in season yet. But then he speaks

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to the tree, ["May no one ever eat fruit from you again."](#) An easy first assumption is that he curses the tree in a fit of anger, but no indication of his mood is mentioned.

Then Jesus does something else surprising. Something, I suggest, that would seem equally out of character if it were not such a familiar story to us. He proceeds directly to the temple courts and physically drives out the traders working there in violent fashion.

So here are two events of which nothing remotely similar is recorded during rest of Christ's life. If it were anyone else we might assume he'd started the day in a foul mood! But this is Jesus. His actions will have been quite deliberate and two of the gospel writers thought them significant enough to record. (It's worth noting that Luke describes Jesus clearing the Temple only, as does John. But John records this as happening during Passover week of a previous year.)

The day finishes with the group leaving the city again. The following morning they come across the same fig tree that is now withered. ([Mark 11:20, 21](#))

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It is interesting to note, at this point that, unlike Mark, [Matthew 21:18-22](#) records the fig tree story as one complete incident. It is widely agreed that Matthew and Luke used Mark's gospel as their starting point to build their own versions of Jesus life story (or, as I like to think of it, they copied Marks homework!) There is much agreement between these synoptic gospel writers. But am of the opinion that Matthew chose to tell this fig tree story in one tidy event rather than stick with Mark's seemingly disjointed account that sandwiches the two parts of this very short story around Christ's run-in with the temple tradesmen. I believe that it is this very sandwiching is the key to understanding message of the withered fig tree. The fact that even Matthew himself doesn't seem to recognise the significance, I find quite exciting.

Why would Jesus expect to find fruit on the fig tree out of season? Although conversely, why would a fig tree refuse to give fruit to its creator if he wanted it? (For the Christ who turned water into wine this surely would not have been a challenge.) Given the proximity of the Temple confrontation this looks to me like Jesus is acting out a parable and, and like many of his parables, they were as yet impenetrable to those listening within the context of the last days of the old covenant. Without coincidence, a

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fig tree is the subject of another of Jesus' parables in [Luke 13:6–9](#) that is clearly representing a last chance for Israel to come good.

When Jesus drove the traders out of the temple, and continued to keep them out [“... he said, “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.’” \(Mark 11:17\)](#) Here he quotes [Isaiah 56:7](#) and [Jer. 7:11](#), where Isaiah is talking about the faithful of the gentiles being acceptable to him and welcome in his house (the temple), and Jeremiah accuses the Israelites of being in breach of the covenant the LORD made with them and yet still believing that they will be safe in the Lord's temple. They are mistaken. Jeremiah goes on to say, in verse 29 [“Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.”](#)

The temple structure was designed to welcome believing foreigners; gentiles. Each of the temple courts were designated for different groups with increasing requirement of holiness: The Women's Court, The Court of Israel (the men's court), The Priest's Court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. But the outermost area was The

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Court of the Gentiles, where the faithful gentiles could worship. It was this area in which the market has been set up, with the permission of the religious authorities (who most probably charged rates of the traders as well). The market was serving the Jewish worshipers (selling livestock for the required sacrifices) at the expense of the gentiles who wanted to worship here and would not have been allowed any further in. This is what made Jesus' blood boil, that the Jews were not allowing gentiles to worship God. This is why he spoke of a ["house of prayer for all nations"](#). It is the non-Jews, the gentiles, whom he wants to draw closer to the LORD.

Jesus' actions in the Temple were about purifying the temple and his cursing of the fig tree is an overarching prophetic act that declares the spiritual bankruptcy of the chosen people. It prophesies the destruction of the Israelite nation that has born no good fruit, and with it the old covenant that has been broken and the system of Law that cannot (and never could) reconcile man to God. In his own body Jesus is about to usher in a new covenant that will be for all mankind, Jew and Gentile. Before the end of the week the old covenant will be both fulfilled and cancelled. Even the curtain to the Holy of Holies, that keeps ordinary people from God, will be torn top to

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bottom. And within forty years (AD70) the Temple itself will be gone.

But there is more!

The twelve had already been given authority to cast out demons, heal and even raise the dead. They had been told to proclaim, [“The kingdom of heaven is near.” \(Matt 10:7\).](#) But at this point miracles were still beyond the disciples. When Peter says, [“Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”](#) Jesus tells them how they themselves can do this and more. If each [“Have faith in God”, “...and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them” \(Mark 11:22, 23\).](#) The key is [“...whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” \(v24\).](#) They won't get the opportunity to do this until the new covenant is established. They will only have the capacity for faith of this kind when the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within each one. All this is now only days away for them.

But there is one last thing that Jesus concludes with. Almost jarringly, he adds a few words on forgiveness. I say “jarringly” because it seems at first reading that this is a bit of unrelated teaching that could have been recorded

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almost anywhere. But I believe that the very reason it is here means it has a bearing on what has gone before.

In verse 25 Jesus says *“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”*

Now we know that, among other things, Jesus brings forgiveness through the cross, and that the gospel of grace offers this to us free of charge, unconditionally. But in this statement it sound conditional, as it does in the Lord’s prayer (*Matt 20:12, 13 & 14*). I suggest we can apply the two part principle of giving and receiving here. We can be given something, but we only gain access to it if we receive it. God has given, our part is to receive.

Let’s define ‘unforgiveness’. If I withhold forgiveness from someone who has offended or hurt me, if I hold a grudge, I am insisting on managing the matter myself. I have decided I will be judge and jury on this matter. In doing so I am holding it away from God. I am not allowing Him access to it, because I know, if I do, he will forgive – He’s just like that, isn’t He? Unforgiveness is a system we participate in, the rational of which is that we all keep tabs on the debt we are owed. We do this in the hope that one day the

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debt will be repaid. But the truth is, it never will be. We don't even really know how much will be enough and sometimes the offending person isn't even aware of our offense, or else how deep it goes, and so will have no inclination to reimburse us (or reimburse us enough).

When we participate in this system of unforgiveness we are unavailable to properly receive forgiveness. The only way to receive forgiveness is to make room for it by forgiving. We need to exit the system.

The Exchanged Life coaching program I am a practitioner of gives opportunity to make a list of everyone who ever hurt me (including, mum, dad and even myself and God). It is an exhaustive list of everyone, detailing how each hurt me. Then we go through the process of verbally weighing out the offenses we have against each person and then forgive them. We cancel the debt and in so doing we are restored to the place before we were ever hurt. At the end of this process the person finds themselves in a place where they have a clean sheet with the world for the first time ever. They have exited the unforgiveness system.

How many of us can honestly say we have ever done this? I have witnessed first-hand how dramatic the impact of

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this is on emotions and relationships. This is one of the best things you can do for yourself: Forgive everyone.

Of course we will get hurt again. But having experienced the freedom of cancelling all debts, we are far more inclined to keep short accounts and forgive new offences as soon as humanly possible.

Once all has been forgiven God gets access to all these areas we previously held away from him. He brings healing, joy and we get to feel the full measure of his forgiveness of us.

I believe what Jesus is teaching in this passage is that it is through forgiving, and then receiving God's forgiveness, that allows the generation of the level of certainty of faith that produces miracles.

So to conclude: The clearing of the temple and the withering of the fig tree are prophetic pictures of how Jesus will draw the old covenant with Israel to a close and so allow room for the establishment of a new covenant for all humanity. The nature of this new covenant will mean that the subjects of it will have access to perform the miraculous. The only thing that will prevent this is lack of

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faith. And lack of faith is repaired by forgiving and receiving forgiveness.

Miracles are within reach now. So let us attend to forgiveness and be expectant of what we will then do with God.