

Introduction: For our series of Reformation Fall Bible notes, we turn this week to Jesus as He cleanses the temple and curses the fig tree - thereby teaching us about *our inability to bear fruit apart from Him*. My prayer is that when you have a sense of fruitlessness, and grieve over your weakness as a believer, you will be encouraged to see how Christ helps us in our struggle with our sin nature and its attendant spiritual impotence. After all, is not the first cornerstone of the Reformation the doctrine of *Total Depravity*? In ourselves, we unable to do anything good or to produce the fruit of godliness. But praise God that it is His job to do this for us and in us, by the Spirit of Christ indwelling us!

Monday: read Matthew 21:12-17. Filled with a consistent regard for His Father's honor, and grieved over the money-changers, whose greed under-mined God's temple as a 'house of prayer for all nations', Jesus cleanses the temple for a second time in Matthew 21:12-17. What a foreshadowing of the judgment that would fall on Jerusalem!

But there was more to Christ's actions that Monday morning of Passion Week than a desire to wreak holy judgment on His enemies. After all, as Judge Jesus could have destroyed the temple at that very moment. No one could have denied Him that right. Instead He restrains His judgment to continue teaching and healing in the temple, so that the blind, the lame and even children are granted access to Him (Matt. 21:14-16)! What a gracious Savior, who has compassion on us in our weakness!

Meditate and Pray: Let us thank God that, all through Jesus' ministry, He fulfilled the gracious purpose for which He came: not first of all to judge the earth, but to give His life a ransom for many! Sing about this from Psalm 8, which Jesus quotes to explain the joy of those who received Him in the temple in Matthew 21:16 (hymn # 114 in our hymn book):

*Lord, our Lord, Thy glorious Name
All Thy wondrous works proclaim;
In the heav'ns with radiant signs
Evermore Thy glory shines.*

*Infant lips Thou dost ordain
Wrath and vengeance to restrain;
Weakest means fulfill Thy will,
Mighty enemies to still.*

*Moon and stars in shining height
Nightly tell their Maker's might;
When Thy wondrous heavens I scan,
Then I know how weak is man.*

*What is man that he should be
Loved and visited by Thee,
Raised to an exalted height,
Crowned with honor in Thy sight!*

*With dominion crowned he stands
O'er the creatures of Thy hands;
All to him subjection yield
In the sea and air and field,*

*Lord, our Lord, thy glorious name
All Thy wondrous works proclaim;
Thine the Name of matchless worth,
Excellent in all the earth.*

Tues/Weds: read Matthew 21:18-21. Besides cleansing the temple, Jesus demonstrated His power to judge His people Israel in equity and truth - with a second sign at the beginning of passion week: the withering of the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-21.

It all began Monday morning. Jesus had stayed the previous night, as was his habit, in Bethany outside of Jerusalem (Matthew 21:17). Early the next day, he went looking for early figs to eat. True to His suffering humanity, He was often hungry, without time to eat except on the run. Finding none of the “early figs” which were considered delicious (Compare Jeremiah 24:2 with Matthew 21:18) or at least failing to find the nodules which could be eaten as soon as leaves appeared, Jesus curses what is obviously a diseased tree, a tree which ought to have had some kind of fruit in early stages of growth, since it already had leaves! According to Mark’s version of events, the disciples heard Jesus curse the tree in Mark 11:14, but did not notice how the tree withered until the next morning, when it was Peter who pointed out the tree which his master had cursed the day before (Mark 11:21).

What then is the lesson? Jeremiah 24:8-10 can help us. There the bad figs stand for the corrupted king of Judah and his nobles in Jerusalem. They boasted of their royal splendor and power, but God had rejected them because of their wicked hearts and sinful behavior. Like ruined figs, God would curse them as hypocrites. In the same way, Jesus searched for fruit from the leaders and the people of Israel and found instead the disease of corrupted, unbelieving hearts. Though Jerusalem boasted that their fig leaves promised real spiritual fruit, the leaves proved to be a false sign. Try as they might (like Adam and Eve of old) their fig leaves could not cover their sin of rejecting Jesus Christ nor their fruitless unbelief. Jesus exposes them, and pronounces such religious hypocrites to be cursed.

Meditate and Pray: “Oh Lord, you see through all our attempts at covering our sinful diseases. Please deal with each of us personally; groaning over our sin; touching the root causes of our blindness and deafness until we see you clearly. Thank you Lord that you have given us in your Son a “Good Physician” who deals thoroughly with each patient under His care. Especially we pray, oh Lord, that you would save us from the religious pride which dares to *show the leaves of a false profession, all the while bearing little of the fruit of godliness*. Help us, Lord Jesus. Save us, prune us and make us bear fruit for your Kingdom. Amen.”

Thursday: read Matthew 21:20-22 and Luke 17:5-6. We continue prayerfully to consider the lesson of the barren fig tree, all the while confessing that we *know* how small and weak our own faith is. Who will deliver us from the fruitlessness of our weak and inept faith? May this prayer begin to point us in the right direction:

“Father, when we look at our own lives, we confess that our faith is not strong in itself as to move mountains. It is only a mustard seed (Luke 17:6), and we fail to see how our small faith will ever yield fruit for our Savior to savor. But thank you that even our small faith can be mighty, placed as it is in our mighty Savior. *His* mighty faith did indeed move the mountain of the guilt of our sin. *His* faith now lives in us (Galatians 2:20)! *His* faith at work in us makes us

willing servants, eager for opportunities to bear fruit for Him – fruit that will indeed endure (John 15:16)! *His* faith indeed endures in us! Amen!”

Friday: read Matthew 21:20-22 and Matthew 25:37-40. We ought to daily grieve over the lack of spiritual fruit in our lives. The founding pastor of our church was known in a few memorable cases to challenge attenders to look at their own Christian lives and ask the question: “Where’s the fruit?” We *all* need such a challenge at times! But there is a difference between the barren tree which Jesus curses (as a picture of the curse falling on unbelieving Israel) and the struggling believer whom Jesus encourages to bear more fruit. The fig is cursed in order to expose the hypocrisy of His proud foes, while His ministry to the people of God is to keep them *from despairing of ever having the fruit of their imperfect lives accepted by God*. For those mourning over their fruitless years, and longing to increase in love and devotion to the Savior, Jesus’ promise is ever, “fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

Meditate and Pray: What a hope for us in the end that our lives will count for God’s glory, and that we *will* be able by His grace to perform the works which He has ordained for us to do (Ephesians 2:10)!

Sat/Sun: read John 15:1-5. A sense of our own *dependency on Christ, so that we continually turn and cry out to Him for His help every moment of every day is the root of wise, godly living*. Here is how such dependency on Christ in all things was expressed by a very fruitful and godly preacher in 19th century Scotland:

“I ought to pray and labor for the deepest sense of my utter weakness and helplessness that ever a sinner was brought to feel. I am helpless in respect of every lust that ever was, or ever will be, in the human heart. I am a worm – a beast – before God. I often tremble to think that this is true. I (wrongly) feel as if it would not be safe for me to renounce all indwelling strength, as if it would be dangerous for me to feel (*what is the truth*) that there is nothing in me keeping me back from the grossest and vilest sin. This is a delusion of the devil. My only safety is to know, feel, and confess my helplessness, that I may hang upon the arm of Omnipotence.... If I were more deeply convinced of my own utter helplessness, I think I would not be so alarmed when I hear of the falls of other men.... I should study those sins in which I am most helpless, in which passion becomes like a whirlwind and I like a piece of straw....”

“There are many subsidiary methods of seeking deliverance from sins, which must not be neglected.... But the main defense is casting myself into the arms of Christ like a helpless child, and begging Him to fill me with the Holy Spirit. ‘This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith’ – 1 John 5:4-5.’” (Robert Murray McCheyne’s *Personal Reformation*, as quoted by Bryan Hedges in his book, Watchfulness.)