

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS, #034 A Chronological Study

*"To Him who opened His mouth in parables and  
uttered things hidden since the creation of the world."  
Psalm 78:2*



### **"The Unfruitful Fig Tree"** **Mt 21:18-19; Mk 11:12-14; Lk 13:6-9<sup>i</sup>**

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#### **THE INTRODUCTION:**

The story of the "Unfruitful Fig Tree" is told in Matthew 21 and Mark 11. Both tell the story that takes place after Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple. Both of these events must have greatly distressed Jesus. The Triumphal Entry, because great crowds of people were celebrating what they thought was their new King who would "immediately" institute the long awaited promised Kingdom of God. Then shortly after Jesus went to His Father's Temple and found it "a den of thieves," and He drove them all out.

What doesn't get found out, unless you are comparing these verses in Matthew: 18-19; Mark 11:12-14 against Luke 13:6-9 is that Matthew and Mark's recorded event is actually that – a real life event.

The Unfruitful Fig Tree narration found in the book of Luke is a parable that has its roots in Matthew and Mark's Gospels – however, all three are connected, and that's what we'll be discovering in this lesson.

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### **SOME BACKGROUND AND HISTORY:**

That kingdom was promised first to Abraham (2126 B.C.) – then Isaac – and Jacob by the Lord. Throughout the history of the Hebrew Israelites (named for Jacob who was later renamed Israel) they won and lost many victories, conquered many nations and were nearly conquered by many—the most recent was by the Romans. But their promised kingdom was never fully instituted.

The first disappointment came when Moses took them out of Egypt and they refused to enter into their kingdom lands across the Jordan River.

After being disciplined for their disobedience for 40 years in the southern wilderness came their first success. Moses led them to the Jordan river and Joshua took them into the lands promised-- what we know as Palestine (then called Canaan), Syria, and Lebanon as far north as the Euphrates River and from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Arabian Desert on the East.

The nation then became engaged in a continuing cycle of successes and failures. There was the series of Judges who came to power to rescue them from their enemies (and themselves). David came close to establishing the kingdom but failed and the

kingdom split in two. Israel fell to Assyria, and then Assyria and Judah fell to Babylon, then the Egyptians, and the Persians. After some battles they were able to regain their lands, but eventually lost all to the Romans.

Then Jesus is born - most scholars place the date around March/April of 3 B.C.. The Israelites, now known as the Jews (Judeans – the remnants of the last faithful tribe), were dispersed all over the surrounding countries – Then, nearly 2000 years later at the end of World War II and the redistribution of the middle east, Israel once again became a nation of its own (May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948, at midnight). To this day the majority of Jews have no faith in their Savior God, and many hate those who do.

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So first, we'll look at the recording of the actual event that Jesus took part in and recorded by both Matthew and Mark. We'll use our "Linear Text" way of integrating both recordings into a single narration so we get as much information as possible.

### **THE UNFRUITFUL FIG TREE NARRATION**

**Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:22-26 [NASB] The Linear Text**

***(Mt 21:18-19a) Now in the morning, when He, Jesus, was returning to the city, He became hungry. 19 Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, (Mk 11:13b) He went to see if perhaps He would find anything, to eat, on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.***

As mentioned before, Matthew and Mark's Unfruitful Fig Tree is an actual event that Jesus and His disciples witnessed. We should note also that the Fig tree is widely used in figurative language about Israel.

A day or two earlier Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem for His Triumphal Entry

**(Mt 21:19b) He** (Jesus) **came to it** (the Fig tree) **and found nothing on it except leaves only;**

The Mark manuscript mentions that it was the wrong season for fig fruit – Exactly – it was the wrong season for Israel to establish the promised kingdom of God.

At this point Jesus is using a metaphor about the Son of God coming to Israel and only finding a non-believing nation, with no evidence of anyone waiting for their **Savior who saves from sin.**

Jesus is putting this “fig tree” event into the minds of His Disciples. He will later use the memory of this event to re-ignite the minds of His Disciples as they will then hear Him tell the story as a Parable. We need to listen carefully to the event, like the Disciples had to, so that the larger meanings of the Parable will then be in focus.

We’re told that Jesus got up one morning and He was hungry. He saw a fig tree and went to it to find some fruit... and only found leaves. Jesus is teaching the disciples, and us, a lesson using this fig tree. He will speak to it... but His words are for the disciples’ ears... **not for the tree.**

We need to remember right away that – Jesus is God the Creator **(John 1:3)**. He is walking on earth having the form of a man **(John 1:14)**. He has just awoken and found that He is hungry. Another metaphor for Jesus’ desire to get on with this very important address to His disciples.

Now it might help us to make believe and think of Him as the **owner** of a breakfast sandwich shop (the fig tree). So, He goes to His sandwich shop and says, “Give me a breakfast sandwich!” (some figs) And the clerk says, “I’m sorry sir, today I knew you were coming, but I did not make any breakfast sandwiches!” (no

figs upon the tree). As I thought about this myself, the first thought was "Fire the clerk and close the shop."

### **What does Jesus say next?**

***and He \*said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you," and (Mk 11:14) He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening. (Mt 21:19c) And at once the fig tree withered. (Mk 11:20b) and they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. 20 Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?"***

**Ah, what question would you have asked? "what do we do next...?"**

No, the question that was asked was not "What do we do next" But "**How** did the fig tree wither all at once?"

The poor disciples, they are with Jesus at the near end of His journey to the Cross... and they are still not getting it. Jesus is God. He may have some limited powers while He is acting as His Father's servant, but only the limiting of certain powers that would circumvent His obedience to the overall plan for the salvation of man. So, "How did the fig tree wither all at once? Because God (Jesus) commanded it by faith (Note: If God did not have faith in the things He commands, He would not be God).

***(Mk 11:21) And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. (Mk 11:22b) 23 Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart,***

***but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.***

As a young man, growing up in my faith, I've heard these words many times, but passed over them thinking they said something else. So, I stress now that we take each word and consider what Jesus is saying to those who follow Him.

His first lesson says, **if YOU HAVE FAITH** and **DO NOT DOUBT** (your faith, or the one you have faith in) you will be able to not only make an unwilling tree (unwilling to serve the Creator God) wither and no longer produce fruit, but also able to speak to a mountain and throw it into the sea. I think the metaphor Jesus is referencing His own faith as God, perhaps what we humans can accomplish would be somewhat short of that, but so much can be accomplished if we as people of **FAITH...** do not doubt but **ACT by faith without doubt.**

***(Mk 11:24) Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.***

Do you see and hear Jesus words. "All things for which you pray and ask." So, first of all comes prayer and asking in **FAITH.** The way I interpret this is that my asking and praying must always be according to the very will of God. As a person of **FAITH IN CHRIST,** my prayers must match His will and desires – not my own will and desires.

Then secondly, when I go to pray and ask, I must be believing that my prayers and questions asked have answers that have already been received... and **THEN** they will be granted to you.

**And there's more requirements:**

***(Mk 11:25-26) Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father***

***who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. 26 [But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.]" (Mt 21:22) And all things you ask in prayer, **believing**, you will receive."***

### **LET US LOOK AT 3 IMPORTANT WORDS:**

**Whenever:** Prayer should be an everyday (perhaps all day) discipline of the believer. I find it amazing that for most of my life those who I've held anything against had me feeling that way because I had done something that offended them. I can find no release for their offense toward me without forgiving them for being offended by me. Now this may not always be the case, for some are just offensive sometimes – in both word and/or deed. But Jesus' command is for every believer to forgive.

**Anyone:** Yes, anyone. The bad neighbor, the offensive driver, the political official that is against God and Christ. The person in your past that has committed a crime or evil against you or anyone in your knowledge. The selfish, the criminal, the sexual offender, the murderer, and all other kinds. But... WHY? Because that's what God did through the death of His Son on the Cross. He forgave everyone who ever lived or will live. We've mentioned this a number of times in this Parables of Jesus study – No human being will ever go to Hell because of their sin or sins. Total forgiveness was paid for at the Cross. Heaven is the result of your personal choice to believe in The Lord Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, for your salvation. Hell is your destination if you choose to "not believe" in Him.

Verse 26 is in brackets because it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts, but it does follow after the principles found in the Lord's Prayer. (Mt 6:12) "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." This verse was most likely added much later.

**Believing:** My guess would be that this is the hardest requirement. You must believe that you will receive your prayer request when you make it. Nothing hinders a person's prayers more than a lack of faith.

If your prayer is in faith, and if you fully believe that your prayer will be answered... then it will be answered – that's His word, now believe it. But do not expect His answer will violate His will or Word.

And you've probably heard the prayer instructions that say that there are three possible answers to every prayer: (1) Yes; (2) No; (3) Not Now, but in His time and always according to His will and purpose.

In our next section we'll now look at Jesus' third use of the unfaithful Fig Tree story. Only this time it will be in the form of a parable.

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## **THE PARABLE OF THE UNFRUITFUL FIG TREE INTRODUCTION**

But, Before we tackle this parable, we need to pay special attention to some verses from Luke's gospel and chapter 12 that lead up to Jesus' parable of the Fig Tree in chapter 13.

At the end of Luke 12 Jesus closes with admonitions to his hearers, a large crowd, that while they can tell the possibilities of the weather by looking at the sky... they don't apply the same skills and logic into telling the possibilities of the political system around them, or God's plans for their world and time by just looking around and seeing. His closing statement tells them that they are sinners and in line for judgment and condemnation, but they just don't see it. And speaking to the Jews he says,



**(Lk 12:57-59) "And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right?"**

Jesus asks them why they don't see the truth of what is going on around them for themselves. Why don't they believe and have faith in what Moses and the Prophets have written in the Word of God about Him, His words and His miracles, and see that they are under God's judgment and condemnation.

**58 For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him (the opponent), so that he (the magistrate) may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. 59 I say to you, you will not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent."**

Jesus is telling them that settling your lack of forgiveness issues before you come to judgment will save you from an eternal imprisonment. In the time of Jesus, a prison sentence meant "for the rest of your life." There was no way for you to work towards a financial release. The only way out was for someone else to pay the penalty. To be clearer: If you are under the condemnation of God you should go to the Savior for there is no work you can do for your release... The only out is for the Savior, JESUS, to pay the penalty and you become free.

**Jesus – The Call To Repent (Luke 13:1-5)**

**1 At that time some people were there who told Jesus that Pilate had killed some people from Galilee while they were worshiping. He mixed their blood with the blood of the animals they were sacrificing to God.  
2 And Jesus said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?"**

So the question Jesus asks is: **"Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?"** Today in our world Christians are being murdered in places like North Africa and other Islamic countries. Do we expect that those who are killed are greater sinners than us? I expect that because we are largely not legalists, that we would answer "no". But in Jesus' time the general thought amongst the people of Israel would be "Yes." Victims of the Rabbinical legalistic laws of the day. Greater enforced legalism requires greater punishment according to their legal definitions. "Oh, they walked too far to synagogue" they are therefore greater sinners and require greater penalties.

Then Jesus makes God's point... Judgment is coming because you **(the nation of Israel and you the person)** will not believe, you will not "turn around (Repent). Judgment is coming and you don't want to see it." "You are living on borrowed time and that time, God's patience, is running out."

**3 I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?**

Jesus uses a recent local disaster to make his point. His question to them is... "Do you think God punishes those who die in an accident because the quantity of their sins being greater than anyone else's?"

**5 I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."**

This is a repeated sentence in just one paragraph. I was taught, at an early time after my conversion to Christ, that when God says something twice... you better listen to what He has to say!

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## **THE PARABLE OF THE UNFRUITFUL FIG TREE**

### **THE PARABLE**

**Luke 13:6-9** [NASB]

Jesus tells this parable and it is about a Fig Tree, a Vineyard Owner, and a Gardener who tends the vineyard.

***6 And He began telling this parable:***

***"A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any.***

So now we are delving into Jesus' **parable** of The Fig Tree. We need some definitions here. The **MAN** in the Parable is **GOD**. He is the vineyard owner and has planted a "Fig Tree" (the Nation of Israel) in HIS Vinyard (the World). God came looking for FRUIT on the Fig Tree (He inspected **Israel** of Jesus's time and found NO SPIRITUAL FRUIT upon it or being produced by it.)

***7 And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any.***

Sometime before Jesus begins His public ministry John the Baptist began his "Repentance ministry." Jesus' gospel ministry has been since He was a Jewish Adult (30). In Luke chapter 3 John the Baptist told the nation that because of their lack of repentance – the ax was already laid at the foot of the tree. Now

Jesus has been all over the Nation and found it severely lacking in faithful and believing leadership and/or people. Here Jesus is at the end of His earthly ministry (3 years – He’s now 33). God has called John and Jesus and they have been focusing on searching for and restoring Israel’s fruit – the fig tree’s fruit in the parable. **The vineyard-keeper is Jesus.**

The vineyard owner says,

***"Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?" 8 And he (the vineyard-keeper) answered and said to him, (The vineyard owner) 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; 9 and if it bears fruit next year (or a longer period of time – 40 years), fine; but if not, cut it down.'"***

The owner, God, wants to be finished with this fruitless tree. The compassionate vineyard-keeper, Jesus, pleads with His Father to extend another year before cutting down the fig tree. The vineyard-keeper wants more time to “dig around” to help possible growth; to put in fertilizer to feed and encourage fruit growth. Over the next 40 years the Church of Jesus Christ will be established and the largest part of that ministry will be the preaching of the Gospel to Jews right there in the heart of Judah. And if the tree (the nation) does not bear its fruit in this next span of time, then you may “cut it down.”

Jesus is using this parable to teach His disciples of the coming end of God’s salvation of the nation of Israel as a tool to provide the world with Spiritual Fruit.

Repentance and restoration are still in Israel’s future but not till the program of the Church has been completed – not till the King returns from heaven and establishes His Promised Kingdom here on earth with the Capital of His Kingdom in Jerusalem.

(Isaiah 55:6-7)

***"Seek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him, and to our GOD, for He will freely pardon."***

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***FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS***

- 1. When reading through the Scriptures what is the difference between a factual story and a parable. Why is this difference important to the understanding of the Scriptures?**
  
  - 2. Why does Jesus wait until the last days of His earthly ministry to talk about this fig tree?**
  
  - 3. Noah was still alive when Abraham moved from the Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan. How long did God continue in His desire for Israel to become the faithful, God believing nation that He desired them to be?**
  
  - 4. What are three messages of Matthew and Mark's telling of Jesus and the Fig Tree?**
  
  - 5. Why was Jesus disappointed with Israel as revealed in the Parable of the Fig Tree?**
  
  - 6. What was the bottom line that Jesus was teaching to Israel?**
  
  - 7. What verses from Isaiah are used in our lesson that summarize the whole story?**
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## ***FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS***

**1. When reading through the Scriptures what is the difference between a factual story and a parable. Why is this difference important to the understanding of the Scriptures?**

God reveals different ways that His Word can be used to teach. A true story (such as Matthew and Mark's telling of Jesus and the Fig Tree) tell us about real characters and actual events.

A second method God uses is the Parable. In a parable the story told is only for providing a verbal illustration, a metaphor of the deeper meanings sometimes found in the telling of the parable, and not directly expressed – like telling a story about a fig tree when the real message is to express a nation's lack of repentance to their God, and a compassionate Savior who wants to give them more time. And finally, revealing that the end result of being cut-off from their purpose is just ahead.

Quiet often the parable gives the opportunity to speak to different audiences depending on what they are prepared to hear with a single story. Often we see that if part of the audience is spiritually alive (the presents of the Holy Spirit) they will hear spiritually what the speaker (Jesus) desires them to hear. At the same time, if part of the audience is full of rage and hate – that's what they will be triggered by to hear rage and hate as a reaction to the message.

In Jesus' Parable of the Fig Tree Jesus' introduction to it tells us that His audience doesn't have a clue to what God is doing there at the end of Jesus' ministry and He's not happy about it.

**2. Why does Jesus wait until the last days of His earthly ministry to talk about this fig tree?**

The Fig Tree parable is about the end of Jesus ministry with the Israel nation as the validity of the nation is coming to an end and God was about to cut it off "at the roots."

**3. Noah was still alive when Abraham moved from the Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan. How long did God continue in His desire for Israel to become the faithful, God believing nation that He desired them to be?**

From 2126 B.C. to about 70 A.D. when Rome destroyed the City of Jerusalem and dispersed the Jews – Israel became a non-nation. That would make the total number of years 2196.

**4. What are three messages of Matthew and Mark's telling of Jesus and the Fig Tree?**

Mark 11:25-25 and Matthew 21:22

- (1) Whenever – Whenever you pray – Pray and Forgive
- (2) Anyone – Whenever you pray – First forgive everyone
- (3) Believing – Whenever you pray – Believe that what you are praying about has been already granted – it may not be apparent to you, but you are required to believe and trust God that what you ask has already been dealt with by God.

And one caveat to add is that What you pray for must be "according to God's will." He will not grant you based upon your desires – unless your desires are in accordance with His desires and nature.

**5. Why was Jesus disappointed with Israel as revealed in the Parable of the Fig Tree?**

The parable is largely about Israel's lack of repentance in all their violations against God's nature. God the Father sent His very own, only Son, to make the salvation of all those who would repent of their sins and believe and believe in the life and work of Jesus.



**6. What was the bottom line that Jesus was teaching to Israel?**

Luke 13:3

***"I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."***

**7. What verses from Isaiah are used in our lesson that summarize the whole story?**

(Isaiah 55:6-7)

***"Seek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him, and to our GOD, for He will freely pardon."***

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Jeremiah 18:15

"Don't stumble from the Ancient Path"

2023-12-21 updated

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<sup>i</sup> All Scriptures from the New American Standard Bible (1995)