

THE PLEASANT VIEW PLUMB LINE

THE BARREN FIG TREE

Upon encountering the story of Jesus cursing the barren fig tree, the average Bible student is slightly taken aback by the “strangeness” of the events that occur. Mark’s account records the story as follows:

*“And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry: and seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, if haply he might find anything thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; **for the time of figs was not yet.** And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter forever. And his disciples heard it...And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold the fig tree which thou cursed is withered away” (11:12-14,20-21, emp. Added).*

One prominent question naturally arises from a straightforward reading of the text. Why would Jesus curse a fig tree that did not have figs on it, especially since the text says that “it was not the season for figs”? In response to this puzzling question, skeptical minds have let themselves run wild with accusations regarding the passage. Steve Wells, the author of *The Sceptics’ Annotated Bible*, labeled this story as an absurdity and said in a sarcastic tone: “Jesus kills a fig tree for not bearing figs, even though it was out of season. He did this to show the world just how much **God hates figs**” (2006, emp. Added). Louis Cable, another skeptic, responded to the story with this statement: “Now to curse a fig tree for not bearing fruit in March is not unlike kicking a dog because it can not speak English thereby punishing it for the inability to do the impossible” (n.d.).

Is it the case that Jesus capriciously, out of anger, cursed the fig tree for not bearing fruit, even though the tree was incapable of producing? With a little research, one quickly ascertains that such is not the case. Not only does an excellent reason exist for the curse upon the fig tree, but an equally good spiritual application should be considered as well.

When Jesus approached the fig tree, the text indicates that the tree had plenty of leaves. R.K. Harrison, writing in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, explains that various kinds of figs grew in Palestine during the first century. One very important aspect of fig growth has to do with the relationship between the leaf and the fruit. Harrison notes that the tiny figs, known to the Arabs as taksh, “appear simultaneously in the leaf axils” (1982, 2:302). This taksh is edible and “is often gathered for sale in the markets” (2:302). Furthermore, the text notes: “When the young leaves are appearing in spring, every fertile fig will have some taksh on it...But if a tree with leaves has no fruit, it will be barren for the entire season (2:301-302).

Thus, when Jesus approached the leafy fig tree, He had every reason to suspect that something edible would be on it. However, after inspecting the tree, Mark records that “He found nothing but leaves.” No taksh were budding as they should have been if the tree was going to produce edible figs that year. The tree appeared to be fruitful, but it only had outward signs of bearing fruit (leaves) and in truth offered nothing of value to weary travelers.

In addition, anyone even slightly familiar with the character of Jesus knows that He did not spend His time on this Earth eradicating barren fig trees as an ecological service

“...then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel...” (Amos 7:8)

PHARAOH'S LEGACY:
NOTHING EVER CHANGED

Text: _____

I. Despite the _____

Notes:

II. Despite the _____

Notes:

III. Despite the _____

Notes:

THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY TO
THE CHURCH

Text: _____

I. Keeping the Church _____

Notes:

II. Keeping the Church _____

Notes:

III. Keeping the Church _____

Notes:

to Palestinian farmers. What, then, was the point of such abrupt action against the tree? When one notices the context of the event, Jesus' intention seems to become apparent and two fold. First, in its immediate context, the barren fig tree seems to apply to the pretentious religion of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Following Jesus' curse upon the fig tree, the text says that Jesus went to Jerusalem and began to drive the money changers out of the temple (Mark 11:15-19). The activities in the temple that once had been fruitful and wholesome had become empty of value and useless. Allen Black commented: "The cursing of the fig tree symbolizes God's judgment on Israel for not bearing the fruit he wanted from the temple. It foreshadows the cleansing of the temple and ultimately the prophecy of its destruction in chapter 13" (1995, p. 200).

Second, in a general sense, Jesus often insisted that trees which do not bear good fruit will be cut down (Matthew 7:19; Luke 13:6-9). The fig tree did not bear fruit, was useless, and deserved to be destroyed: the spiritual application being that any human who does not bear fruit for God will also be destroyed for his or her failure to produce.

Jesus did not throw a temper tantrum and curse the fig tree even though it was incapable of producing fruit. He cursed the tree because it should have been growing fruit since it had the outward signs of productivity. Jesus' calculated timing underscored the spiritual truth that barren spiritual trees eventually run out of time. As for personal application, we should all diligently strive to ensure that we are not the barren fig tree.

-Kyle Butt

WHAT'S YOUR PURPOSE?

Josh McDowell explains that, "an executive recruiter, a 'head-hunter' who goes out and hires corporation executives that I'm trying to hire for someone else, I like to disarm him. I...take my coat off, then my vest, undo my tie, throw up my feet, and talk about baseball, football, family, whatever, until he's all relaxed. Then, when I think I've got him relaxed, I lean over, look him square in the eye and say, "What's your purpose in life?" It's amazing how top executives fall apart at that question.

"Well, I was interviewing this fellow the other day, had him all disarmed, with my feet up on his desk, talking about football. Then I leaned up and said, 'What's your purpose in life, Bob?' And he said, without blinking an eye, 'To go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can.' For the first time in my career I was speechless."

THE BOOK OF GOOD WORKS

The epistle to Titus concludes a section of the New Testament, and specifically of Paul's writings, that is commonly called the "pastoral epistles," but could more accurately be called the "evangelistic epistles." Like Timothy, Titus was a gifted young preacher of the gospel who both appreciated Paul and was appreciated by Paul. Also, like Timothy, Titus was a convert of Paul's (Titus 1:4), and at the present time was working with the church on the island of Crete. Paul had left him there at some point during his travels with two intentions in mind: (1) set in order the things that were wanting, and (2) ordain elders in every city (Titus 1:5). Thus as Paul's epistles to Timothy were written in order to encourage and instruct him in the means by which he could do his evangelistic work effectively, this single epistle penned to Titus bears essentially the same purposes.

As Paul grew older and the fruits of the gospel spread wider, he recognized the likely fact that brethren with whom he had had contact and had loved for so many years would not be seen again this side of eternity. Likewise works with which he had had close contact would have to be left entrusted to the care of others. And as Paul looked toward the inevitable he knew that the continued success of the church would be contingent upon one fact: being committed to good works. So as Paul now pens this epistle to Titus, entrusting the care of the Cretian congregations to him, Paul outlines a series of five good works in which the brethren needed to be active to ensure their steadfastness in the sight of God.

First, Paul tells Titus to commit himself to appointing proper church leadership. Any organization is only going to be as good as its leadership and a congregation is no different. However, unlike the organizations of the world whose leadership might rely upon business savvy or material success, the leadership in the church relies upon spiritual strength and wisdom. Thus, just as he did in his first letter to Timothy, Paul outlines in chapter one certain traits necessary to produce a successful elder in the Lord's church. His training for this great work is in personal preparation, evidence in leading his family over which he is head to the faith, being reputable among those around him, and in earnestly striving to lead the lost and erring to the truth (1:6-9). By committing himself to this good and great work, Titus would be preparing congregations the world over for perpetual service rendered faithfully unto God.

Second, Paul tells Titus to commit himself to rebuking false teachers. As earnest as the need is to tell people what the truth is, there is just as much need at times to tell them what the truth is not. Recognized was the fact that the enemies of Christianity were taking error just as far as the truth was being taken, so Paul warned Titus: "*For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake*" (Titus 1:10-11). The danger was real and thus Paul's counsel to Titus was to rebuke them sharply for the intention of making them sound in the faith. And by committing himself to this good and great work, Titus would be stopping the spread of the evil error and would be making the truth more widely available.

Third, Paul tells Titus to commit himself to preaching the truth. While speaking out against error is needed, Paul's counsel to Titus was to balance himself by also speaking out for the truth. He, though, was not alone in this great task. By each child of God holding fast to their own personal responsibilities, the truth would spread farther, wider, and faster; but what were these responsibilities? "*That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded*" (Titus 2:2-6). By having a place for everybody and everybody in their place the church would be able to function effectively according to its charge to preach the word; and by committing himself to this work, Titus would be promoting the advance of the gospel.

Fourth, Paul tells Titus to commit himself to keeping the church pure. There perhaps was, and is, no greater challenge set before God's children than to keep the church unspotted from the world. At times the slightest deviation can be detrimental to the overall structure instructed by God. Therefore Paul's instruction was to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, thereby living soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world (Titus 2:12). Remembered was the fact that Christ died to bring about purity upon His people, and it is that purity to which we must be committed. Committing himself to the purity of the church, Titus would be taking a stand to preserve it for generations to come.

Then, fifth, Paul tells Titus to personally maintain good works, living as an example to all people what a New Testament Christian is to be. Words mean little if there is no substance in life to back them up. Ultimately Paul said it best by writing that maintaining good works are good and profitable unto men. Thus, by committing himself to his own spiritual maintenance, Titus would be providing the example by which countless other souls could maintain godliness as well.

Though rather short in length, this epistle to Titus provides timeless advice for not only preachers, but for all Christians today. By strictly adhering one's life to these principles, surely preparation will be made for the life to come.

-Andy Brewer