

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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Lessons from the Withered Fig Tree

Steve Wright

Please read the text of **Mark 11:12-14, 20-25** and consider:

Fig trees in Palestine may live as long as four hundred years. A well-cultivated tree should produce fruit for ten months of the year in those locales. However, because of the difficulties of translation, some have extrapolated a point from this text in the way it comes across to us in our English Bibles, which needs to be corrected. Some have claimed that you could not have expected to find any figs on this tree at the time of year when this occurred; fresh young leaves, yes, but the fruit would not have been ready yet.

Now, there are three things wrong with this postulation:

1. Fig trees can bear fruit for 10 months of the year over there – some of the varieties, and indeed even individual specimens, can bear quite early, especially if they are in a sheltered spot, so to have ripe figs on a tree at Passover time is indeed quite feasible. But those who interpret the phrase in the text as meaning “It was too early for figs” are expressing their ignorance of this fact. As well . . .
2. Anyone familiar with the growth habits of figs will tell you that fig trees are deciduous and, as such, show a remarkable trait of the fruit being visible on the tree before the leaves even appear after its dormancy period. Therefore, a tree in full leaf, as this one was, should have fruit on it.
3. What about what this says about our LORD? Some may not realize that they are making Jesus out to be vindictive, cruel, and unjust by his cursing of this fig tree. Our Lord who made the trees, would certainly have known whether this particular variety or this particular tree should have been fruiting! He certainly would not have been looking

for fruit long before its proper time, as these critics suggest.

These critics simply miss the point. Or, I should say, the “points” of this incident.

Some Lessons from the Withered Fig Tree

Jesus took the opportunity to use the cursing of this fig tree as an object lesson for his disciples (and we can learn this lesson as well) about faith. In fact, there are several good lessons we can learn from this incident. One of the greatest

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ones for our context is the one Jesus taught in **Matthew 7:15-20**, “By their fruits you shall know them!”

You see, that fig tree was a pretender! It “looked right” but in truth, it was not right at all! Was it wrong for this tree to look beautiful and nice – to look the way that it should? No! Was it wrong for this tree to only LOOK good but to, in fact, be no good? Yes, that is what was wrong!

This is the same lesson that Peter speaks to in **1 Peter 3:3-4**, *Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's*

continued on the next page...

sight is very precious.

Is it wrong for a woman to look nice? No! Is it wrong for her to only *look* nice but not *be* nice? Yes!

What do people observe when they watch you suffer?

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

What prompted Ruth to say those words? She had seen her mother-in-law become bereft of her husband and her two sons. She suffered all of this in a foreign land, far away from her home and her people. The way Naomi conducted herself in godliness and righteousness through all of these depravations left an indelible impression upon her daughter-in-law, Ruth! Ruth saw the godly fruit being borne by Naomi as she dealt with the hardships of life. This prompted Ruth to become a follower of God.

"By their fruits you shall know them!" Are you bearing good fruit for Christ?

Consider **Matthew 23:3** as well, *"...so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice."* Read all of Chapter 23 to see the litany of crimes of the religious leaders of the Jews. And yet, because they did proclaim and teach the Law of Moses, Jesus said quite literally, *"Do as they say, not as they do!"*

So, what do we glean from the withered fig tree?

1. All of us are flawed. All of us are inadequate. We all have our idiosyncrasies, our imperfections. None of us can serve as a model for someone else to follow in terms of getting to heaven.
2. The answer is found in being like Christ. So, be like others, but only in the ways that they are like Christ.
3. Don't put on a show. Simply live your life for Christ, bearing the fruit that He seeks, not what may impress someone in a human sense.

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Gibeonite Promises

Joshua Riggins

In **Joshua 9**, we're introduced to an interesting group of individuals, the Gibeonites. Having heard of the great successes of Israel (verse 3), they put together a scheme designed to save their lives. Verses 4-5 detail the great lengths they took to make it look as though they came from a far country:

...they worked craftily, and went and pretended to be ambassadors. And they took old sacks on their donkeys, old wineskins torn and mended, old and patched sandals on their feet, and old garments on themselves; and all the bread of their provision was dry and moldy.

Their goal was to hide truth from the Israelites. God reminds us in **Jeremiah 23:24** that he fills heaven and earth; there is no hiding from him. However, with men, hiding is possible (see **Psalms 55:12**). The Gibeonite scheme succeeded because the leaders of Israel did not inquire from God (**verse 14**), so the one who fills heaven and earth had no input. When we fail to involve God in our decisions, we run the risk of missing the mark. God encourages us in **James 1:5** to ask him for wisdom, knowing He will give it with liberality.

In **verse 15**, Joshua made a covenant with them, and from that point on, the children of Israel were to be at peace with the Gibeonites. Three days later, they learned the truth of the matter (**verse 16**), so they kept their word when entering their country (**verse 18**). The Gibeonites did not escape their consequences, as deception is not the right problem-solving tool. Israel made the Gibeonites woodcutters and water carriers for the house of God (**verse 23**). Not only did Israel preserve their lives, but they also protected them with great effort. In **Joshua 10:6**, the men of Gibeon request Israel's assistance in defeating the five Amorite kings who attacked them (**verses 3-5**). The Israelites, in a battle where the sun stood still for a whole day and was like nothing the world has ever seen (**verse 14**), routed and thoroughly defeated the Amorites. God promised Joshua in **10:8** that *"not a man of them shall stand before you."* Even the five kings who tried to flee

were killed (10:26), leaving no man of the Amorite battle standing before them.

Psalm 15:4 states the following criteria for those who may dwell in the holy hill of the LORD, "...he who swears to his own hurt and does not change."

The scriptures make plain that Joshua and the leaders of Israel acted quite irresponsibly in failing to inquire of God. Had they done so, no covenant of peace would ever have been transacted between the two nations. It was God's will that all the nations of Canaan be removed from the land. (see **Judges 2:2**) And yet, we see in **chapter 10, verse 8**, God told Joshua that

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none of the enemies of Gibeon would be able to stand before him.

From time to time, I say yes too quickly, adding a commitment to our calendar that shouldn't be there. Perhaps there are "yesses" you have committed to for which you later regretted the cost. Even more damaging can be the covenants we make without consulting the Lord. Marriages entered too hastily. Employments taken before considering the nature of the work and its impact on our families and schedules.

Business agreements are done without reading the fine print.

Housing arrangements were made without a full assessment.

The examples are too numerous to list here.

The question to consider is how we respond when we've entered that covenant without first consulting God. God's expectation is that we do the next right thing. In other words, we keep that covenant. Our word is important, and God expects us to be a people who keep our word. "*But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'.*" (**Matthew 5:37**).

A business owner I deal with frequently had a choice to make in the supply shortages of the early pandemic days. He had committed to selling his product to certain individuals at a set fee. As his costs increased, that set fee wasn't enough to cover his expenses. Many of his competitors decided to solve the problem by tacking on additional upcharges that would cover their costs. He chose to take the loss because it was important that he be a man of his word. Solomon remarks in **Proverbs 10:9**, "*He who walks with integrity walks securely.*"

Since Joshua upheld that covenant, consider the impact it had on the Gibeonites. Listed among the individuals repairing the wall of Jerusalem in **Nehemiah 3**, we find Melatiah the Gibeonite (verse 7). The time between **Joshua 9** and **Nehemiah 3** would be about 900 years. Gibeon, a hopeful people, observed Joshua lead his people with integrity and faith. He shined God's light for them to see. Nine hundred years later, they stayed true to that light in their service to the LORD, repairing the wall alongside their brethren. If you want to let God's light shine through you, keep your commitments and promises in this world. This is the God-like way. Paul says,

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us...was not Yes and No, but in Him was Yes. For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us (2 Corinthians 1:19-20).

Be known for your integrity, even when it hurts.



Please check your expiration date!

Blessed Are the Dead

Wanda Marilee Burkman, 85, passed away on November 1, 2024. Wanda was born on April 10, 1939, in Davis County, IA, to **John Marion** and **Blanche Evalee Lunsford Jones**. Wanda graduated from Davis County High School in 1956 at 17. Wanda moved to Des Moines and worked for Fry Manufacturing for several years, where she met **Donald Ray Burkman** on a blind date. On June 2, 1958, Don and Wanda united in a beautiful outdoor garden wedding while standing on a large porch with their family and close friends to celebrate the start of their marriage.

Wanda was a lifelong member of the Church of Christ and was baptized on October 2, 1955. She died as a faithful member of the church in **Pleasant Hill, IA**. Wanda enjoyed teaching Vacation Bible School and Sunday School. In church was when you could hear Wanda lifting her voice joyfully in music. Wanda hosted multiple families and friends for the Spring Meeting, Labor Day Meeting, and the Two-Week Meeting.

Wanda would spend hours in the card section of the grocery store carefully perusing the shelves in search of the perfect card or gift to make someone's day. Wanda's greatest strength was her time in prayer. Wanda consistently prayed for her husband, children, grandchildren, and many of you.

Wanda is survived by her husband, **Donald Burkman**; her children **Melanie (Blaine) Deaton** of Bloomfield, IA; **Valerie Burkman** of Des Moines, IA; **Timothy (Melody) Burkman** of Prairie City, IA; and **Stephanie Burkman** of Dallas Center, IA; ten grandchildren and sixteen great-grandchildren.

Special Meetings

As our calendars change from 2024 to 2025, many congregations are planning meetings for this upcoming year. Your editor would like to include announcements and flyers for those meetings in both the print and digital editions as well as *The Gospel Message* website, gospelmessage.net. As you finalize your plans, please email them to your editor at:

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