

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 21:18-22

“The Fig Tree”

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Matthew 21:18-22

Verse 18

Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry.

- It was the second day of Holy Week. Jesus was on his way into Jerusalem when he realized that he was hungry.

Verse 19

Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately, the tree withered.

- Being hungry, Jesus noticed a promising fig tree by the roadside. It was in leaf. When a fig tree is in leaf, it bears fruit. However, this tree was disappointing. Although it was in full leaf, it bore no fruit. In appearance it was one thing, a healthy fig tree. But in reality, it was something else, a tree that bore no fruit and was therefore not healthy. Because it was not what it appeared to be, Jesus judged the tree. He cursed it for the reality of what it was, and it immediately withered.
- There are several important observations here. First, note the problem with the tree. It was not what it appeared to be. Second, note the relationship between the health/acceptability of the tree and the presence/absence of fruit. (See Matthew 7:15-20) Third, notice that cursing, the opposite of blessing is the tree’s punishment for not bearing fruit.
- Scholars are agreed that the tree is a symbol of God’s judgment upon the Jews in Jesus’ day because they, like the tree, appeared to be one thing but were, in fact, another. The tree, therefore, represents the people in every generation who appear to be the people of God but bear no fruit. The point then is that God will withdraw blessing from any people who claim him but do not bear fruit.

Verse 20

When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked.

- The disciples are impressed with the wrong thing. The rapidity of the tree’s withering amazed them. So much so, that they asked about that rather than the meaning of what had happened.

Verse 21

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done.

- Jesus’ response indicates that this kind of power, to wither a fig tree, is the fruit of faith-filled life. In fact, he implies that the withering of a fig tree is nothing compared with the possibilities available to those who have faith in him.

Verse 22

“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

- A powerful life is built on faith in Jesus Christ. To have faith in Christ means to trust in him above other persons and things. If we trust Jesus, he will provide everything we need in this life and in the next. The issue here remains the fig tree. If we are like the tree, appearing to be one thing but in reality being something else, there is no power or reward. We are to bear fruit, not just grow leaves. That fruit comes from trusting Christ.

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