

06.27.10 / Mark 11:12-14 and 20-25

Passage Insight

As is so often the case, this passage demonstrates how Jesus' words and actions go much deeper than they appear at first glance. With just a few simple words, Jesus shows us the importance of having faith in HIM alone if we are to bear fruit, and He shows us that if we are to have faith in Him, we must first lose faith in everything else.

When fig trees start to develop leaves, they are supposed to have small, edible buds on them before the leaves ever show up, and in this case, all that was there were the leaves. There was no fruit at all despite the fact that from a distance the tree looked as though it was bearing fruit. In this part of the world, figs were a staple, and healthy fig trees that bore fruit meant you had food. So if those trees were destroyed, life was destroyed. As such, historically in the Bible, the prophets used destruction of fig trees' to symbolize judgment, like we see in Isaiah 34:4 and Joel 1:12.

But, this passage isn't really about the tree at all. It's about the Lord's faithfulness to fulfill His promises to us and to call us to faith in Him alone.

Israel is God's chosen people, through whom He has chosen to reveal Himself to the world. The Temple of Israel was THE means for God's people to approach God – you had to go to God VIA the Temple. This was done through the sacrificing of animals, shedding blood of something precious to them, so that the sins of the people could be atoned for, allowing them to reconnect, if you will, to God. In his destruction of the tree, Jesus is foretelling the coming judgment against the Temple and making the statement that what LOOKS REALLY HEALTHY (just like the tree) could be completely worthless and devoid of fruit (just like the tree). The Temple, as we see in verse 15-19, was unhealthy, and Jesus did not mince words when calling people out on their involvement in this. Commerce steeped in greed, as well as sacrifices that weren't truly sacrificial, were at the heart of the Temple. At the heart of this was a lack of faith in God, leading to a Temple that LOOKED healthy but that in reality bore no fruit for the Lord.

There was no fruit because there was a lack of faith. So, what does it look like to have faith in God and see Godly fruit as a result? When we go to the beginning of Israel and look at God's pursuit of Abram, the man whose descendants would ultimately lead the 12 tribes of Israel, we start to get some answers. In Genesis 12:1-3 the Lord calls Abram to leave what he knows and to follow Him instead, promising to bless the entire world through Him. The Lord promises to bear fruit if Abram will have faith. Faith in God. Against all odds and all rational thought, Abram believed God's promises. He chose faith in God, and his life bore fruit as a result, even bearing children when his body was as good as dead. What ultimately bore this fruit was not Abram, but rather GOD's faithfulness to see His promises through. Israel had lost faith in God, and without faith in God, there's no Godly fruit, only fruit of what you have faith in, which in this case was not very good.

Not having faith in God doesn't mean we don't have faith. It just means we have faith in something other than God. It could be faith in someone else, a set of circumstances, or even faith in yourself. The truth of the matter, though, is that you can only gain faith in God if you lose faith in everything else.

We all struggle with this, and when we have faith in something other than God, we cannot bear God's fruit. If Jesus has the power to make things wither when they don't bear fruit, this why wouldn't Jesus destroy us if we don't bear

fruit? Because Jesus bore the wrath against this disobedience when He died on the cross and was resurrected, and He destroyed this sin in the process so that we can be in God's good graces.

Jesus' comments in verses 20-24 beg the question, "So if I REALLY believe, then should I get whatever I want?" Let's look at the question itself first. Believing in faith isn't about you. It's not about mustering up some faith and REALLY believing REALLY hard. If it is, then praying in faith isn't about God, it's about you and how hard you can work to make it work. Secondly, it's not about what you want, but rather what God wants. We are to pray for God's will to be done on earth, not ours to be done in heaven. When we believe in Jesus, we are saved, justified, and glorified, and for the rest of our lives on earth we are being sanctified, changed more and more into Jesus' likeness. Because this is a process, there will be times when we ask for things that are not in alignment with God's will, and so sometimes God will tell us no. Remember, gaining faith in God means losing faith in everything else, and sometimes God will use denied prayers as a way to draw us away from faith in ourselves and toward faith in Him, showing us more and more clearly just how He chooses to work, which is constantly for His own glory. What should our response to denied prayer be? Gratitude that God loves us enough to hear our prayers in the first place and that He does not placate us by giving us that which He knows would not ultimately be best for us, because what is best for us is whatever glorifies Him.

Finally, in verse 25, we see a clear call to forgive others. When we fail to forgive others, we're simply revealing something about our own hearts, namely that we ourselves don't understand our own need for forgiveness. Failing to forgive is another way of comparing yourself to someone else and making the statement that what they've done is worse than what you've done, implying that they need forgiveness more than you do. This is pure self-righteousness. Sin is sin, though, and regardless of its form, it's equally disgusting to God and equally condemning. Jesus destroys ALL sin, and we are called to forgive others in the same way that we ourselves have been forgiven. We are called to forgive as God forgives, taking the initiative. Jesus didn't wait to go to the cross until we had repented. He went while we were still sinning against Him in total rebellion (Romans 5:8). As such, **our forgiveness of someone doesn't rely on someone else's repentance.** If it does, we're in direct opposition to Jesus. When others have sinned against us, it is not up to us to punish them or to have wrath for them. The wrath that is due them for their sin is God's alone to pour out, and He has poured out that wrath on the cross, leaving it up to the offending party whether they will accept or reject this gift. We as Christians are called to forgive those who hurt us in the same way that God forgives, and we can only do this by the power of His Spirit who now lives inside of us. If we try to do it of our own strength, we will fail. When we're struggling to forgive someone due to some deep hurt that they've done to us, it can be incredibly difficult, and we will need the support of our Christian brothers and sisters in this. Please encourage your people to reach out to one another as they seek to live a life of forgiveness despite tremendous hurt. We do not at all want to minimize the pain that often accompanies a struggle to forgive, and we ultimately want to see our people live in freedom from the weight of not forgiving someone, for this freedom brings glory to God.

The beauty of the gospel is that when we follow Jesus, the awareness of our sin that conviction brings doesn't condemn us, it simply informs us. Jesus took on all our condemnation at the cross and destroyed it for those who believe in Him, so we should not be burdened by guilt when convicted by our still sinful ways. Instead, we should pray to God, whose Spirit now lives inside of us, to continually change us more and more into the likeness of His pure and perfect Son, forgiving all who sin against us, expressing our gratitude to God for His faithfulness to bear fruit in us when we have faith in Him.

Jesus is the eternal Temple through whom we must go to be united with the Father, and gaining faith in Him means losing faith in everything else.

Application Questions

Gain and Loss

- 1) Gaining faith in God means losing faith in everything else. Where do you put your faith in other people? Circumstances? Yourself?
- 2) What promises do these things make to you (or do you want them to make to you even if they don't)?
- 3) How do these things ultimately fail to bring the fulfillment they promise?
- 4) What does it look like tangibly for you to lose faith in these things and gain faith in the Lord instead?
- 5) How exactly does Jesus provide fulfillment where what you were seeking fails?

What We Reveal to the World

- 1) You can't reveal God's faithfulness to others if you have faith in something other than God. You will instead reveal to others your faith in THAT thing. Who in your life is most impacted by this?
- 2) You need to start with yourself in order to see this corrected. Go through the questions in the "Gain and Loss" section above for help with this.
- 3) What would the impact on these people be if your faith were in GOD instead, revealing to them GOD's faithfulness in your life?

Forgiveness

- 1) Where do you currently withhold forgiveness from others in your life?
- 2) What does this say about your heart and your own need for forgiveness?
- 3) How deep does Jesus' forgiveness go?
- 4) How about your forgiveness of others?
- 5) Jesus' complete and total forgiveness of you is the one thing that can close this gap. Where do you struggle to receive this (thinking you're not worthy, thinking you're really not that bad, etc.)?
- 6) Who in your Community Group can help you with this?
- 7) How do you respond when God says no to your prayers?

Sources

- Prayer
- Pillar
- Tyndale
- Sailhamer
- New International Commentary on the New Testament