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Matthew 21:18-22, English Standard Version.

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" ²¹ And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

Mark 11:12-25, New International Version.

¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

¹⁵ And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹⁶ And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." ¹⁸ And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came they went out of the city.

²⁰ As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹ And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." ²² And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. ²³ Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and

does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

Do it now!

We talked about prayer last week, and I'd like to pick up with this topic. The two passages we've heard this morning describe the same event. Remember that it's widely believed that Mark wrote his Gospel first (although we have no idea who "Mark" was, and it is only tradition that tells us who wrote the four Gospels), and that Matthew wrote his Gospel with the benefit of having Mark's Gospel on-hand. So, it's no wonder that the tellings of this story in the two Gospels are so similar. We've looked at Matthew's version – the second one written - before. In that message, we considered what is the dominant interpretation of this story, the way Bible scholars have tended to view it. In particular, we focused on the seeming complexity of this scene, which ends with Jesus making the statement *“You can even say to this mountain, ‘May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and it will happen.”* What appears to be the unspoken fact here is that while Jesus is saying this, his disciples are looking up at the Herodium, a giant palace fortress on the top of Mount Masada. It was built by the senior Herod, a ruthless ruler who

went on a building spree constructing a number of magnificent buildings in his honor. The Herodium in particular was a hated symbol of Roman occupation, and so the idea of throwing the mountain and its giant palace into the sea was a mighty visualization of the might of the power of having faith in God.

But as we noted the last time we discussed this scene, this statement about faith is interwoven with a story about a fig tree that Jesus decides to curse. At face value, the scene seems unnecessarily tangled. Let's step through it. In Matthew, Jesus is crossing from Bethany to Jerusalem when he comes across a fruitless fig tree, which he curses, causing it to immediately wither. Jesus is actually trying to make a point that has to do with an incident that comes just before this incident in Matthew's Gospel. Remember that immediately before Jesus curses the fig tree, Jesus has overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple; these are people who charge a very hefty commission to turn Roman money into Shekels – because the Temple officials won't accept anything but Shekels as an offering to God in the Temple. But most people carry Roman and Greek money, and so they're forced to pay this commission simply for the privilege of then giving the money to the Temple. Jesus is comparing the supposedly faithful followers of God who turn the temple into a rip off money changing business to a fig tree that's useless because it bears no fruit. The money

changers, although they claim they are serving God by working at the Temple, have as much true faith as the fig tree has fruit – i.e., none. They aren't serving God. They're being false, using their religion to make money, not to serve God. What's intriguing is that the Apostles don't seem to get the point. They don't seem to hear Jesus explaining this comparison between the fig tree and the money changers. They are simply captivated by the fig tree withering so quickly, and they focus only on this. And so, Jesus seemingly turns this event into a lesson about the power of faith and prayer. He figures that if they don't understand what he's saying about the evils of false faith, he may as well make the point that faith in God is a powerful thing. So, Jesus says: hey, just like I just zapped this tree, faith and prayer could toss Herod's big old mountain fortress into the sea.

But is this really the point? Is it really true that Jesus got caught off-guard by the disciples being so un-clever, or is this scene actually smoother and more integrated than we might otherwise think? Maybe Jesus isn't trying to focus only on false faith, and he didn't change his focus when the Apostles didn't seem to follow him; maybe over the centuries we've tended to misunderstand this scene from Mark and Matthew. Consider this: In Matthew's version, Jesus first turns over the tables of the money changers. Then he curses the fig tree and it withers. Then he tells the Apostles that just like he withered the tree, faith and prayer could toss

Herod's mountain into the sea. But notice that in Mark, the order of events is a bit different. Jesus first curses the fig tree, then he overturns the money-changers tables, and then, he takes us back to the dead fig tree, and Jesus makes his statement about tossing a mountain into the sea. The difference is that in Mark, the part with the money changers is carefully tucked into the story about the fig tree, instead of the fig tree being a story coming completely after the story about the money changers. It suggests a deeper, more integrated relationship between the fig tree, the money changers, and tossing a mountain into the sea.

Importantly, this second version was actually written first. If Mark has the sequence right, then the money changers scene is deliberately positioned in the middle of the story about cursing the tree and tossing a mountain into the sea. Perhaps from the very beginning, Jesus was trying to make a different point, and it has to do primarily with prayer and faith, not with the money changers being as worthless as the zapped fig tree. In this interpretation, Jesus starts out by cursing a fig tree that has no fruit. Then he turns over the tables of the money changers. Maybe Jesus first curses the fig tree so that when we see him turn over the tables of the money changes, we realize that the point is that Jesus has as much power over those money changers as he just demonstrated over the fig tree. Jesus ended the life of that fig tree. God could end the faith lives of the money changers at any

moment, and symbolically, by turning over their tables, Jesus has done this. Next, Jesus talks about the power of prayer and faith in order to make the following point: those money changers had their chance to serve God. Maybe they thought they would always have the future in which to do it. They could rip people off now and turn back to God later. But just like that tree will never have another season to bear fruit, those money changers might not have another chance to serve God.

In this interpretation, Jesus doesn't change his mind about the point he's making when the disciples don't seem to catch on to his argument about the relationship between the money changers and the fig tree. They do understand. Jesus is simply finishing up his lesson by saying, yes, isn't that amazing what I did to those money changers, what I did to that fig tree that could not bear fruit? Well, said Jesus, God can free you from anything, but you have to do something, you have to take action. You have to do it now. Remember that the biggest problem that the people around Jesus faced was their colonial oppressor, the Roman government. They were a much, much bigger threat than the money changers. Jesus is saying: hey, if you want your Roman occupiers thrown into the sea, then remember what happened to the money changers and the fig tree. They lost their chance to make a difference. Whatever you face in life, even if it's as horrible as being occupied by a foreign power, prayer can overcome it. Because God will

indeed listen. But you need to turn to God. Don't wait. You might not have another season to bear fruit. Pray now. Reach out to God now.

The point is that the traditional interpretation of this story is that Jesus is saying that like the fig tree, these money changers and their false faith are worthless. It's a negative story really, one of Old Testament punishment. Jesus punishes the fig tree the way God will punish the money changers. And then, oh yeah, Jesus decides to tack on a more upbeat point about prayer and faith being as powerful as tossing Herod's mountain into the sea. But a different interpretation makes all of these elements fall into line to make a single, focused point: The fig tree lost its chance to have fruit; it will not have another season to try because it is now dead. The money changers lost their chance, too, and we understand this because we just saw the fig tree get cursed and suddenly die. Indeed, Jesus symbolically ends their chances by turning over their tables. But look at what they could have done, if they had just acted. They could have borne fruit. They could have turned to God, shared in the power of God through prayer, and even possibly thrown the Roman oppressors into the ocean. Keep in mind that Jesus wraps up this story by saying: *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."* It's a story on how to claim that power God gives us, not a story about God's reprisal against people with false faith.

We can go a little deeper with this. Here's an interesting point. Note that in Mark's version, the version that was written first, when Jesus walks up to the fig tree, his thought is this: *When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.* What? Did you hear that carefully? It wasn't yet the season for the tree to have figs. The poor tree! It gets nailed for not having fruit when it wasn't even time for fruit to appear on the tree. Get it? Our chances to turn to God could end at any time. Just like those money changers got caught off guard. There they were, making lots of money, when boom, they're out of business forever by the hand of God. A fine point is that botanists tell us that the fruit on a fig tree appears at the same time as the leaves, not after the leaves are formed. So, when Jesus sees that the tree has leaves but no fruit, well, the tree blew it. That fig tree grew a canopy of big, wide, gorgeous leaves. Fig trees are beautiful because of their immense foliage. But it was all show. Just like those money changers acting pious on the steps of the Temple, pretending to help people honor God by trading their Roman money for Shekels, the money demanded by the Temple. We shouldn't get caught up in our worldly ways and forget about praying to God. You know, when this scene happens on the steps of the Temple, it's Passover, and huge crowds have poured into Jerusalem to celebrate. There is great tumult and singing. Yet, it's all fake if we aren't sincerely turning to God and praying at the same time.

You know, Jesus was being very prescient here. This is roughly around the year 30. Just 35 or 40 years later, the Roman army would decide to crack down on and invade the Holy Land. It came at the end of a brutal four-year campaign against Israel. They destroyed the Temple along with much of the city. The money changers, who actually represent all people with false faith, people who are more concerned with worldly appearance and power than honoring God, would never have another chance. There would be no more seasons to bear fruit.

Don't see this story from Mark and Matthew as a punitive story. We might be tempted to conclude that God is yelling in our ear that we're worthless, that we are like a fig tree with big, beautiful, giant leaves but no fruit. Matthew likes to pitch Old Testament stories of retribution. But I don't think that is what Mark is doing. See this story as God telling us that he's there, waiting for us to turn to him. Our lives can be so much more fruitful, so much happier and secure, if we stop and pray. I offered a rather long prayer last Sunday. Here's a very, very short one:

God, we sometimes stop praying because we don't seem to get fast results. But right now, at this moment, we pray to you not for any particular favor or even for deliverance, but simply to be able to sense your presence and to know that yes, you are there for us. We know that this is what really matters: you are our God and are always available. We ask that you make us confident of this knowledge. Amen.