

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

MATTHEW 21:18-22

THE last verse of our previous study declared that after the priests' objection to the singing of the children, **"He left them, and went out of the city into Bethany, and lodged there."**

These verses contain the story of His coming from Bethany, after a night spent there, back to Jerusalem, and of what happened on the way. This story has created difficulty in the minds of many, and it is well to notice at once, and to recognize the fact, that it is peculiar, in that it is the only record we have of the performance by Christ of a miracle of judgment.

There are other occasions when by exercise of His power judgment was manifested, but on such occasions there was also always deliverance wrought. According to the story of the Evangelists, in the country of the Gadarenes He destroyed an unholy traffic in swine, but He did it in connection with His freeing two men from demon possession. But this is the story of Christ coming to a fig-tree, and pronouncing upon it a doom, and of how the disciples saw it wither away.

Mark tells us the story with a little more detail than Matthew, and we gather that their question was asked not there and then, but on the morning after. Let us consider first of all the difficulties; and then look at the story as to its important and permanent values. It has been said that this act of Christ was an act of injustice, because, according to Mark, it was not the season of figs.

The story has also been objected to because it has been said that Christ manifested a spirit of anger, that, being hungry, and finding no fruit, He immediately cursed the tree, and that such manifestation of anger is out of harmony with the character of Christ.

That same thing has also been stated, not as a reflection upon the character of Christ, but as being out of harmony with His method, in that He did not come to destroy life, but to save it, that He did not come to execute judgment, but to show mercy.

Let us look at these three objections. First, what are the facts concerning this fig-tree? The usual time of figs was June, and there is no doubt whatever that this was what would answer to our month of April. But there was a **"the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up."** The phrase occurs in the prophecy of Isaiah, the twenty-eight chapter, and there is an intimate association between the prophecy of Isaiah and this particular miracle.

The phrase referred to was undoubtedly used by Isaiah as a figure of speech, and yet of course it was one that was familiar to the men of his time, and indicated a fact concerning a certain kind of fig-tree to be found in Palestine. There were those that constantly produced what the prophet called “**the first ripe fig before the summer,**” and one of the peculiarities of that tree was that the fruit appeared before the foliage. The presence of foliage on the tree before summer ought to have indicated the fact that fruit was there, too.

If this explanation is accepted we have a perfectly natural understanding of the equity of His dealing with this tree, so that there was no injustice in the sentence He pronounced upon it. This miracle was also a parable, as all His miracles were; and this tree was not faithful in fulfilling its true function; it was putting forth a manifestation which was not true to its inner life.

There is not in this parable any sign of personal vindictiveness.

Notice, the effect produced upon the men who beheld what happened, was not one of wonder that He should act as He did in the presence of the tree, but rather at the speed with which His fiat was carried out; and surely we have the right to interpret the attitude of Jesus, and the method of His action, and the spirit manifested, by the effect produced upon the men who were there, rather than by the effect produced upon others, centuries after, who did not see or hear what He said, and how He said it. The disciples were evidently in agreement with what He had done.

Then, finally, the objection and this is perhaps the most serious of them that this is not in harmony with the methods of Jesus as revealed in the Gospel stories.

When He entered into the synagogue at the commencement of His public ministry, and read from the prophecy of Isaiah the great Scriptures which indicated the meaning of His mission, He ended abruptly in the midst of His reading. He read from that portion of the prophecy of Isaiah where it is written, “**The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me;**” but He did not read the latter part; He paused with the words, “**The acceptable year of the Lord.**”

He was then commencing His ministry, and in the prophecy of Isaiah, as we have it by translation, there is but a comma between that phrase, “**the acceptable year of the Lord,**” and the phrase, “**The day of vengeance of our God.**” So that we need to remember that in the counsel of God, as revealed in the ancient prophetic writing, the Servant of God came not only for the “**the acceptable year of the Lord,**” but also for “**the day of vengeance of our God.**”

That day of vengeance had not yet dawned. But so far as the Hebrew nation was concerned, the “**acceptable year of the Lord**” had ended; and the King had now come up to Jerusalem for the specific purpose of pronouncing its doom. We immediately find Him in conflict with the rulers in the Temple. In a series of parables He revealed the doom, and the reason of it. He gathered His disciples together, and most marvelously predicted the overthrow of Jerusalem by aliens; and cursed it with an eightfold woe. All this has no application to personal salvation, but only to national accountability.

Also in Matthew another of the prophecies of Isaiah is quoted. “**A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench,**” and it is an interesting thing, we almost invariably end our quotation there. And yet the quotation ends, “**He send forth judgment unto truth.**” When He sends forth judgment unto truth and victory, He will break the bruised reed, and quench the smoking flax.

One other illustration of the method of Jesus. We remember His own parable of the fig-tree. The parable of words was borrowed, as to its thought, from the song of Isaiah, “**Now I will sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard.**”

That parable declared that a certain man had a vineyard, and a fig-tree planted within it. The plea of the intercessor was that he might have opportunity to provoke it to fruit-bearing, and the final word was, “**If it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.**”

The intercessor was at one with the proprietor; and the last method of the intercessor was a method of judgment and destruction for that which did not yield to his ministry.

Jerusalem had had its opportunity. The King was coming up to pronounce judgment upon it, to be at one with the Proprietor in flinging it out as a nation for testimony, and reducing it to ashes in the economy of God.

On the way, this method of His work, never seen before, flamed out, as

- He no longer acted in pity, but in judgment;
- He no longer acted in mercy, but for the destruction of something which in itself was a failure.

*Let us now look at the immediate and permanent values of this miracle of judgment. Carefully notice the opening words of this section; “**Now in the morning as He returned to the city, He hungered.**”*

Why did He hunger? During the last week in the life of our Lord, He never stayed in Jerusalem for the night. Speaking merely on the level of the human, He dare not. Men were waiting to arrest Him. The first night that He did stay in the neighborhood of Jerusalem, on the mount of Olives, He was arrested. So that during those days, in which He was officially denouncing Jerusalem by parable and by woe, He went out every night to Bethany.

Now Bethany calls to mind at once certain associations.

Bethany was the home of Lazarus, and Martha, and Mary, and it is a most strange thing to read at the beginning of this paragraph that, coming back from Bethany in the early morning, He was hungry.

It is inconceivable that He had spent the night in the home of Martha and Mary, and Lazarus. It may be only speculation, but perchance it was out of tender regard for them, knowing He was being followed, knowing very likely that Lazarus' life would be in danger on His account.

In all probability He had spent the night in some long lone vigil on the hill-side, in a quiet and secluded place, and when the morning came, and He turned His face back toward Jerusalem, He was hungry. Through the stress and strain of the spiritual conflict there had been no sense of hunger; and suddenly, He hungered. And what had been His spiritual experience through that night, and during the whole of that period? One of intense spiritual hunger.

The song of Isaiah and the parable of Luke both come back to mind. In that great song of Isaiah, God's desire after the fruitfulness of His people is pathetically and magnificently declared, **"What could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?"**

The Lord in the person of Jesus of Nazareth had been in Jerusalem, looking for judgment and finding oppression, looking for righteousness and finding a cry. Or, to take His own parable, He Who was at once Proprietor and Intercessor in a strange and wonderful unity of purpose, had been there, attempting by the ministry of His teaching and the ministry of His doing, to provoke Jerusalem to fruit-bearing, and the men and rulers of His time to being what God intended they should be; and they had refused Him.

We can enter in some measure into the intense and overwhelming hunger of the heart of the Christ. **"Who hath believed our message? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?"** was infinitely more than the cry of Isaiah.

We know how it was fulfilled in this King, and probably during that night He had been filled with spiritual hunger. The material hunger was caused by the spiritual. That is to say, the spiritual hunger had made Him for the moment careless as to food, careless for the sustenance of the body, and when morning came, and He set His face toward Jerusalem for all the awful ministry to be exercised there, the spiritual hunger was expressed through the material.

Now notice what happened.

With all naturalness, walking back to Jerusalem with a little group of men, strangely perplexed around Him, we have this strange act.

Let us go back again to the prophecy of Isaiah, the twenty-eighth chapter. It is the chapter in which the prophet declares that at last God deals in judgment with people who refuse the ministry of His servant. That is the peculiar message of the chapter in which the prophet describes the taunts of the men who opposed Him, **"Precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line: here a little, and there a little."** And he answered them, Yes, so God has spoken to you, because He has been bound so to speak. And at last the prophet uttered this word, in verse twenty-one, **"For the Lord shall rise up as in Mount Perazim, He shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that He may do His work, His strange work, and bring to pass His act, His strange act."**

If men will not listen to the wooing, patient, halting speech of grace, halting because men can only hear line upon line, precept upon precept; then at last God will be driven to judgment, and He will be compelled to do that which is strange to Him, His strange work, His strange act.

Now on His way to the national rejection, conscious of material hunger, He stood in the presence of the fig-tree with leaves that ought to have been the sign of the early ripe fruit before summer. There was no fruit, and the condition was symbolic.

He understood His relation to the ancient prophecies and that the prophet of old had foretold His coming there. There at the parting of the ways stood the fig-tree, symbolic of the new condition of the people to whom He had been sent, with a fine exterior of promise, but with no fruit. Then the wail of God sounded in His heart,

“Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?” and the word of God thundered through His soul, **“Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?”**

In the presence of the symbol He acted in answer to material hunger, but in order to express the spiritual hunger, and the absolute necessity that was thrust upon Him for carrying out the intention and the purpose of God.

When His disciples wondered, He gave them no answer to the astonishment in the way in which they expected; but by saying a thing which seemed to have very little connection, He declared to those men that if they had faith, not only this fig-tree, but mountains should be removed. Let us try to enter into the very mind of Christ and see what was passing therein.

Why was it necessary for Him to denounce this nation, and cast it out? Because of its lack of faith.

The whole economy of God in connection with the Hebrew nation was that of revealing to the nations of the world the fact that the one master-principle of life for men was that of faith in Himself. The whole nation was founded upon faith. **“By faith Abraham.”** - And because the people had failed in their faith, and had garbed themselves in the works of a mere external ritualism, they must be flung out.

They had lost their contact with infinite power because they had lost their faith. And so, in the presence of the miracle, Jesus did not account for His power at all, did not draw attention to Himself at all, but said to this little group of men round about Him, **“If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig-tree,”** but you will be able to fling all obstacles out of the way of God’s progress.

He gave no explanation of the meaning of this miracle of judgment; but calling His own disciples, the little group of men to whom He was about to give the responsibility of expressing the will of God in the world, which responsibility was being taken away from the Hebrew people, He called them back to the fundamental principle, for having forgotten which, the Hebrew people were to be cast out from testimony and to be rejected, while He pronounced upon them the woes that negated the Beatitudes with which He had opened His ministry.

There are permanent lessons here which we do well to understand.

First of all, we have a revelation of the absolute oneness of Christ with God. His ministry of mercy merges into that of judgment when men refuse to submit themselves to His mercy. Of course, this is to recognize and to abide by the truth of man's responsibility.

The next two parables are both parables of the vineyard - the ancient figure of Isaiah - directed against the rulers, and then against the people; and through all Christ recognized human responsibility.

Jesus Christ is one with God in underlying purpose as He deals with men.

- He seeks to provoke men to fruit-bearing for the satisfaction of God.
- He comes seeking righteousness;
- He does more, He comes to make it possible for men to live the life of judgment and of righteousness.

But if man refuses, then Jesus Christ is absolutely one with God and as in the parable of the fig-tree, so in the miracle of the fig-tree, the ministry of Jesus is intended not to be a ministry of pity merely, but a ministry that provokes us to the realization of God's underlying purpose for us.

To imagine that He simply came to plead for pity upon men who fail, is false to the whole of the New Testament teaching. He came to reveal sin to be what it is, active, willful, definite, positive rebellion against God; and He came to deal with men, so that their will should be turned in the direction of the will of God, that men should be made to fulfil the divine intention.

Of course the application in this story is national, but we may apply it also in individual life; and if a man shall, in spite of all the ministry of grace, and mercy, and power, still refuse and fail to trust Him; then, as surely as Jesus blasted the fig-tree on the way between Bethany and Jerusalem, He will blast the life of that man.

There is the other side of the application; and it also is of permanent value. The power in which His own are to cast obstacles out of God's highway is to be that of faith in Him. He was emerging along the great highway of the Divine purpose, and if we miss that view, we miss the whole point of our story. When we see Him as the great Servant of God, that His every act was a link in the chain of the Divine continuity of purpose and of power, when we understand that His casting out of Jerusalem was by the act, and power, and will of God, then we understand what He meant when He said to His disciples, If you have faith, you will not only be able to wither away one fig-tree, but all the mountains; you will be able to speak to them with faith, and they shall be removed.

The Hebrew people had become God's greatest hindrance instead of God's greatest help; and officially and positively He flung the nation away, declaring in detail how that judgment should fall within a generation. Within one generation the Roman legions had swept through the city, and it was flung down until no stone was left upon another. He was thus flinging a mountain of difficulty out of the way of God, that He might move forward according to the purpose of His heart, in blessing to others.

So men of faith, operating through faith, are able to take hold of the power of God for the accomplishment of the purpose of God, that purpose being the setting up of His Kingdom. God operates through faithful men, but men can do nothing toward removing mountains of difficulty without God. So that when Christ tells us we are to have faith, it is not merely an individual thought, it is not merely in order that a soul may be saved; it is that, but it is in order that we may be workers together with Him, in order that we may fling the mountains of difficulty away, and make the high places smooth, and fling up the valleys to levelness.

God through the centuries has been moving ever onward, and He has always moved onward through human agency, but He has never been able to move onward through human agency save where man has operated upon the rock foundation of faith in Himself.

Let us remember as we go forward we are the servants of Christ Who waits in infinite and long-continued patience, but Who, at last, if the fig-tree bear no fruit, will Himself wither it with a word, and fling it away; but He does it in order that in the place which it occupied in the vineyard of God some other may be placed for the fulfillment of His ultimate purpose.

And so the miracle becomes a flaming teaching, filling the heart with fear in the presence of the Lord, making one recognize that if He be the Lamb of God which beareth sin in the mystery of an infinite meekness, there is such a thing as the wrath of the Lamb, against which none can stand. If we fail to answer the ministry of His love, we must be blasted by the ministry of His judgment.

~ end of chapter 57 ~

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