

God, the Zealous Farmer

I remember my first tomato plant. We were in nursery school, and we got to take home the bottom half of a Coke bottle with soil and a small seedling of a tomato plant. I watched as it grew, and after not too long, it produced some tomatoes, which I asked all my family to eat. This they kindly did, commenting on how tasty they were. It was a rewarding feeling to grow something – to cultivate something with water, sunshine, a makeshift trellis to tie the plant to, and to see fruit. All you who garden and grow things, whether it be flowers, fruit, vegetables, or bonsai, know the satisfaction of reaping fruit. On the other hand, you probably know the opposite feeling: the deep frustration when you put hours into weeding, feeding, pruning, spraying, watering, sheltering, supporting, and you get nothing. No growth, no fruit, no flowers, or no life.

This experience was created by God to help us understand a far greater reality. God wants fruit. God is a farmer, a cultivator, and the fruit He looks for is not flowers or food. The fruit He looks for is responses from the human heart.

In this passage we find just how passionate God is about His people bearing fruit. After having presented Himself as King to Israel, Jesus is now going to return to Jerusalem and make it known what kind of King He is. Messiah King is king over Israel, who was supposed to be a nation of worshippers. They were supposed to return to God the fruit of genuine love for Him, as a kingdom of priests.

His actions in this section show how passionately He desired fruit from them, and how the nation robbed God. After so much investment in them, so little came back to Him. Here is the zealous King, seeking fruit from a barren nation, with thieving leaders.

The same King of Israel is king over each of us that call ourselves Christians. We need to know what fruit God seeks from His people. We need to know how Israel failed, so that we do not fall into the same trap, or even come under some of the same chastenings or judgements. 1 Peter 4:17 tells us the judgement must begin at the house of God, so we are not exempt. We have a King who wants our hearts, and His zeal is boundless. He puts much into His people, and comes looking for a return. God is not apathetic, or indifferent towards what kind of fruit you bring forth. After all, at what cost did He buy you?

We will see the passion of the king and the perverseness of the people. Once again, we can judge how we are doing, as those who claim to be God's people, just as Israel claimed to be God's people.

I. The Prince Seeking Fruit

Mark 11:11 - 19 ¹¹ And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve. ¹² Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. ¹³ And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it. ¹⁵ So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹⁶ And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. ¹⁷ Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den

of thieves.' " ¹⁸ And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. ¹⁹ When evening had come, He went out of the city. "

On the Sunday when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem, He did what many kings and princes would do: inspect and survey. He rides into Jerusalem and goes to the temple complex and there he observes what has become of it. He takes a good look, as the King would walk through His domain.

Let me describe what He would have seen in Herod's day. The Temple was not just one building, but several areas – a complex, much larger than Solomon's Temple. There was an outer area, called the court of the Gentiles, where everyone could be. Walls surrounded the inner section. Ten gates gave access to this inner section, through which only Jews could go. Once inside, there were more subdivisions: the court of women, the court of Israel, and the court of the priests. The court of the priests would have had the bronze altar, and the laver, and only then would you enter the actual Temple, with the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place. The Lord would have walked through the courts, as far as an Israelite, who was not a priest, was allowed to, and surveyed what was supposed to be the symbol of Yahweh's Presence on Earth.

But this is the scene that would have greeted His eyes. In the large court of the Gentiles would have been something that looked like an Eastern Bazaar. Hundreds of stalls selling animals, tables where money could be exchanged. Why? Well, when Jews came up from all their scattered places, they were required to pay the Temple tax of half a shekel. And it had to be in that currency. So those with foreign coins, and foreign currency were there to exchange money into shekels, at a price, of course. And since travellers needed money for other things, these money-changers were exchanging large sums, so that the pilgrims could have spending money while in Jerusalem. You can imagine the weighing, deducting for loss of weight, arguing, disputing, bargaining. And on top of that, there was plenty to buy in the Temple area. See, the Law of Moses said that a sacrifice for Passover needed to be observed for several days to make sure it was without blemish, and fit for sacrifice. Pilgrims might find this hard to do, so a thriving trade had taken off- of selling pre-checked, pre-authorised animals fit for sacrifice – all at a premium price, of course. We can barely imagine the amount of money that was pouring into the Temple treasury, but we do know that when the Romans sacked it, they took with them what, in today's money, would be around £250 000 000, or in Rands, R3.5 billion.

Picture the traffic, the noise, the queues, the arguing, the profiteering - all under the approving and permissive eyes of the wealthy, wealthy priesthood. And now picture the expression of the King as His eyes survey this scene. Here is the place where worship is to centre. Here is where all nations should ideally come up to seek the one true God. Here is the place where Israel as a nation of priests, is to offer their sacrifices, and their devotion.

Exodus 19:6 ⁶ *'And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

If God is looking forward to picking the sweet fruit of love from His people and has here come to what should be the lushest and most fruitful vineyard of all – the Temple – what kind of fruit is He finding?

After His survey, Messiah returns to Bethany, 2 kilometres to the East. Who knows what prayers went up to His Father that night. Who knows what grief and righteous anger was in Him that night, as He thought on what had become of the nation of priests.

Monday morning, and Jesus begins His walk to Jerusalem, where He will assert His authority like at no other time. He is hungry, and something catches His eye. It is a fig tree, covered with leaves. But the thing with fig trees in the middle East is that the fruit comes before the leaves. So to see leaves on this fig was unseasonable. Perhaps it still had some fruit hanging on it. But as He comes up on it, what does He find? Nothing but leaves. His response? He says, out loud, so that His disciples can hear “May no fruit grow on you ever again!”

What's happening here? Is Jesus really angry at an inanimate object?

Luke 13:6-9 ⁶ *He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ "Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' ⁸ "But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ 'And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' "*

This fig tree is a visual parable. Jesus is looking for fruit. Yes, it just so happens that physically, He had desired the actual fruit of figs at the time. But this is not a man who becomes petty about being hungry – after all, He once fasted for forty days. No, the physical is an analogy, a picture of the spiritual. What does His soul truly long for? He longs for fruit from His people Israel. And just the day before, He has seen what kind of fruit Israel is bringing forth. He told the Samaritan woman:

John 4:23 ²³ *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.*

What kind of figs are growing at the Temple? None. The leaves of a thriving industry. The leaves of much busyness and activity. The leaves of grand buildings, decorated in gold. The leaves of thousands of animals bought and sold. But the sweet figs of worship in Spirit and in truth, where is they?

Filled with righteous anger at Israel's barrenness, Jesus goes straight to the Temple complex, and does what you would only do in your own house - throw out people who do not belong. Jesus is not in some kind of passionate rage: His is the pure anger of someone who loves what God loves and hates what God hates. He loves true worship, so He hates when worship has turned into mere ritualism, mere formalism, mere merchandising.

He pushes over the money changer's tables, he turns over chairs. Look closely at verse 16. Jesus has assumed full control over the Temple complex. Here is a thirty-something-year-old man, probably no bigger than your average man, who has brought the whole Temple to a standstill. The money changers probably set up shop outside the Temple complex, and the other sellers likewise, but for the time being, Jesus has cleansed the place. It is supposed to be a place of praise, prayer, honour, and it had become a place where people robbed each other.

Jesus sets up a place to heal and teach, we read in the other Gospels. And for that day, and all of Tuesday, Messiah was at the Temple, there to be publicly inspected, considered by all of Jerusalem. Just like the Passover Lamb was to be inspected for several days before being sacrificed, so the Lamb of God was now available for interrogation by the religious leaders and questions from sincere seekers. He was presenting what kind of King He was – the King who is worshipped; the King who causes true worship of His Father.

When Jesus takes over the Temple complex, He is stepping on the toes of the Sadducees – the priests, the chief rulers. We read in verse 18 that they wanted to destroy Him, but couldn't because of Jesus' popularity.

What is behind cursing a fig tree? What is behind turning over tables and driving people out? Holy zeal? God the Son loves God the Father. God the Son longs to see fruit. So much so that the Triune God is willing to prune, He is willing to discipline, He is willing to upset our apple carts. God is not playing games with us. The Greatest Commandment of all is to love the Lord with your heart, soul and mind. Jesus Christ came to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our idolatry and sinful love of self, and to give us new hearts that will love God. The Holy Spirit comes to live inside us, so that we will love God. God gave us His Word and His church and His Spirit to enable this fruit to come back to Him. God wants you to grow more than you do! He has invested in you, and looks that you will bring forth fruit.

How?

John 15:1-8 **John 15:1** *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶ "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.*

Abide. Live in my Presence. Live your life in Me, and mine in you, Jesus says. Fill yourself with My words, submit to Me, let my will have its way, and I will supply the growth. *You* yield, *you* humble yourself, submit, seek, trust. *My* life will do the rest.

This is what the Prince was looking for. But sadly, for the most part, what He found was the opposite.

II. The People Seeking Their Own

²⁰ *Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. ²¹ And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away.*

²⁷ *Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him. ²⁸ And they said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?" ²⁹ But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: ³⁰ "The baptism of John -- was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me." ³¹ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ³² "But if we say, 'From men' " -- they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed. ³³ So they answered and said to Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." ^{NKJ}*
Mark 12:1 *Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. ² "Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. ³ "And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ "Again*

he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. ⁵ "And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. ⁶ "Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷ "But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸ "So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard. ⁹ "Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ "Have you not even read this Scripture: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. ¹¹ This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'?" ¹² And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.

In the morning, Tuesday morning, they find the fig tree withered away. This gives Jesus an opportunity to teach about faith. But what does this visual parable mean about the nation? We find out when Jesus goes into the city.

As they go back into the city, Jesus exposes why Israel is fruitless: The religious leaders come, and demand that He give His credentials. They demand He explain by what authority, derived, inherited or legally given, could He take over the Temple complex, and sit there as Messiah. They didn't anoint Him. They didn't select Him. He hadn't been in their schools, or raised in their families. Where did His right come from?

Well, there are many ways Jesus could have answered this question. He could have pointed to the fact that He was the son of David, legally through His adopted father Joseph, and physically through His mother Mary. He could have pointed to the many prophecies He had already fulfilled, including the exact timing of Daniel's prophecy. He could have pointed to His miracles. He could have called Lazarus up as a personal witness to His Messianic power. He could have done a miracle in front of them. But He answers them according to the kind of people they are.

Proverbs 26:5 *Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes.*

These men are dishonest. They are proud rejecters, despisers of the good, destroyers. They are thieves, stealing from God's people to enrich themselves. What kind of answer do they deserve? They deserve an answer which requires them to be honest. So Jesus gives them a question. John the Baptist – his whole ministry, was it from heaven or from man? In other words, was John truly a prophet of God, with God's authority, or was he just a man on his own authority? This is brilliant. Jesus is taking them back to the forerunner of Messiah – John. They are now in a dilemma. All the people are listening. They took Jesus on publicly, and now they need to answer publicly.

You can picture the rabbinic huddle as they go back and forth. If we say, of men (which is what we actually think), there'll be a riot, because these ignorant peasants think he was a prophet. But if we say God, that he was God-sent, then Jesus will say, why did you not believe him?

Because who did John say was the Messiah? John had already answered their question: where did you get this authority? The answer Jesus gives them requires honesty, to either admit their rejection of John, or honesty to repent on the spot and affirm Christ's right to be in the Temple.

But they are not honest, so they say, "We don't know. We can't say." And fitting is the answer, In that case, I can't tell you either. You be truthful, and you'll get the truth. Keep lying, and you'll get no answers.

Psalm 18:26 *With the pure You will show Yourself pure; And with the devious You will show Yourself shrewd.*

Now Jesus will talk to them about who He really is, in a parable. There was the visual parable of the fig tree, but now comes the verbal parable. The story is simple: A man has a vineyard. He prepares it, digs it. And just those first few words of the parable should have sent any Israelite that knew his Bible back to Isaiah 5:

Isaiah 5:1-7 *Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. ² He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes. ³ "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done to My vineyard That I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes? ⁵ And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, But there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds That they rain no rain on it." ⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.*

So they should know that Jesus is about to talk about fruitlessness. The fruitlessness of the nation, largely because of the wickedness of its leaders.

It was sometimes done that a wealthy man would lease a vineyard to people, who would give him some of the produce or some of the profits and keep some for themselves. In this story, the man, at the appointed time (not too early, not at an unfair time, but at the right time), sends a servant, expecting some of the produce. Instead of giving the produce, they wound the servant. The process is repeated again and some are killed, others beaten. These men are selfish thieves, refusing to give what they owe, using it for themselves. Finally the landowner sends them his own son, in hopes they will treat him differently. But instead, their wicked hearts realise that if they kill the son, the landowner may give up his claim altogether.

In this parable, the man is God the Father. The vineyard is Israel, and the vinedressers are its leaders. The servants are the prophets that God sent to Israel. Through the years of Israel's history, God sent the prophets, calling Israel to repentance; calling them back to true worship. The prophets were rejected, sawn in two, like Isaiah, thrown in a pit like Jeremiah, arrested like Micaiah.

So in the fullness of time, God sent His own Son. Though His miracles, and His words made it clear He was the divine Messiah, what did the leaders of Israel do? They conspired to kill him so that they could retain control over God's vineyard, Israel.

John 11:47-50 ⁴⁷ *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. ⁴⁸ "If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation." ⁴⁹ And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ "nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish."*

What would that vineyard owner come and do? He will come and exact lawful retribution on them for their acts of thievery and murder. So the idea is, God will come and judge these leaders, and remove the vineyard from them. The Messiah that they rejected would now become the chief cornerstone of a new

building that God would make.

The new building would be the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles who come to Israel's King, Jesus, and submit to Him.

And in fact, in 70 A.D., terrifying judgement came upon Jerusalem, and the priesthood of Israel was certainly removed. With the start of the church, the twelve apostles became the new true leaders of God's people, not the Sanhedrin. Those in God's flock, those truly growing in God's vineyard, would have new vine-dressers, shepherds after God's heart; shepherds who desire to love God, and help people to love God. With both the fig tree and this parable – you have three things: an expectation of fruit, fruitlessness, and a curse. The difference in the spoken parable demonstrates that the fruitlessness is deliberate and chosen. It is based on selfishness. It comes from a desire to take what is God's.

Is God done with Israel altogether? No, Romans 11 clearly shows us that Israel's blindness is part of a bigger plan, to bring in the maximum amount of people into God's kingdom. God removed the stewardship of His vineyard from Israel's leaders, but that does not mean God is done with the Jewish people.

When we see the terrible judgement on Israel, we should step back and see how serious God is about fruit from His people. We have a serious, zealous king, willing to curse, upset, shame those who deserved it.

But we also have a God who gives us every resource we need to bring forth fruit. When you think about all that God has put into you, all the gifts of health, education, job, family, circumstance - is God receiving some fruit of true worship from your life. If so, rejoice, and commit to more abiding.

Let us avoid the errors of Israel, with mere religiosity, going through the motions, self-worship, using God's time, God's resources for pure selfishness. The Puritans used to use a phrase a lot: Let us improve upon our advantages. That is, let us make good on what God has given us. Let us please our Farmer-King, with the sweet fruit of true worship.