

## **Faith for Cursing Fig Trees**

Matthew 21

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Peter walks onto the stage and begins looking through the leaves of a tree on stage for fruit.

“Man, I’m really hungry.”

Looking... looking... looking for fruit.

“I can’t find any figs... This tree’s all show and no fruit.

I curse you fig tree! ‘May you never bear fruit again! Wither and die!’”

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Now, our text for the morning, Matthew 21:18-21. Jesus has passed Beth-phage, the house of unripe figs. He’s entered Jerusalem, which is all show and no fruit, and He’s cleansed the temple of merchants and money changers.

*In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it, and found nothing on it but leaves only. And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never 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 cast into the sea,' it will be done."*

In Mark 11, Jesus does the same thing, and Peter describes it as "cursing."

Paul wrote, "Bless and do not curse [those who persecute you]." We're never to curse people, but I guess that doesn't include fig trees.

In fact, Jesus said, "*Truly* [in other words, "Guys, pay attention to this..."] if you have faith and never doubt, not only will you do this to the fig tree, but also something else."

That is, fig tree cursing is not simply optional but ideal.

Now, I don't know about you, but to me, cursing fig trees for not bearing fruit seems a bit strange.

I mean, a tree is not a moral agent.

I mean, it's not responsible for bearing fruit.

I mean, a tree can't like, just *choose* to bear fruit...

especially when the fruit is not in season

(as Mark points out).

Why would Jesus curse a fig tree for not doing something it couldn't do?

Have you ever heard people say, "God would never ask us to do something we couldn't do."?

I've stopped saying that because I realized the Bible appears to be full of God commanding folks to "do things they couldn't do." It's called, the Law.

God commands perfect obedience to the Law, and, at least in the old covenant, everybody is dead in their trespasses and sin and enslaved to sin, so unable to choose the good. I think we, Americans, have made an idol of our

free will, but dead things and slaves to sin don't have a free will.

Well, why would God ask people to do things they couldn't do? Why would a parent tell a child to do something the child couldn't do?

Well, I used to do that a lot when the kids were little. They'd throw a fit and say, "I do it! I do it! I don't need you!"

I'd say, "Fine, you do it. Go ahead, run away. Get your own food. Build your own house. Find your own city. Make your life work without me."

I knew they couldn't do it, but they didn't.

So I commanded them, "Go make your life work," just so I'd hear one little word...

"Help."

"Save."

"Daddy, help me."

"God save..." in Hebrew "Yeshua,  
in Greek "Jesus."

Well, Jesus curses this fig tree because it is unfruitful when it's not even fig season, as if

He knew it couldn't bear fruit, but maybe we don't.

For thousands and thousands of years, His people, His bride had been trying to make fruit through the works of the Law, that is the knowledge of good and evil. Remember God's very first command for humanity (Eve and the first Adam) was "be fruitful and multiply."

It's Valentine's Day weekend, so I thought I should tell you about my experience with that. May 28, 1983,

Susan and I were wed. After a wonderful party we drove to Vail for our honeymoon

Well, when we got to the room, I sat my bride down and said, “The wedding and all was nice, but we’ve got work to do. God’s first command is to be fruitful.”

To help her I showed her one of these... [Peter gets a mannequin and brings it onto the stage.] I said, “We need to make one of these, a person! This is what a person looks like. Let’s study it and get her done.” So we got busy, went to work making a person.

I actually have a home movie of our first attempt on our honeymoon night. This is Susan and me trying to make a person... Larry, roll the film.

[A film clip from Young Frankenstein is shown where Dr. Frankenstein tries to bring life to his creation.]

Actually, it didn’t work and instead of producing a person, we could only create a monster. [Peter turns and yells at the mannequin...] “Live. Live. Live. Life, I say!”

Kind of reminds you of church sometimes... a preacher yelling at a bunch of zombies, “Live. Live. Live!” But nobody bears fruit, not real fruit, only fake fruit, the kind we can manufacture.

Looks like fruit, but it’s only plastic.

Looks like a real boy, but it’s only a mannequin or a monster.

Well, Jesus cursed that old fig tree because it had no fruit, no real fruit that He could eat. Maybe the fig tree was more than just a fig tree. In scripture, trees are like systems or paradigms; they represent ways of getting things done. And this tree reminds us of a way... the wrong way.

It reminds us of that tree in the garden and another curse. That tree is often pictured as an apple tree, but scripture doesn’t say that.

God told Adam and Eve to “be fruitful,” and He placed them in a garden with two fruit trees in the middle—the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—saying, “The day you eat of that tree, you will die.” The knowledge of good and evil must be the Law.

Well, instead of trusting God, Eve trusted *that* tree to make herself good and fruitful. Then she gave some to Adam who was with her.

I’m pointing to Eve because Eve is a picture of all of us, the Church, for we are to be wed to the last Adam, Christ. We are the bride of Christ.

Well, Eve trusted the Law rather than God.

She didn’t have faith.

So maybe Eve was a sinner before she took the fruit. “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin,” wrote Paul, so she was a sinner, she just didn’t know it because she didn’t have the “knowledge of good and evil,” the Law.

“Apart from the Law, sin lies dead,” wrote Paul, and “the power of sin is the Law,” and “The Law came in to increase the trespass.”

Well, anyway, Eve trusted the Law to produce the good, but it just revealed that Eve was bad, and seeing her sin, she only turned back to the Law. Eve and Adam made fig leaf underwear to hide their shame.

They were all fig leaves and no fruit.

And then all creation fell under a curse.

Many Jews thought that Jerusalem was the site of Eden, and the new Jerusalem in Revelation looks like Eden and contains a tree bearing fruit with leaves that heal the nations.

In Matthew 21, Jesus has just entered old Jerusalem. Jerusalem is His Bride, but she's all show and no fruit. She's behaved as a harlot. There are merchants in her temple.

No fruit, and yet she *has* produced a monster—sick religion. The harlot and the beast will have Jesus nailed to the cursed tree by the end of the week.

Well, anyway, in Matthew 21, Jesus curses the fig tree and goes on to prophesy the destruction of the temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the transfer of the kingdom from geo-political Israel to a new nation bearing the fruit of the kingdom.

In the prophets, Israel is pictured as a fig tree as well as a harlot that will be redeemed.

All that to say, cursing the fig tree seems to be important for it has something to do with old Israel, and old Jerusalem, and the old temple, which contained the old system. That tree must be that old way, that old system, which is the Law—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It has produced no fruit, and now we need to believe that curse so we won't return to that tree.

That tree is barren.

In other words, “no one will be justified by works of the Law” (Romans 3:20). And Paul reveals that he's not just talking about Jewish law. He writes, “When Gentiles who have not the Law do by nature what the Law requires, they are a law to themselves . . . They show what the Law requires is written on their hearts.”

No matter where you go in this world, every society has a knowledge of good and evil, a list that Paul calls law.

We all try to fulfill our law and make ourselves good, just like Eve and that first Adam. Every religion of

this world is a reliance on *our* ability to choose the good according to some law or formula. Even though the formula or law may be different, they all rely on our flesh which is dead, and so can't choose the good and fulfill the Law.

The Old Testament Law is the best law because it comes straight from God. But it's still law and "no one will be justified by works of the Law."

We Christians love to point out that we are not under the Law, yet sometimes I think all we do is preach Law in the power of the Law and petition government for more laws.

It's like we're putting our hope in better laws.

Civil governments are a worldly blessing, but they are entirely sterile and barren because law cannot make one person good.

Remember, the chief opponents to the Gospels in Paul's epistles were the Judaizers. They constantly tempted the early church to go back under the Law (Jewish Law or any law). Paul writes to the Colossians,

Why do you submit to regulations, <sup>k</sup>"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? <sup>l</sup>These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh [that is, sin].

You know, Christ's chief opponents were the Pharisees. They produced "Halakah" which became the "Mishnah" which was all an effort to further define the old

testament Law making it practically applicable to everyday life.

Early on in this preaching deal, I learned that's exactly what most American Christians want their pastor to do, and that's what my flesh wants to do: Take every paragraph in the new testament and come up with 3 simple action steps that you can take this week to make yourself good.

As if...

- The Bible is God's little instruction book.
- My job is to turn the new testament into a cookbook for righteousness, a set of practical application points to make yourself good.

We think the Gospel is a self-help book.

But when I read the Gospels over and over...

- This is the simple action step: Pick up a cross.
- This is the principle for success: Admit you failed.
- This is practical application point: Repent.
- I find the purpose of the Law is to reveal that I'm already dead, so my self can't help my self, but thanks be to God, He sends the Spirit of His Son into my heart crying,

"Abba, Father,"

"Daddy, help"

"God save"

"Yeshua"

"Jesus"



And then all my good deeds are *His* action steps, and I am *His* practical application, *His* body in this world.

But when I try to do the good in my own strength, looking to the Law, I only feed the monster. I feed the monster in myself and feed it in others. The monster is called my flesh, my pride, my self.

Please understand, I'm not saying the Law isn't good. The Law is good, but "that which is good brought death to me," wrote Paul. It inspires the monster in me for "the power of sin is the Law." (1 Corinthians 15:56)

The Law is descriptive but not prescriptive.

It tells what's wrong  
but doesn't give us the power to fix it.  
It tells us what's good  
but doesn't make us good.

The mannequin tells me what fruit looks like.

This mannequin tells me what a person might look like,  
but the mannequin doesn't give me a clue as to  
how to make one.

It's descriptive, not prescriptive.

I went to the doctor, and I told him all about my symptoms. I said, "Doc, I've been coughing, and shaking, throwing up. At night I break out in cold sweats."

He listened intently, looked in his big book and said, "Stop it. Stop it. You stop it! That's bad. That's bad. It's the flu; stop it!"

See, that's descriptive, not prescriptive.

We come to church so the pastor can look in his big book and yell, "Stop it! That's bad. That's sin. Stop it!"

That's descriptive, not prescriptive.

And you see, we assume we can "stop it." We can stop certain behaviors like cussing, chewing, or burping in public. But we can't just decide to not sin when our very nature has become sin.

In fact, the more I scream, "Stop it!"  
     (as if you yourself can stop it),  
         the more I make you sin,  
             the more I feed the monster,  
  
 the more you rely on your own flesh,  
     yourself,  
     your own pride,  
         and fear,  
         and anger,  
             and self hatred,  
         and jealousy,  
                 and competition,  
                 and condemnation  
                     to control your sin  
                 *which is sin.*

At the last Living Stones Service, a friend shared a vision she had received. She saw a pure white background and then watched a stony, ugly gargoyle crawl into the foreground. The Lord said, "That's sin." Then she watched another gargoyle, ten times larger, a monster. It came in the picture and crawled on the back of the sin gargoyle. The sin gargoyle acted as if it was in pain as the monstrous gargoyle grimaced in quiet satisfaction. The Lord revealed, "That monstrous gargoyle is condemnation."

The Law is good, but to live by the Law only feeds the monster that is our flesh, only brings condemnation... self condemnation and condemnation of all around us.

We control sin,  
but only with more sin.

The Lord labeled the picture, "Double Jeopardy." Jeopardy is danger. We're tempted by sins *against* the Law, like tax collectors and harlots, and then doubly tempted to sin *with* the Law, like scribes and Pharisees.

Double jeopardy is a second punishment for the same offense. "Law came in to increase the trespass," wrote Paul, "that grace might abound all the more."

Well, as my friend gazed at the vision, the word "repentance" came. She shared,

As soon as repentance comes, in front of this pure white background, this minute drop of the precious blood of Jesus fell upon the back of condemnation causing it to open up like a fissure or earthquake. It continued down his back onto the back of sin until they were both destroyed and pulverized into a powder to be blown away. Two words were left, written in white, even more pure than the background. The two words were Mercy and underneath Mercy was Grace.

There are different ways to say it, but the fruit the Lord desires is

Faith in His Mercy  
(Khesed)  
(Steadfast Love)  
(Covenant Love)

In the Revelation, the “harvest of the earth” is bread and wine, body broken and blood shed—Jesus.

The Law is descriptive, like this mannequin is descriptive. The Law tells me what faith in mercy looks like, what love looks like, just as this mannequin tells me what a person looks like.

Yet the Law can’t make me merciful.  
The Law cannot make me love;  
it can only tell me I’m not.

The Law is descriptive,  
but the blood is more than descriptive;  
it’s prescriptive.  
I need a blood transfusion.  
I need new life.  
I need to surrender the old life  
and receive His life—  
The Blood.

What keeps me from the blood?

Remember when Eve and that first Adam saw their sin and their condemnation? Rather than confess their shame to God who is love, they hid their shame in more Law. They made fig leaf underwear and hid in the trees.

What keeps us from the blood?  
Our own faith in the Law.

On one level, I suppose it's good to suggest practical application points, to say...

Maybe you should go on one mission trip a year.  
Maybe you should give 10% of your income to the church  
Maybe you should have a 30 minute devotional every day.

The problem is, you can do those things and pretend they're fruit, and with those things hide your shame so you won't have to surrender your heart to His mercy.

And the truth is...

He wants your whole life to be a mission of mercy.  
He doesn't want 10%; He demands absolutely all and without restraint.  
He doesn't want a 30 minute devotional; He wants every breath fully devoted to Him in unselfconscious love.

And the only way that will happen  
is to see you can't make it happen.

And so, you, therefore, surrender your shame and receive the imperishable seed—His body and His blood. He is the last Adam, and we are the bride of Christ, called to bear fruit in His image.

Bride of Christ, you can't do that dressed in fig leaves.

Recently, another friend shared a vision at the Living Stones Service. She received it during one of our worship services. She said,

Suddenly, in the middle of the sermon, there was blood coming from the front of the church. . . . I asked the Lord, "Where is this blood coming from?" He showed me it was coming from the communion table—the blood and the bread. It's his body broken and his blood poured over us. His blood flowed into the auditorium over all the people. There was not one person that was not covered. His blood flew from the communion table like floating sheets, crystal red colored and inwardly illuminated, surrounding every person in the room. Then I asked, "Why are you doing this? And where is Jesus, because He's always here?" Then I saw Jesus walking around to each person, one at a time, face to face. He would walk up to each person and stand there with them . . . waiting for them to say something to him, or simply worship him. [He waited for us to worship.] . . . I asked the Lord, "What's going on here? What's in our way? Why do we not want to receive the blood of Jesus?" He said, "It's because you want to continue wearing the fig leaves."

The last Adam says, "Eve, you're covered in fig leaves. You're justifying yourself. You're hidden in the Law. You're building stone temples when I've called you to *be* my temple. You're hiding your shame. But when you surrender your shame and confess your sin, I cover you in mercy and impregnate you with life."

My friend went on to say, "He is preparing us to go across the oceans—to walk on the sands of Africa, to wash

the faces of children in the DR.” He’s preparing us to bear fruit, you see. Then she said, “We can’t do it if we’re covered in fig leaves.”

Do you understand why we’re called to curse the fig tree? In Philippians 3:2-11 Paul curses the fig tree. Let’s listen in...

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the Law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the Law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse [“skubalon” in Greek].

The proper translation of skubalon is abundantly, exceedingly clear. Early church fathers even tried to modify the text, embarrassed by Paul’s vocabulary. My wife begged me not to translate it accurately for you. She said, “Peter, if you say that word, people will shut down

over the pastor who cursed in church.” Well, I hope you translate it in your mind so you can believe Holy Scripture.

Paul is saying, “All my good deeds, all my religious works, indeed all things, aren’t worth (that word).”

People were offended that I might have criticized Israel. Some were offended that I might have criticized U.S. foreign policy. None were offended enough. Paul is criticizing every work of human hands. He’s criticizing all things apart from Christ, as if they’re all under a curse and will be dissolved by fire. Yet Christ and all in Christ will remain. He writes,

I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him.

“Know” is another powerful word in the Bible. Adam *knew* Eve, and she got pregnant with fruit. That’s how you bear fruit. The ultimate Adam wants to know you, bride of Christ. He wants to know you, but you’re hiding in those damn fig leaves. You’re hiding in the Law, unable to fulfill the Law because you won’t believe His mercy and bear the fruit that befits repentance.

So curse the fig tree in faith.

Cursing the fig tree is renouncing the flesh.

Cursing the fig tree is leaving the old covenant.

Cursing the fig tree is refusing to live by the Law,  
so you can be constrained by love,  
and so fulfill the Law.



Cursing the fig tree is no longer hiding your shame...

It's confessing your sin and believing His grace.

It's confessing your self and receiving His self.

It's confessing your nation, your city, and your temple.

It's surrendering the city *you're* building to receive the city *He's* building. The city is your bride, your kids, your family, your church.

Susan and I did bear fruit (though not by works of the Law). The first fruit we bore, we named Jonathan.

I have to surrender him, or I'll destroy him.

I have to surrender control, or I'll produce a monster.

I have to sacrifice my mannequin, my ideal, my formula, my flesh, and my responsibility in order to bear the son that is God's responsibility.

It may be a bumpy ride, and I may feel totally out of control. But I'm already seeing it. The Jonathan, Elizabeth, Becky, and Coleman that *God* is creating are better than any fruit I could imagine.

I can't build those temples;

I can only serve God at those temples.

Cursing the fig tree means faithful obedience rather than anxious responsibility.

It means

loving your kids, even when they fail,

loving your church, even when it really hurts,

loving your bride, even when she nails you to the cross,

loving yourself, even when all your good deeds are crap.

Cursing the fig tree is faith in God's mercy.

Cursing the fig tree is a paradigm shift. You do everything the same, but for an entirely different reason, out of faithful obedience rather than anxious responsibility.

Cursing the fig tree is

- Abraham sacrificing Isaac in the obedience of faith when his mind tells him it violates every law in the book.
- It's Jesus sacrificing Jerusalem and all His people, trusting God is good and capable of making all things new.
- It's Mary rather than Martha.
- It's prayer that is dependence which is surrender.

Cursing the fig tree allows you to cast Zion into the sea. It's taking the Gospel to the nations where the Holy of Holies appears in temples of flesh.

Cursing the fig tree is no longer trusting the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's trusting the fruit of the tree we call the cross—body broken and blood shed. It tells you *who* is good, and makes you good. It gives life. It turns harlots into brides and even zombies into sons.

So cursing the fig tree is dying to yourself.

And now you say, "Gosh, if you put it that way, I don't think I have faith to curse the fig tree." Well, the truth is, you don't. Jesus said, "If you have faith and never doubt." None of you "have faith and never doubt." Yet many of you have a mustard seed of faith. Well, that seed of faith is imperishable and from God and that faith will grow, and one day you will curse the fig tree, and He'll

help you. You'll utterly surrender your self, your flesh to God who is mercy. That is, one day you'll die, and that day you will begin to truly live.

In 40 years from this moment in Matthew 21, God will utterly destroy Jerusalem through the Romans and Zion will be cast into the sea.

That was God's judgment that was also mercy. He was helping them "curse the fig tree." We all must sacrifice the city we're building to receive the city He is building.

That is, we must renounce the fig tree for He still commands us to be fruitful (now we can be).

I read about Jules and Olivia in a book. Jules and Olivia are in their fifties. Every Friday night before they celebrate the Sabbath—the 7th day, the day of completion and rest, which is a picture of eternity—every Friday night they draw a warm bath and together, take off their clothes and bathe.

This is their ritual cleansing—part of their marriage covenant, which is to be new covenant, that is, a picture of Christ and His church. Each unclothed and open to the other, each puts a hand to the other's heart and asks if there is anything they need to say, anything they need to confess.

On some nights there is little to say. On other nights words must be spoken aloud that festered in secret and hurt to hear.

Yet for 30 years, Jules and Olivia have celebrated this ritual. I don't know how many children Jules and Olivia have... it doesn't matter that they have any, for whatever the case, I bet their marriage is profoundly fruitful. We'll talk about that fruit next week.

But Bride of Christ, it's your Sabbath, and the bridegroom invites you to communion. He wants to bathe you in His blood and fill you with His life.

So drop the fig leaves.

On the night He was betrayed, He took bread, and He broke it, saying, "This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Take and eat." And in the same way, after supper, He took the cup, and He said, "This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me. I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new, with you, in my Father's kingdom."

And so, we invite you to come forward in faith. If you want Him, tear off a piece of the bread and dip it in the cup. The black cups are wine; the purple cups are juice. But as you come forward, come forward in faith. That means come forward confessing your sin. Confess your sin, and believe His grace, and believing His grace, do what comes natural, for it will be supernatural.

In Jesus' name, believe the Gospel. Amen.

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I think the Lord would say this to you, "I see you. I know you. I know every thought. I know every breath. I sit by you as you're sleeping. I walk with you through your dreams. I hold together every cell in your body.

So I see your sin. I see your shame. I see the condemnation. I see all those things, but now, Eve, please don't place a fig leaf over your ear. Don't go that way, just listen to what I have to say next. You are the beautiful one I love. You are the beautiful one I adore. Beautiful one, my soul must sing. And, you see, when you believe my song, you sing over me, too."

And so, in Jesus' name, believe the Gospel.

You know, if you feel like all condemned because “Pastor said I give in to condemnation.” As I was sitting there singing, I realized what is the hardest thing for me to hear from the Lord. It’s the thing I most want to hear, and yet, I have the hardest time listening to it. But He says it, “Peter, I like you. I really, really like you.”

Listen to what He’s saying, “I adore you.”

And so, in Jesus’ name, believe the Gospel, and then you’ll live the Gospel. Amen.

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So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. <sup>1</sup>And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. . . .” <sup>1</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>2</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” <sup>3</sup>Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” . . . <sup>1</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. <sup>1</sup>And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

*Genesis 1:27-29, 2:16-18, 3:4-8 (RSV)*

Bear fruit that befits repentance, <sup>1</sup>and do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”; for I tell you, God is

able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>1</sup>Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

*Matthew 3:8-10 (RSV)*

<sup>1</sup> Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>2</sup>You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? <sup>3</sup>So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. <sup>4</sup>A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>5</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

*Matthew 7:15-19 (RSV)*

<sup>1</sup> In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. <sup>2</sup>And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it, and found nothing on it but leaves only. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. <sup>3</sup>When the disciples saw it they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" <sup>4</sup>And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never 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 cast into the sea,' it will be done."

*Matthew 21:18-21(RSV)*

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. <sup>1</sup>And Peter remembered and said to him, "Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered."

*Mark 11:20-21 (RSV)*

Plead with your mother, plead—  
for she is not my wife,  
and I am not her husband—  
that she put away her harlotry from her face,  
and her adultery from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked  
and make her as in the day she was born,  
and make her like a wilderness,  
and set her like a parched land,  
and slay her with thirst. . .  
And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees ,of which she said,  
"These are my hire, which my lovers have given me." I will make them

a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them.<sup>1</sup> And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals when she burned incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, and forgot me, says the LORD. “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.<sup>1</sup> And there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And in that day, says the LORD, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love [khesed], and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.” . . .<sup>1</sup> Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to Baal, and became detestable like the thing they loved. . . . Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of steadfast love [khesed]; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain salvation upon you.

*Hosea 2:2-3, 2:12-20, 9:10, 10:12 (RSV)*

I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy [khesed], and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.

*Matthew 12:6-7 (RSV)*

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.<sup>1</sup> For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.<sup>1</sup> Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>1</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, <sup>1</sup>as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of

Christ. <sup>1</sup>Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

*Philippians 3:2-9 (RSV)*

All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them <sup>1</sup>on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. . . . <sup>1</sup>For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. . . . Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. . . . Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. <sup>1</sup>While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. . . . There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. . . . The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." . . . The



commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>1</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. . . . for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

*Romans 2:12-16, 3:20, 5:20-21, 7:4-6, 8:1-4, 10:11-13, 13:9-10, 14:23b (RSV)*

<sup>1</sup>And without faith it is impossible to please him.

*Hebrews 11:6a (RSV)*

The opposite of sin is faith. And this is one of the most decisive definitions of all Christianity -- that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.

*Kierkegaard*

But faith's paradox is precisely this, that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the individual determines his relationship to the universal through his relation to the Absolute (i.e. God), not his relation to the Absolute through his relation to the universal. That is, to live by faith means that one has an absolute duty to God and to God alone. In this tie of obligation the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the Absolute -- the God who commands. This duty alone is absolute and for this reason the ethical, for the person of faith, is relegated to the relative. In fear and trembling, this is faith's paradox -- the suspension of the ethical.

*Kierkegaard*

<sup>1</sup>I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—<sup>1</sup>not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. . . . For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them." Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for "He who

through faith is righteous shall live”; but the law does not rest on faith, for “He who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree”—that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. . . . For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love [“faith expressing itself through love” – NIV].

*Galatians 1:6-9, 3:10-14, 5:1-6 (RSV)*

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*1 Corinthians 15:56-57 (RSV)*

Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. In that day, declares the LORD of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree.

*Zechariah 3:8-10 (ESV)*

My beloved speaks and says to me:

“Arise, my love, my beautiful one,  
and come away,  
for behold, the winter is past;  
the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth,  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.

The fig tree ripens its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.  
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,  
and come away.”

*Song of Solomon 2:10-13 (ESV)*

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