

THE LATTER PARABLES OF JESUS

Message 7

Scripture: Matthew 21:18-22

INTRO: Our studies have been on the latter parables of Jesus. Because we've had some time lapse, let me show you where we are. I gave you a number of introductory matters on parables and prophecy, and then, our first parable took place on Jesus last trip to Jerusalem before He was crucified. As Jesus was nearing Jericho, He gave the parable of the vineyard owner who hired workers from early in the morning until the last hour of the work day, but he paid them all the same. And here is my summary of that parable, **"Those who respond to God's call all receive salvation, no matter how long or short their service was. But, the Jewish people who responded to the call of God before the eleventh hour of their history, will be last, because many were called but few were chosen; and the Jewish people of the eleventh hour will be first. So the last will be first and the first last. The last will be first in the kingdom and first in position."**

And now, after they leave Jericho, and head up towards Jerusalem, and because the disciples thought the kingdom of God would be set up immediately, Jesus gave the second parable. And the heavenly meaning, as I see it, is this: **I will not set up the earthly millennial kingdom at this time, as you are expecting. As a matter of fact, I am leaving for a far country, and it will be some time before I return. My own citizens, Israel, will now reject Me and I will be leaving. There will be a lengthy time, and then I will return. Before I leave, I will give you certain responsibilities and I want you to be faithful with that which I endow you until I return and then I will reward each one of you according to what you have done. The Jews who rejected Me, and My servants that were unfaithful will meet their just judgment when I return.**

Well, after giving that second parable, Jesus then arrived in Bethany. Here, no doubt, He spent some busy time, and then the people of Bethany made a large community Sabbath meal so they could commemorate it together with Jesus. This was done at Simon the leper's house. I expect he was a leper healed by Jesus. We do not know. He may even be that one leper of ten who were healed who returned to give thanks to Jesus for his healing.

After this, Jesus spent the Sabbath there, and the next day is the day we know as, anybody know? It was Palm Sunday. It is the

day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey. And after a very busy day, Jesus goes back to Bethany for night. And then, in the morning, on the way back to Jerusalem, something interesting happened. And I believe it is a parable, and that it is a parable in actions rather than words. And so we go to Matthew 21 for the parable. This parable took place on Monday of the crucifixion week.

C. The Fig Tree (Matt. 21:18-22)

1. The Parable (18-19)

So, we begin again by reading the parable. It is in verses 18-19 (read). Now, if you were to read this Gospel alone, you would think the tree withered there right before their very eyes. But, that is not the case. So go to Mark 11 (read 12-20). Now, here we find that it is a day later that they find the tree dried up from the roots. So, in Matthew 21, verses 18-19 happen one day, and verse 20 the next. So our parable is actually verses 18-19.

Now, our very first question must be this: is it correct to call this a parable? It does not say this is a parable. There is not the usual setting and application, so is it a parable? Well, on the one hand are those who say it is, and that the fig tree speaks of Israel. On the other hand are great prophecy teachers like John F. Walvoord and J. Dwight Pentecost who do not see this as speaking of the nation of Israel.

But surely when we come to this account we must ask, "What is the meaning of this?" Some mockers have concluded from this that Jesus was as human as we are and that when He did not get what He wanted He got angry and what we see is simply frail humanity. But no one who has thoroughly studied the Gospels would come to a conclusion like that. Why did this event take place? And if it is a parable, just what does it mean?

It is beyond question to me that there is significance to this account beyond the simple historical facts that it happened and if that is true, then we must ask what is the significance of this event? Those who teach that it is a parable say the fig tree is symbolical of Israel. John MacArthur writes, "Jesus used many subjects from nature—birds, water, animals, weather, trees, flowers, and others—to illustrate His teaching.

On this occasion He used a barren fig tree to illustrate a spiritually barren nation. The illustration was a visual parable designed to portray the spiritually degenerated nation of Israel." His next heading is, "The Parable", referring to the fig tree.

So I researched this question: Does the fig tree speak of Israel symbolically? It is not hard to discover that the vine pictures Israel. We find that in Isaiah 5:1-7 and will look at that in another parable. But it is not as easy to discover that the fig tree also pictures Israel. However, 17 times the vine and the fig tree are mentioned together in the OT. 14 times the vine occurs first and then the fig tree. But three times the fig tree comes first.

From Judges 9:11-13 we learn that the fig tree is known for its sweetness, and the vine for the cheer it brings to both God and man. However, in Hosea 9:10 it says, "I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the first-fruits on the fig tree in its first season." Then in Joel, when Israel lay in judgment it says in 1:7, "He has laid waste My vine, And ruined My fig tree; He has stripped it bare and thrown it away; Its branches are made white". Then in 1:12 it says, "The vine has dried up, And the fig tree has withered". And according to Joel 2:22, a passage that speaks of a time when Israel will be back in its blessing it says, "Do not be afraid, you beasts of the field; For the open pastures are springing up, and the tree bears its fruit; The fig tree and the vine yield their strength."

I think there is ground from those passages to conclude that not only the vine, but also the fig tree, picture Israel. But, did we not have those references, I think that one could come to that same conclusion from the three passages in the Gospels that refer to the fig tree. I think that John MacArthur and others are right in coming to the conclusion that the fig tree represents Israel.

So then, let us look at those three passages in the NT. Go to Luke 13 (read 6-9). Here we are told this is a parable. We will look at more of this later. Now go to Matthew 24 (read 32). Again it is stated that this is a parable. And in a later message we will see what an amazing prophecy this is of the nation of Israel. And

so, our question is, if this is a parable, just what does it mean?

2. The setting

Well, we begin once more with the setting. The setting is a little more difficult to find than in most parables. But I believe the closing events of the previous day become the setting and we have this in Matthew 21:12-19 (read). So Palm Sunday closed with a cleansing of the temple. But go now to Mark 11 the passage we read earlier, we find a cleansing of the temple on this day as well (11:12-19). Now, either Matthew or Mark got things out of order, or Jesus cleansed the temple one day, arrived again the next day after the cursing of the fig tree and cleansed the temple a second time. I believe He cleansed the temple twice. If that is the case, then at both ends of this parable we have a cleansing of the temple, which is the centre of Judaism. And the picture of Judaism in these cleansings, is a picture of spiritual bankruptcy.

In the introductory messages I mentioned what I call 'historical prophecy.' It is when an historical event becomes prophetic of something future and that is how I see this event. So, as I see it, the cursing of the fig tree is a historical prophecy of the setting aside of the nation of Israel, and the setting of the parable is the spiritually bankrupt state of Israel as exemplified in the two cleansings of the temple.

3. Interpretation

So, if in fact the cursing of the fig tree is a parable, what is the intended meaning? What is the truth Jesus is putting forth? What is the interpretation? Well, to begin interpreting the meaning, let us begin by going back to Luke 13 (read 6-9). Jesus gave this parable, in the earlier part of this seventh trip back to Jerusalem. Now notice that the parable is of a fig tree, and notice the context in which it is given in verses 13:1-5 (Read). Jesus has given the Jews, or Israel a very strong warning to repent, and if they do not, like those in the account, they will all likewise perish. It is then that He gave this parable. Time for repentance is running out for Israel. In the parable, one more year was given for the fig tree to bear fruit.

Let me just insert here that if this fig tree represented Israel, and I believe it does, one might conclude from this parable that Jesus ministered for three years, because it is after three years that the tree was to be cut down, which is what happened to Israel. But, as you know I hold that Jesus ministered for only 2 years. I believe these three years indicate the time God gave Israel to turn to Him, but most of the first year was under the ministry of John the Baptist, and the other two by Jesus.

However, the most important point is that it speaks of Israel, and in both instances we have looked at this morning, it is a lack of fruit that is the problem. And Jesus' experience in the Jewish temple right before and right after the cursing of fig tree clearly indicated the fruitlessness of Israel.

So, let me give you the setting of this parable historically. Daniel had prophesied of 70 weeks that were related to what was to befall Israel and Jerusalem (Dan. 9:24-27). Many years ago, Sir. Robert Anderson studied those 70 weeks, and what he found was that the 69th week ran out the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey. And what day was that? Well, that was the day before Jesus cursed the fig tree! And what happened at the close of those 69 weeks? The 70th week was put on hold, and it is still on hold. This 70th week is the tribulation time that lies shortly before us. And the day after the completion of those 69 weeks, the third year of the efforts to get the fig tree to bear fruit, Jesus cursed this fig tree. It is a picture of the end of the nation of Israel as God's primary tool in the world to do His work at this time!

And I ask, is that what happened historically? Well, just over 50 days later, on the day of Pentecost, the Church was born. Israel had been set aside as God's instrument to bring His message to the world. And Rome was already plotting the demise of Jerusalem. And just 40 years after this, Titus will come and destroy Jerusalem and the temple. So horrific was that slaughter that dead Jews lay in piles in the streets and the temple was burned! And for almost 2,000 years, the city lay in desolation! And what was God's tool in those 2,000 years? The Church! Jew and Gentile in one body known as the Church!

Now we need to answer a few questions. First, go to Mark 11:13 (read). Now, how could Jesus go to a tree like this expecting fruit, when He as Creator of the universe, the One who had made all these trees as well, and knew the laws regarding these trees, how did He not know there would be no figs yet because it was not the time of figs? How was Jesus justified in cursing this fig tree for not bearing fruit if the time of figs was not yet?

I read some articles on fig trees. One of the articles I read that seemed most helpful was written by Sam Shamoun, a Christian apologist to Islam, who wrote this on the fig tree: "There is a very reasonable explanation why Jesus cursed the fig tree even though it wasn't the season for figs." He then quotes the late and renowned NT scholar F.F. Bruce like this: "'The other miracle is the cursing of the barren fig tree (Mk. xi 12 ff.), **a stumbling block to many**. They feel that it is unlike Jesus, and so someone must have misunderstood what actually happened, or turned a spoken parable into an acted miracle, or something like that. Some, on the other hand, welcome the story because it shows that Jesus was human enough to get unreasonably annoyed on occasion. **It appears, however, that a closer acquaintance with fig trees would have prevented such misunderstandings.** 'The time of the fig is not yet,' says Mark, for it was just before Passover, about six weeks before the fully-formed fig appears. **The fact that Mark adds these words shows that he knew what he was talking about.** When the fig leaves appear about the end of March, **they are accompanied by a crop of small knobs, called taqsh by the Arabs, a sort of fore-runner of the real figs. These taqsh are eaten by peasants and others when hungry. They drop off before the real fig is formed. But if the leaves appear unaccompanied by taqsh, there will be no figs that year.** So it was evident to our Lord, when He turned aside to see if there were any of these taqsh on the fig-tree to assuage His hunger for the time being, **that the absence of the taqsh meant that there would be no figs when the time of figs came.** For all its fair foliage, it was a fruitless and a hopeless tree'", end quote.

(Bruce, *Are The New Testament Documents Reliable?* [Intervarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill,

fifth revised edition 1992], pp. 73-74; bold emphasis ours) <http://www.samshamoun.com/>.

I think F. F. Bruce must be right about the taqsh. I checked on taqsh on internet and a blasphemer, who reviled the Bible in horrible words, made fun of Bruce's interpretation but he did not deny the truth of his statements on the taqsh. I read his comments because if anyone could have and would have poked holes in this if it was not correct, this vile man surely would have done so. Now, if that is correct, this fig tree could have had the early taqsh, but when it did not, it also indicated that it would not bear figs for this year, and from the other parable, this is the third year.

Now, here is what I think happened. The Lord had given one more year time for Israel to bear fruit, in the parable given in Luke. And now, Jesus, wanting to portray where Israel is spiritually goes to this tree that by all outward signs should have had some of the early fruit, and this would have been an indication that it would bear fruit this year. And since it did not have the taqsh, the indication was that for another year it would not bear fruit. So the time of patience with this tree had run out. Repentance had not taken place as the events in the temple on these two days indicated. What Jesus saw in the temple that day indicated that He was fully justified in what He did to the fig tree, and thus symbolically, to Israel.

Well, the day before the cursing of the fig tree in our passage, according to Sir Robert Anderson, 69 of Daniel's 70 week prophecy were fulfilled. From this day, the 70th week was put on hold. And in two days from the time this parable is given, Israel will crucify the Messiah, and the nation will be set aside for 2,000 years. And in a month and a half or so, the Church will begin and it will have prominence in the program of God for the next 2,000 years. All of that is very significant in light of the fig tree in our text.

Now, there is a second question raised by the text and I did not find any commentator that dealt with it. Jesus said to the fig tree, "Let no fruit grow on you **ever again.**" If the fig tree pictures the nation of

Israel, is God done with the Jew forever? Paul said in Romans 11:1, "I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not!" The view I hold with regard to prophecy is that God is not finished with Israel, and that Israel will in the future once again be God's primary tool for truth in the world. That will happen in the millennium. So we ask, how could Jesus then say, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." If the fig tree represents Israel, and Israel is yet to become a nation and of service to God in the future, how could Jesus curse this tree 'forever'? Will righteousness never be found in Israel again?

I have mentioned to you numerous times that I cannot find a word for *eternal* or *forever* in either the Hebrew of the OT or the Greek of the NT. I can find phrases that carry that meaning, but not single words. I know there are those who hold that the Hebrew word 'olam' and the Greek word 'aiwna' can mean forever, I have not been able to verify that. When the Hebrew wants to express the idea of 'forever' it says, 'olam, ad olam'. When the Greek wants to express the idea of 'forever' it says, 'eis twan aiwniwn twan aiwniwn'. These words would literally read, 'into the ages of the ages'. There is the idea of 'forever'.

Now, the original words translated 'ever again' or 'forever' in our text are 'eis ton aiwna', not eis twan aiwniwn twan aiwniwn. The word 'aiwna' is an age, singular. It does not say, 'Let no fruit grow on you 'eis twan aiwniwn twan aiwniwn', that is, into the ages of the ages. It says, 'Let no fruit grow on you eis ton aiwna.' If one were to translate these words literally they would read like this, "Let no fruit grow on you unto or to the age."

Vine's dictionary argues that the words, 'eis ton aiwna' should be translated, 'forever'. Darby's literal version agrees with Vine and translates it, "Let there be never more fruit of thee for ever." But is that true of Israel forever? Not according to Scripture. But Young's Literal Translation disagrees that it means 'forever' and it reads like this, 'No more from thee may fruit be - to the age'. So, we must ask, could that be correct?

The question, as I see it is, was Israel cursed forever or 'to the age'? Go to Romans 11. In Romans 11:1 Paul says, "I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not!" And in the chapter he shows how Israel has stumbled and then in verse 11 he says, "I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles." Now look at verses 12-24 (read). Here Israel is likened to an olive tree. I think this tree is used here because of the laws of grafting. The Gentiles are pictured here as a wild olive branch, grafted into a tame olive tree. Then in verse 23 he says that if Israel will stop living in unbelief, God will graft them in again. And we know from prophecy that Israel will come to faith at the end of the tribulation.

So, if the word means 'forever' in our text, that does not seem to work with prophecy in other passages. So what is the answer? The Jews viewed time in two ages, this age and the age to come. Jesus confirmed that view. He said in Matthew 12:32, "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come." The phrases, 'this age' or 'the age to come' occur numerous times in the NT. The KJV translates it as 'this world' or 'the world to come'. The correct word is 'age'.

Well, our question now is, when does the age to come begin? In my understanding, the age to come begins with the inauguration of the millennial kingdom. Jesus speaks of this as 'in the regeneration' (Matt. 19:28). In this kingdom, once more, Israel will produce righteous fruit. And so, if Israel, as a nation, comes to faith at the end of the tribulation, then Young's translation, "No more from thee may fruit be - to the age", fits the whole picture. Whereas, to translate it as 'forever' does not. So, Israel would be set aside until they repent as a nation, and prophetically, that will happen at the end of the tribulation. In the millennium and in eternity they will again be fruitful, as prophecy very clearly shows.

In brief then, the interpretation of the parable of the fig tree is this. The Messiah has come. For three years He has sought fruit on the fig tree of Israel. Now Jesus has come to a fig tree that has leaves and indicates that it may have the early fruit which would indicate that this year it will bear fruit. But when it does not have the early fruit, the indication is that Israel will have squandered away their golden opportunity to welcome the Messiah. As a matter of fact, in a day or two they will crucify Him. And all of that will result in Israel being set aside to the age, or until the millennium. This interpretation fits history thus far, and it waits to be seen if Israel will repent in the future as Scripture prophecies, and I have no doubt, that will happen.

4. The Application (20-22)

So, we ask, what is the application of this parable? If this is a parable about the nation of Israel, what is the heavenly meaning? The meaning, as I see it is this, **"Daniel's 69 weeks ran out yesterday. My own citizens have now rejected Me! The nation of Israel is cursed. Their tree is withered. As of this time, Israel as a nation has been set aside by God. And from now, to the end of this age, Israel will not be prominent in the work of God because they failed to bear the fruit God sought from them. But God is not done with Israel for good. It is only until the end of this age."**

CONCL: So, we have completed our third parable. In the first parable Jesus explained that the first shall be last and the last first. The disciples who had received Him as the long promised Messiah, were among the last in Judaism, but they would be the first in the kingdom. So here is my conclusion on the first parable: **"The Jewish people who responded to the call of God before the eleventh hour of their history, will be last, because many were called but few were chosen; and the Jewish people of the eleventh hour will be first. So the last will be first and the first last. The last will be first in the kingdom and first in position."**

But, the disciples did not understand that the kingdom could not be set up now because of Israel's national failure to believe. They were sure that in a very short time the kingdom would be set up and already they were seeking positions in that kingdom.

And now, because the disciples thought the kingdom of God would be set up immediately, Jesus gave the second parable. And the heavenly meaning, as I see it, is this: **I will not set up My kingdom at this time, as you are expecting. As a matter of fact, I am leaving for a far country, so it will take some time before I return. My own citizens, Israel, will now reject Me and I will be leaving. There will be a lengthy time, and then I will return. Before I leave, I will give you certain responsibilities and I want you to be faithful with that which I endow you until I return and then I will reward each one of you according to what you have done. The Jews who rejected Me, and My servants that were unfaithful will meet their just judgment when I deal with them.**

Well, after this parable they arrived in Bethany and then they commemorated the Sabbath there. The next day was Palm Sunday. It was the last day of the 69 weeks Daniel had prophesied. They had welcomed Him with palm branches and loud hosannas. There were the taqsh! Praise the Lord, Israel was welcoming their Messiah. And the next day, Jesus went to look for actual fruit on the fig tree to find nothing but leaves only. The evidence in the tree said Israel would not bear fruit for some time yet.

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