

The cursed fig tree--*Matthew 21.18-20, Mark 11.12-14, 20-21*

First, I will transcribe the texts:

Matthew 21:18 Now in the early morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. 19 And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He went up to it and found nothing on it, just leaves. And He says to it, "May you never again produce fruit!" And forthwith the fig tree started to wither. 20 And seeing it the disciples marveled saying, "How quickly the fig tree became withered!"

Mark 11:12 Now the next day, as they were leaving Bethany, He was hungry. 13 And seeing from a distance 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, because it was not fig season. 14 So Jesus reacted by saying to it, "Let no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening. . . . 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 that you cursed has dried up!"

As Mark points out (Mark 11:13), it was not fig season, but a tree with leaves might have some dried figs. Since dried figs are very good eating, any visible figs would have been eaten long since (the tree was near the road). In fact, Jesus was certainly not the first person to come up with this idea, so there was little chance of Him finding any figs. Before commenting on Jesus' reaction, let us clarify what happened to the fig tree.

If we only had Matthew's account, we could understand that everything happened immediately, right there. That is, that the tree dried up immediately before their eyes, causing the disciples to react. But Mark 11:20 makes it clear that the disciples' reaction did not take place until the next morning, 24 hours later. Matthew 21:19 says that after Jesus spoke the fig tree began to wither. Strictly speaking, the Text says that the sap was cut off; the result would not be visible right away. But as the sap comes from the roots, the tree dried up from the roots, just as Mark 11.20 says! If Peter was the first to speak, the others certainly did too.

Matthew and Mark record what Jesus said differently, but I understand that Jesus actually said both things, one after the other. But how may we understand Jesus' attitude? It was out of season—it was not the tree's fault that it had no figs! Was Jesus unfair for cursing her? Well, to begin, being the Creator, Jesus had the right to do as He pleased with His creation. But it seems to me more likely that it was a prophetic act, the fig tree representing Israel – indeed, the parable of the fig tree in Luke 13:6-9 seems to me to tend in that direction; the owner looked for fruit for three years, without finding any, and since the tree continued without bearing, it was cut down. Third, Jesus took the opportunity to give the disciples a lesson in faith.