



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Withered Fig Tree, or Israel Under a Curse,” Matthew 21:18-22

The incident which is the subject of the message which will follow in a few moments has to do with “The Withered Fig Tree or Israel Under a Curse.” It is another one of those incidents in the Bible which is described to not only in one of the synoptic gospels but also in others, and in this case the incident of the withered fig tree is also found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 11. The interesting thing about these two accounts is that according to the Matthean account, the incident evidently occurred on the Tuesday morning following our Lord’s entrance into the city, on Palm Sunday, whereas in the Markan account the description is divided and part of the incident occurs on Monday and part on Tuesday.

The reason for this, in case some of you may have wondered in reading through the Gospel of Matthew and Mark, is that Matthew is a gospel that records the events in our Lord’s life topically, whereas in Mark, there is much more given to chronological detail. So we read this in the Matthean account, but realize that it occurred actually in two stages: one stage, the first day our Lord cursed the tree; the next day, as the apostles and disciples came by the tree again, they marveled that the tree had so quickly withered up and evidently had died. So we read now beginning in verse 18 of Mathew 21, the account in the Gospel of Matthew,

“Now in the morning as he returned into the city, he was hungry. And when he saw a fig tree along the way he came to it and found nothing on it but leaves only, and said unto it, let no fruit grow on thee hence forward forever. And presently the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it they marveled saying, ‘How soon is the fig tree withered away!’ Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘Verily I say unto you, if ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this, which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be though removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done.’”

(Incidentally “this mountain” is an expression that probably refers to the Mount of Olives which is nearby, and since the sea is evidently the Dead Sea, the Mount of Olives together with the distance below sea level – it was the removal of a mountain about four thousand feet, so it would be quite a feat to move a mountain into the sea). The incident concludes with the final words of Lord in verse 22,

“And all things, whatever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] We come to thee, Lord, again with thanksgiving and praise for our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, and we rejoice in these invitations to prayer which he so often gave to the disciples, and through the word given to the disciples to us. We thank thee that we have the access that we have by virtue of the high priesthood of the Lord Jesus who is our Mediator, and through whom we may come directly to Thee. And so Lord we want to praise Thee and thank Thee again for all of the blessings of life, and we thank Thee for last week for which thou hast brought us, and we look forward to this week that

has just begun and pray, O God, that in it our lives may truly reflect the glory of the Son of God who loved us and has loosed us from our sins in his own precious blood.

We rejoice that we are justified declared righteous through the blood that was shed. We rejoice in the forgiveness of sins, not only of the guilt of sins past, but of those that are in our present experience and those that shall be part of our life in the future. We praise Thee that the Son of God has died for sinners and that the sins of sinners have been covered through the blood that was shed. And so we praise Thee in the words of the Psalmist, blessed is the man whose sins have been forgiven.

And we thank Thee Lord for all of the other blessings of life that have come through the forgiveness: the presence of the Holy Spirit, the possession of the word of God, the written word of God about which we have just been singing. Truly Thou hast made wonderful provision for the saints as they travel on their way to the eternal city, the new Jerusalem. We look forward to that.

We pray O God that Thou enable us to realize the importance of our presentsojourn here upon this earth where we are strangers and pilgrims. Enable us, Lord, to reflect upon the importance of having our priorities straightened out in the light of the divine truth. Enable us to put Thee first In the interest of our great triune God first in our lives, enable us to remember the importance of the spiritual as over against the material. O Father, we pray Thou speak very directly to each of us and give us a true sense of value in the light of eternity for the young who are here. We pray especially for them and ask that their whole lives may be given over into Thy hands for the direction of the Holy Spirit.

For those of us who are old we pray O God that the remainder of the life that we have may be the life in which Thou art glorified, and through the testimony of Believers Chapel, Lord, we pray that there may go forth the sweet savor of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and that others shall come to know him whom to know is life eternal. Out of gratitude, enable us, Lord to serve Thee in a way that will please Thee.

We pray for the sick, for those who are hospitalized, we ask that Thou be with them comfort them strengthen them restore them to health and strength in accordance with Thy will.

And we commit the ministry of the chapel to thee, and it’s various forms of outreach, and ask Lord that Thy hand of blessing may be upon it. May O God it have the marks of being that which pleases Thee, that which comes from Thee, that which has its origin in the heart of our great God. So we commit the work to Thee. We pray for the elders. We pray for the deacons. We pray for each individual member that together we may recognize the destiny which Thou hast set forth for us in the eternal counsels of ages past.

We worship Thee, we glorify Thy name, the great sovereign, majestic, triune God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Message] The subject for this morning is “The Withered Fig Tree, or Israel Under a Curse. The incident of the withered fig tree has been criticized by those who have read the Scriptures on three grounds. It is said by some that it was an act of injustice. Imagine the Lord Jesus coming to an innocent fig tree, pronouncing a curse upon it and having it wither away and die.

Now it is difficult to see how this could be, so it is important that we remember that this was April and not June to start with, and it was June when the figs should have been on the tree. In fact, Mark, says it was not yet the time of the figs. When they had leaves they normally had fruit, and so that is the reason for the surprise that our Lord experienced, as a man when he came to the tree and saw that it was full of foliage but had no fruit. This one, however, did not have any fruit, though it had a great deal of foliage, and we can probably surmise that as a result of this, it may well have been a diseased tree, and if it was a diseased tree, then what is the injustice of doing what our Lord did?

Or if it were a tree that was reverting to its wild nature as often happened, because the trees were usually grafted trees in which a cultivated scion was grafted onto a wild stock – I think I have used the right horticultural terms there – and so if that were so, then it is possible for this to be a tree that was reverting to its wildness.

If it is a sound tree, then its use – that is the, use to which our Lord Jesus put it – justified the curse, as one of the best of the interpreters of the Gospel of Matthew has said. If the narrative is historical, and of course we believe it was historical, the tree fulfilled a more important function by dying than by living, and it is a false sentiment to think of it as badly treated if our Lord used the tree which had no moral responsibility to communicate the important truth that he evidently has communicated through it. So I don’t think that we can call this an act of injustice on our Lord’s part.

It has also been said it was an act of ill-tempered irritation ,or of selfish anger on the part of the Lord. He was hungry. He saw the tree far off, saw a great deal of foliage, and thinking there were figs upon it, he walked over to it expecting to get some of the figs to assuage the pangs of hunger, and then when there were no figs upon it, he became irritated and angry and cursed the tree and it withered up and died because of his irritation.

Well now there are other reasonable explanations, and I think it is very unreasonable to lean upon such an explanation in which we charge the Lord with something of which he was never guilty anywhere else. Others have said it is out of harmony with his method of action; he doesn’t normally go around cursing fig trees. Well, of course. I am sure that our Lord never did that. He did not walk around and whenever he saw a fig tree cast a random curse at it to see if it would wither up and die.

It is obvious this had special certain significance in the light of the situation in which he found himself at this time, but to say that it is contrary to his method of action ignores this very context in which he has entered into the temple area, and there he has

cast out those that sold and bought the animals for the sacrifices, and overthrew the tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and chased them out of the temple. We would call that an act of violence today, and in the same context we have this act of violence and cursing the fig tree, so if one of these is his method of action, the other is as well. So it seems to me these accounts, the cleansing of the temple, and the cursing of the fig tree, are in beautiful harmony, and I hope to show in the message that follows that this is true.

Why did our Lord curse the fig tree? Well, we know he has just finished the cleansing of the temple, and that was a dramatic denunciation by the king of the wicked worship that was carried on, or the perversion of worship that was carried on in the temple area. Now this seems to me this is a very dramatic, symbolic, denunciation of the wicked witness of the nation in failing to fulfill their national calling. If the tree represents the nation in some way – we will talk more definitely about it later – than it evidently was making a great profession, but there was no reality there. And so by virtue of this act of denunciation, the Lord Jesus accomplishes the very vivid and dramatic purpose of saying, Israel, who are making very great professions, do not have any real reality there, and therefore they are not fulfilling their appointed and chosen tasks of communicating the truth concerning the triune God to the world.

So in one, we have a denunciation of the wicked worship of the nation, and the other a denunciation of the wicked witness of the nation. We will develop this I hope a little more in a moment. Let's look now at the parabolic illustration first, and then we will look at its interpretation and finally try to make a personal application of the incident as a whole, but we will not escape application as we go along, because we'll see at more than one stage, the propriety of applying some of the things this incident illustrates.

Now we should begin I think right at the beginning and notice the situation as it is described for us in the 18th verse of chapter 21. Now in the morning as he returned into the city he was hungry. Why the Lord Jesus was hungry the account does not tell us. We

do know from other incidental references here in this gospel and also in the others when our Lord Jesus made his entrance into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, having finished that entrance, he went out and stayed overnight in Bethany. It is the feeling of many that he stayed in Bethany through the whole week until the day of his crucifixion.

Bethany was the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and I mentioned last Sunday, it was a place where the Lord Jesus always, it seemed, received a favorable reception, one of the few, if perhaps the only place in the land, where he did seem to receive a favorable reception most of the time. But whether he slept with them in their home and had breakfast with them, the Scriptures do not say. It is possible as was his custom often that he slept out under the hills, on the hills under the stars.

At any rate, it is very easy to understand how he might have been hungry. Perhaps he had an early breakfast with the family in Bethany, but then he had to walk several miles into the city of Jerusalem, and it would be natural for him in the middle of the morning, seeing the fruit tree with its profession of figs, to walk over to it to seek to meet the natural pangs of hunger that came to him after that rather lengthy walk. If he had not had breakfast at all, we can understand further why he would want to eat and why he would be hungry.

So he has come into the city and he is hungry. This word, hungry, evidently gives a great deal of depth and meaning to passages in the New Testament, which stress the true humanity of the Lord Jesus. It is something we often fail to realize as evangelicals because we are so anxious to preach the deity of the Lord Jesus since our liberal friends deny it, and we fail to realize often that he was a truly human person. He possessed true humanity apart from sin, and so he could be hungry. In fact, he could be weary as we read in the 4th chapter in the Gospel of John, so he had the natural feelings that a man has, because humanity is weak, created by God and possessed with all of the natural weakness of created material. He was hungry.

Paul in the 2nd chapter in the Epistle to the Philippians in the great *kenosis* passage which speaks of his emptying of himself, says that he was in the form of God, which means that he possessed all of the attributes of God. That was a philosophical term – to be in the form of something meant to possess all of the essential attributes –and so the expression, “he was in the form of God,” meant that he was fully God.

But then having said that he was in the form of God, the text of Scripture says that he did not count it to be something to be held on to or grasped, but he emptied himself and took upon him the form of a servant. That is, he took to himself an additional nature, a human nature with all of its limitations. And so this incident here is an illustration of how the true humanity of our Lord Jesus is just as our humanity, and it enables us to understand how he can be a high priest who sympathizes with those for whom he ministers. He knows what it is to be without food. He knows what it is to be weak. He knows what it is to be tempted and tested – not from within – but to be tested by the world, tempted by the world, and tempted by Satan. All of these things make him the kind of high priest who can sympathize with us.

You know it is great to have a high priest who can sympathize in that way, and incidentally, he knows temptations that you and I have never known, because we fall when the temptation reaches a certain intensity. But at that intensity he goes on and therefore he knows strengths of temptation that you and I do not know, and further he not only knows that through which every one of us has ever passed, but he has the strength to overcome, and he offers that strength to his saints who call upon him. So he emptied himself.

This is a beautiful picture that he became hungry or he was hungry, beautiful picture of his humanity. But now we don’t lose sight of the fact that there was a glory side to his marvelous personality as well, and in a moment we will see that when he curses the fig tree and that tree withers up and dies.

The imprecation or the curse that follows when the Lord Jesus came to the fig tree has had a great deal of study directed toward it, and I’m not going to try to take you into an library of an exegete and explain to you the textural problem that exists here, and then the result of text and what it means. I want simply to say that I do accept the statement as being a prohibition, and I understand that what he is saying is, essentially, let no fruit come from thee forever. So as he stood in front of the fig tree and saw that it had no fruit but simply luxuriant foliage, he spoke out and said, let no fruit come from thee forever. He expressed his will, and incidentally his will was done because he is the eternal Son.

Now to understand what lies back of this we need to understand some thing about fig trees. I’m sure that many of you in this room have a fig tree in your yard or in your home or in your estate, I should say. [Laughter] Now I have a fig tree on my place and as a result of having the fig tree on my place, I’ve learned something about fig trees. I might say that when I grew up, I think both in Alabama and South Carolina – I remember particular in South Carolina because I was older – we had fig trees on the ground, and I did not learn a thing about fig trees. I went out and picked the figs but paid no attention whatsoever to fig trees, because I was young. But now that I’m old, I’m interested in birds and trees and things like that. [Laughter]

Now the fig tree of course had very pleasant associations for Israel, because, well, fig trees and olive trees and grape vines were the types of things with which they were acquainted, and in the Old Testament, you read about the Israelites when they are in places of blessing, or in places of rest, are said to be sitting under their own vine and under their own fig tree. So that was a figure of speech expressive of the fact of the finest kind of existence.

Such as someone today might say, I was sitting by the side of lake so-and-so with a fishing pole in my hand. That’s ideal. Or another person might be, I was out on the golf course, I spent all of my time on the golf course. These are expressions that speak of

the things that we like most. Well, to sit under a vine and under a fig tree was something the Israelites liked to do, particularly if you had the Scriptures in your hands, if you’re a good Christian who believed in the Old Testament.

So the fig tree had pleasant associations for Israel. When they were told about the land into which they were to go, it was said that it was a land that contained fig trees and figs, so figs were things that they were acquainted with and things that they liked.

Now I learned something about a fig tree, and I must confess I learned it from the Bible. I learned it from the Bible because of incidents just such as this. I’ve never really noticed this. But in my own fig tree in my backyard, I noticed after reading the Bible that along about January or February or so, if you’ll look at the fig tree, if you look at it in December, it looks as if it’s dead of course like most trees that are dormant. And there’s nothing green on that tree, but then in January or February – I’ve not really plotted it to see exactly when this comes about – but on the tips of the branches of the fig tree there will appear little green knobs, almost like a little knob.

Now these little knobs are called *pageen*, and it is from these little green tips that the fruit comes, and the striking thing about a fig tree is that when it begins to, in the Spring, begins to get ready to bear fruit, it’s the fruit that comes first, and not the leaves, so the figs appear first and then the leaves. There’s not a great deal of difference between them, but the figs definitely appear first. So you see whenever you see a tree in foliage you expect to find the figs there because the figs come before the leaves.

Now that is what happened here. The Lord Jesus looked saw the foliage even though it was not the time for the figs. Figs, incidentally, in Palestine, usually were produced in June and in September. I have two bearing seasons on my fig tree. The large, Texas-sized figs come in June and the other Alabama-sized ones [laughter] come later on. So the Lord Jesus came in April – this is the Passover time – in April he came he saw the foliage, thought in his human nature, here is an unusual tree, it evidently has

figs before its time but when he came found no figs, only the leaves, Mark says it was not the time for figs yet.

So now the important thing about it of course is why, well, it could have been a diseased tree. It could have been a tree that was reverting to its wild state, but the ultimate reason for this is that the Lord Jesus, through this, was giving us, providentially I think – this tree existed as it existed, providentially, in order that it might become an acted parable of certain spiritual truth which he wished to proclaim.

The imprecation itself – we’ve spoken about. The reason for the imprecation then, becomes plain. The reason for the imprecation or curse is not that the fig was without fruit. It was it was giving a false profession. It was not the fruitlessness for which it was cursed, but the falsity of its profession. It was not the time of the figs yet. But it had this luxuriate growth, as if it did have figs upon it, and so our Lord Jesus comes to it, and because it had the promise of figs but lacked the performance of actual fruit, then it becomes the object of the divine curse. Both of these accounts stress the fact that when he went there he found nothing but figs [sic., leaves] so it was a case of a great profession but no reality. It was, in effect, a lying fig tree.

Now Alfred Plummer, who is one of the better commentators, a British professor and commentator on the gospel of Matthew, has entitled this particular section, “The Cursing of the Braggart Fig Tree.” It was saying it had fruit when it really didn’t have it.

Now what is the application of this? And I want to say this just, incidentally, as we pass by, because you see what happens here is that the disciples are very amazed by what they see when the Lord Jesus curses the tree, and they’re amazed the next day as they walk by to find the tree has already withered away. So it was a remarkable thing that had happened to the fig tree. One day he says, let no fruit hence forth forever come from thee; the very next day they pass by and the leaves are withered, and it’s obvious that the tree is dead or dying. Now the Lord Jesus answers their amazement here and applies in a practical way what he has been saying by expressing an answer to their

implied request for an explanation, “Verily I say unto you if you have faith and doubt not ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree but also if ye shall say unto this mountain be thee removed and be thou cast into the sea, it shall be done, and all things whatever ye shall ask in prayer believing you shall receive.”

Now what is the point of this, suddenly introducing these statements concerning prayer into an incident that obviously has reference to the national purpose for which the Lord Jesus had come? Let me offer this as a suggestion to you. I think what he is saying to them is, if you will look at what I have done, you will discover that it has been done by the prayer of faith in God and then he encourages them to the exercise of a similar time of faith in God.

Now that brings up the subject of prayer, and I want to say just a few words about it, because I think that it is proper for us in the application of this incident to say a little something about it. Many people have prayed earnestly for some definite blessing from God, and when they have failed to obtain that for which they have prayed, they have grown bitter and sometimes even cynical. After all, praying over and over again for something, and it does not come to pass. I have lost faith in prayer, they say.

Now that is a very frequent refrain that you hear from people saying, I have lost faith in prayer. But I want you to think about that statement for a moment: I have lost faith in prayer. The very phrasing of that statement, I have lost faith in prayer reveals a misunderstanding of the right attitude toward prayer. Faith in prayer is one thing, but the prayer of faith (in God) is another. Faith in prayer is not the same as a prayer of faith. The man who starts out only with faith in prayer puts too much emphasis upon prayer, and too little emphasis upon the one to whom prayer is directed.

In fact, the person who speaks about faith in prayer, as if he really has faith in prayer, is a person who is using prayer as a sort of magic talisman, as a kind of “open sesame” to the things he wants, a quick way of getting things he wants from God. And so when he doesn’t get what he asks for, he gives up prayer like the heathen who beats his

fetish when he falls into trouble and doesn’t get what he is supposed to get from that fetish.

Prayer is prayer that arises out of faith in God, so the prayer of faith is the prayer of faith in God. Now when our prayer is directed toward God rather than your prayer directed toward faith in prayer, then that is an entirely different kind of thing. The prayer of faith that rests in God can rest even though the answers are not necessarily yes. All of you who have prayed, I am sure, have had often no’s to your prayer request, but if you realize it is directed toward God your prayer, and if you are really resting upon him, then you can rest in him when the answer does come, no or yes or wait, because your faith is faith that is ultimately in God and not in this magic of prayer itself. So the object of our faith is not prayer. The object of our faith is God, and faith in prayer can be a cheap thing bordering on superstition, like knocking on wood, like I used to do for many years before I became a Christian.

So the Lord Jesus then said if you want to know how to have power with God then it comes through prayer directed toward God. Now then there is one other thing that you of course notice here. He does say in all things whatever ye shall ask in prayer believing, you shall receive. Now does that mean that we have a kind of promise from the Lord which is a signed blank check, and we can ask for anything that we wish and expect to get a yes answer? No. It does not mean that.

It means of course that if the faith that has been given by God exists in a certain thing, you can expect that answer to be answered, but God answers prayers with no’s as well as with yes’s. And what is meant here is not to be taken out of the context of the New Testament in which he says if you ask anything according to his will he hears you. So you see when we read this we are not to understand that we are going to have a blank check and no matter what we ask, no matter if it is the Lord’s will or not, we are going to get it. I am so thankful it is that way, because I have asked so often for things that really were bad for me, and it is obvious as time goes by that they were bad for me. One of the

fortunate things about being related to the Lord is that he sits so high in the heavens that he is able to see down the road a little bit, and therefore he knows what is best over the long run, and when he says no, those no’s are the best things in the world for us. So it is great to have a God who cares for us and who does say no.

Incidentally it is great to have a father who says no, too, and for the children who are listening, let me urge you to thank God for a father who says no, and says it often, incidentally. I really thank God for the fact that I had a father who said, no often, sometimes too often, but nevertheless he said it often, and I learned a great deal by having a father who said no, because it was really an expression of his love and care for me. And I am sure if there is anything good that has come from me, part of it is due to the fact that I had a rather strict old Presbyterian father who was an elder in the church, not quite a blue stocking as they use to say over in South Carolina, but nevertheless one who really cared enough for his children to say no, and there are lots of things I never had even though he could have provided them, because he thought they were bad for me.

Now I want to spend just a few moments interpreting this parable because it is important for us to see it in the light of its context, in addition to this practical application that we have been talking about. What is meant by the fig tree? If we are to understand this we must understand it in the light of its context ,and we must ask ourselves now what is the fig tree.

It has been said, and I think this is true, that there are two primary interpretations of the fig tree. Some have said, when the Lord Jesus said, let no fruit grow on thee hence forward forever, in reference to the fig tree, that he was referring to the Jewish nation as a whole. Now if you turn to the Old Testament you will find some passages – not many but some passages – in which it appears that the fig tree is a symbol of the Nation Israel. Hosea 9:10, it seems to me, is such a place, and therefore when he said, let no fruit grow on thee hence forward forever, those who take this as a reference to the Jewish nation say

what he is saying is, as a result of their disobedience and the rejection of the Messiah, he was saying that there was no national future for Israel thereafter. Let no fruit grow on thee hence forward forever, *Israel*.

Now I must confess that I have a problem with that interpretation, because of that time expression, forever. Because when you read the Old Testament and the New Testament you see that there are manifold passages that describe Israel’s national or ethnic future. We all remember the passage in Romans chapter 11 verse 26 which says, “And so, all Israel shall be saved,” and I think a fair reading of that context must refer that expression to the future. All Israel shall be saved in the future. There is going to be a national or ethnic restoration of Israel to her promised Abrahamic blessings, so if this refers to the Nation Israel, then there is some contradiction in the word: let no fruit grow on thee hence forward forever.

Therefore I like to refer, and I think I am correct in this the expression of the fig tree, not to the Jewish nation, but to the generation of the Jewish nation that was on the earth when our Lord was here and which rejected him. So it is for that generation that this implication or curse is.

Now back in the 12th chapter and the 39th verse, the Lord Jesus had made reference to this generation, he had said, an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonah. Again in chapter 16 and verse 4 he said the same thing. So the curse then stands upon the generation of the nation that was on the earth when the Lord Jesus was here. Now that of course is a curse that stands fulfilled and will be fulfilled on into the future. You see what happened was that when the Lord Jesus came, the generation on the earth that should have responded to his Messianic claims did not, but actually carried out with the gentiles the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. It is upon them that the curse is pronounced.

Well now secondly, what is the meaning of the leaves? Well now, Bible students ought to know what fig leaves mean, because as you begin to read the Bible and start in

Genesis chapter 1 and Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 3, in the 3rd chapter in the book of Genesis, you read about fig leaves. After Adam and Eve had sinned in the Garden of Eden, and then feeling the reproach of their nakedness, and sensing that as the Lord came down as his custom was into the garden to have fellowship with them, they would be in his presence naked, they sought to cover their nakedness by aprons which they had made out of fig leaves.

Not a very nice garment, incidentally. If you take a fig leaf and just rub your hand across it you will see that it is not a very smooth kind of leaf, so this must have been an unusual kind of garment that they possessed. It was not like a Hart, Shaftner and Marx suit, I assure you of that. But fig leaves, you see, come right from the first mention in the Bible, symbolic of man’s attempt to cover the nakedness of his wrong relationship with God. Fig leaves become, in a sense, a pretension. They represent bustling religious activity seeking to cover up the fact that they have no righteous standing before God, having lost it by virtue of their fall. So the fig leaves, then, represent that which is a lie.

Now to translate that of course into modern life is very simple, because it is very common and has been common down through the years through Israel’s experience and through the church’s experience for us, individually, to cover up the fact that we do not have a righteous standing before God by our own bustling religious activity, and if it is not in the Christian religion, it is in some other religion. We are basically naturally religious because God has created us in the image of God, and we are fighting against that knowledge of God which is placed within us—every one of us. And so one of the most popular and most common ways to do it is to cover it up by religious activity.

And in this country, because it is popular to be a member of a church, we join a church. We are baptized. We sit at the Lord’s table. We attend the meetings. We usher in the meetings. We give to the work of the church. We put on an outward shell of religious activity – very bustling – sometimes we even become elders and deacons [laughter]. And tell it not in gaffe, publish it not in Ashkelon, less the uncircumcised

Philistines of some other religion hear, they even become ministers in Christian churches, but they don’t know anything about the relationship with the Lord that comes through the knowledge of our guilt and condemnation and our falling down before the cross and receiving the forgiveness of God out of sense of our own need and serving God, then, out of gratitude for what he has done.

Too often in our congregations, they are congregations that do not know anything about the soul’s despair and its breathless gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done. Fig leaves. Listen, it is very easy for Christians to go to leaf, very easy for them to cover up the fact that they have lost touch with the Lord, by religious activities. Even attending Believer’s Chapel eleven o’clock service or even the eight thirty service – attending the meetings during the week, sitting at the Lord’s table, all of these things.

The curse incidentally is, of course, eternal punishment for barren legalism and perfunctory ceremonialism. Have you ever noticed a fig tree when it didn’t have its leaves? Upon it is a very vivid picture. It is not a very pretty tree. In fact, when the fig leaves are off of the tree fig tree, it stands there with a rather gnarled look. In fact, its branches have this strange, weird, appearance as if it’s a kind of skeleton itself. Have you ever noticed that about a fig tree? Well, take a good look next time. It’s almost as if when its leaves are off its a standing picture of something that is dead – a skeleton. So when they went by the next day, that’s the picture that they got. It was a picture of the curse of eternal punishment that rests upon those who refuse to respond to the Lord Jesus.

Now in view of the fact that we only have a few moments, I want to pass by the remainder of the personal application, because I have already made a great deal of that and stress simply this that this was our Lord’s billboard way, I would say, of expressing the fact that the Nation Israel – at that time that generation had made a great profession of having reality with all of its service, its priesthood, its offerings, its stress upon the law of the Old Testament and the covenant – it was the religious nation of the eastern world. It

had made a great profession, but at the time he was, there were no figs upon the tree—luxurious foliage but no reality.

You know it is possible for Christians to have great knowledge of truth. It is possible for them to profess some of the greatest doctrines of the word of God. It is possible for them to profess belief in total depravity and not really know anything about total depravity, never having really felt any of their own depravity. It is possible to confess that you have been elected by God but not to know anything, really, about what it is to have been called by the Holy Spirit and brought to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. And such profession of grace without the experience of grace is the funeral pageantry of a dead soul.

One of the great expositors has said, “Religion without holiness is the light that comes from rotten wood; the phosphorescence of a decayed.” I speak dread words but how can I speak less dreadfully than I do. If you and I have a name to live but are dead what a state we are in our’s is something worse than corruption it’s the corruption of corruption. It’s bad to be corrupt and to reject the things that the Spirit of God, but what is worse than that is the corruption of corruption to add to our lack of touch with God, the hypocrisy of religious profession. That is the corruption of corruption.

Well then this is a vivid, dramatic, denunciation of that generation of Israel. One of the well known Bible teachers of our day an old man now whom I have heard several times through the years, said that when he was a student in Bible Institute he was asked to go out and play the piano at a Swedish church. Not knowing what he was in for he agreed to go, and he went out and he discovered it was a Swedish church in reality—that is they were Swedes who were living in this country, and they were still carrying on their service in Swedish.

So he sat at the piano and said, “I heard them seeing the hymns for which I was playing, but didn’t understand a word of what they were saying.” Then the announcements were made and they were made in Swedish, too, and I didn’t understand

anything about them, and then of course, the sermon came and it was in Swedish, and I didn’t understand anything about that either. And as I was going home,” he said “I reflected upon the fact that this was very much like life, that there are people who go through life and who do not really understand what is happening. They are borne in the midst of the people who are living but they don’t understand life. They are like people who read a book but read only the words and don’t understand what is being said. They look about them at nature and do not see the hand of God in it at all. They look at their own lives and do not see their lives in the light of the total program that God is carrying out,” and then he went on to make the application that this is true of us spiritually as well.

We are walking through life and don’t understand anything about God, because we can actually hear the word of God, read the word of God, but until we have been born again through the Spirit of God, we don’t understand. The natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God; they are foolishness to him, neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned.

And if you have never come to know the Lord Jesus, and you come to a service like this, you are like that man sitting at a piano playing at a Swedish church and not understanding anything that is going on – hearing it all, seeing others singing, seeing others understanding things, evidently (unless they are hypocrites too), but nevertheless you don’t grasp it at all. And you know we can put on a façade that makes people think we really are getting it when we really are not.

There is an old story which I love. It was supposed to have really happened; I hope it did because it’s such a great story. It’s a story of a gathering of people. Included in it was a man who was a well-known actor, and one who was an old minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the course of the gathering, which was relatively small, someone asked the actor if he would read something. He was well known for his ability to read and enunciate the things that he read, and so someone suggested he read the 23rd Psalm.

And so he took the 23rd Psalm – and he really didn’t want to read it – and he read it beautifully. He gave the emphasis at the right spots. He spoke in mellifluous accents. And when he finished, very impressively, there was a great deal of praise for him, and finally one of the people suggested that the old minister read the 23rd Psalm. And he fought to keep from reading it, because he knew he couldn’t read it like the actor did. And finally they prevailed upon him, and so he began to speak, and as he read the 23rd Psalm, it was obvious, soon, that he was not so much reading the Psalm as voicing an experience, and when he finished, there were not too many dry eyes in the audience.

There was an impressive silence, and finally the actor spoke up and he said, “You see, it’s obvious that he has read this much better than I, and the reason is this. I know the Psalm. He knows shepherd.” And in the final analysis, that is the difference between reality and that which contends for reality: profession. There can be great profession but no performance, and that is unreality. May God deliver us from profession without performance, from the fig leaves of religious activity, even spiritual activity such as most of us engage in, without the reality of the relationship to the Lord.

Now there is one little point I must say as I close. Did you notice when the Lord Jesus came and saw that fig tree a far off, Mark says, he went right to that fig tree hoping perhaps he might find fruit upon it? I think that is expressive that the Lord Jesus loves to find the fruit when there is profession. It pleases him. It is honoring to him for reality to exist. May God help us to respond to the appeal of the Lord. To give him that which pleases him: the reality of a relationship to him that means something. Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for the privilege and opportunity to hear the word of God and to read from holy Scripture the things that please Thee, the things that give Thee joy.

And Lord we do pray that amidst all our profession of a relationship to Thee there may be the reality of the figs. O God deliver us from a profession in which there is no

“The Withered Fig Tree, or Israel Under a Curse” by S. Lewis Johnson
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production of fruit. If there should be someone here, Lord who has not yet believe in the Lord Jesus who died for sinners. O God give them no rest nor peace until they rest in the atoning work of the Lord Jesus, and have come to know Thee as the only true God in Jesus Christ whom thou has sent. Go with us we pray with the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.