

The Fig Tree

Here is a picture of the leaf and fruit of a fig tree.

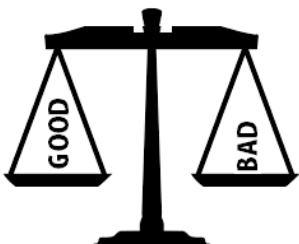


Does the leaf look familiar? ☺ The first use of it was by none other than our first ancestors – Adam and Eve – who sewed fig leaves to cover their nakedness in the Garden of Eden. (Gen. 3:7)

“During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree. – 1 Kings 4:25

“Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken.” – Micah 4:4

It is evident from references to it in the Bible that the fig tree was common in ancient times. Not only did the tree gain prominence in the Creation story, Palestine was also described in Deut. 8:8 as a land of ... fig trees ...”



There are good fig trees and bad fig trees. The good ones can be very good, and the bad ones can be very bad. (Jer. 24:1-3) Here, we are seeing two extremes of good and bad, not simply borderline cases. Hear what the LORD, God of Israel compared the figs to the good and bad among the people of Israel (Jer. 24:5-10):

*“**Like these good figs**, I regard as good the exiles from Judah ... My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart ...*

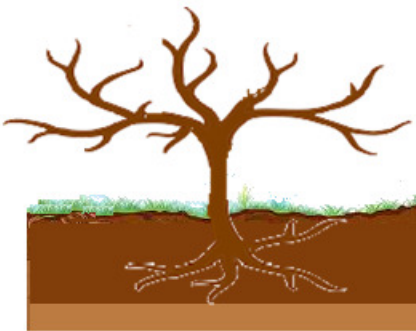
*“But **like the bad figs**, which are so bad that they cannot be eaten ... ‘so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the*

kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse² and an object of ridicule, wherever I banish them. I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their ancestors.”

As we contrast the extremes of good and bad of the figs as allegory of the people, we can feel a similar contrast of the extents of charity and severity that the LORD will deal with them accordingly.

In Matt. 21:18-19, we read about Jesus cursing a fig tree:

“Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered.



What a curse! But why of all plants did the fig tree become the target of Jesus' curse? Was Jesus making an allusion to the Old Testament about bad figs deserving of others to see that they are cursed?

If so, then the lesson of the cursed fig tree to the followers of Jesus is not simply about being fruitful or unfruitful in service (although fruitfulness is a discernible part of a good fig), but about something more substantial; i.e., Jesus

used the fig tree as a metaphor of the Jewish nation. Good figs would be like the exiles from Judah; bad figs would be just good to see (with the outward appearance of abundant leaves) but not good to eat – an object of ridicule like Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem.” (See Jer. 24:5-10 above.)

To understand more about the reason for cursing the fig tree, we must go beyond the Bible passage that gives the account of the cursing.

Cursing of the fig tree was immediately followed by Jesus' three parables (Parable of the Two Sons, of Parable of the Tenants and Parable of the Wed-

² Footnote explanation in NIV 2011: “That is, their names will be used in cursing (see 29:22); or, others will see that they are cursed.”

ding Banquet), all of which shared a common theme of castigating and pronouncing judgment upon those Jews (the Scribes and Pharisees) who questioned His Authority.

Cursing the fig tree ➡ Two Sons ➡ Wicked Tenants ➡ Wedding Banquet

Jesus denounced them for:

- Hypocrisy – burdening others with all kinds of requirement but they themselves do not practice what they preach. (Matt. 23:1-4)
- Hypocrisy – looking pious, on the outside only! (Matt. 23:25-28)
- Hypocrisy – doing wicked deeds under banner of virtue (Matt. 23:29-36)
- Pride – pretentiousness (Matt. 23:5-12)
- Malevolent influence over those under their charge – Matt.23:13-15
- Being more concerned about the fine points of the Law and ignoring the more significant issues (Matt. 23:16-24)
- Being responsible for the judgment that would be upon the whole nation (Matt. 23:33-39)

Wow! That was a lot, and really uncomfortable to those at the receiving end of the rebukes. It looked not simply bad, but very bad. They who had just the exterior of religious piety were just like the barren fig possessing a lush grandeur with an imposing presence of foliage, but ... in the end, would just wither off.

Clearly, a single thread tied together the cursing of the very bad fig tree (with an utter withering that would show others that it was cursed), the ensuing three Parables and the harsh denunciations. In the cursing, Jesus had in mind both the “bad guys” he chastised and the disciples with him. In reply to the disciples’ question about how the tree withered so quickly, Jesus replied:

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. – Matt. 23:21

Indeed, the disciples witnessed how a bad fig (literally and metaphorically) was cursed. Much as they had learnt a lesson on the right choice for themselves – to be good figs – they would not be able to totally avoid being intimidated by the shadow of the bad figs growing all around them. To avoid being

encumbered by the bad figs would be a virtually impossible task which was, in Jewish metaphor, akin to moving mountains. Telling the mountain to “Go, throw yourself into the sea” had the same meaning as telling the hindrance to “Go, get out of my way and get lost!” which would reflect the degree of anguish over the unwelcome influence of the Scribes and Pharisees.

In OT times, there were good figs and bad figs, and the LORD, God of Israel, made His stance known. In NT times, there were also good figs and bad figs; and our Lord Jesus imparted precisely the same message about what would happen to the bad figs.

In the world today, do we still have bad figs in the appearances of bogus “teachers of the Law” and “modern Pharisees” who fit to a T the characters that were condemned as we read of in the Bible? Certainly, among God-believing peoples, there are cults and sects with leaders of hypocrisy and pretentiousness exercising a malevolent hold on those under their charge by orating on the fine points of their body’s laws and ignoring the major points of truth. These leaders will become responsible for the judgment that will be upon the whole cults/sects.

Even if the bad figs are in the minority, the good figs cannot help feeling unease at the sight of the bad shadows’ threatening clout. Matthew 23:21 gives us hope. If we have faith in Christ and not doubt, we can say to the mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done.



John Lee