



Unexpected
Responses
of Jesus — 4

That Poor Fig-Tree !

The Cursing of the Fig Tree

Mark 11:13-14

Jesus is hungry and finds a fig tree without fruit, even though it's not the season for figs! His unexpected response: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

The next morning Peter exclaimed, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

In the context of Jesus' work of redirecting human consciousness to deeper spiritual truths, this puzzling action is seen to be a symbolic rebuke on voluntary unfruitfulness and a lesson on faith for his disciples.

A Hunger Beyond Figs

Jesus' hunger when approaching the fig tree is quite intriguing. That Jesus was hungry is not in itself remarkable. But was he truly desperate for food? We'd find that difficult to believe, since elsewhere Jesus tells his disciples, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about... My food ... is to do the will of him who sent me." — John 4:32-38. Or is there a deeper, spiritual hunger at play?

Clearly, his physical hunger and his actions toward the fig tree are not just about bodily

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sustenance but serve as a symbolic prayer to the Father: "Thy kingdom come." His hunger and actions reflect a deeper longing, not for figs, but for righteousness and spiritual growth among his followers. Among us—those of us who seek to live in communion with God's grace. His Jewish listeners would think of "There will be no figs on the tree, / and their leaves will wither. / What I have given them / will be taken from them." — Jeremiah 8: 13 where a fig tree may have been quickly understood as standing for a wayward Jewish nation and religion. But what about us—what might a fig-tree be for us?

Why Curse a Tree?

Why would anyone curse a tree? The story of Jesus cursing the fig tree — Mark 11:13-14 seems, at first glance, out of character. Why would Jesus, known for his love and compassion, react so strongly to a fig tree that had no fruit—especially when it wasn't even the season for figs? Why curse a tree for doing what's natural?

As with many of Jesus' actions, this puzzling event holds deep spiritual significance. Let's explore the profound lessons behind this episode and how it speaks to our own spiritual lives.

In Christian thought, fruitfulness transcends literal harvests; it reflects our spiritual state and readiness to respond to grace. We are called to bear spiritual fruit in all seasons of life, regardless of circumstances, noting that some of the fruit may be quite invisible to other people. Our spiritual journey is not about waiting for the "right" conditions. Nor is it about obsessing over 'production.' Rather, it's about living in constant readiness, trusting that fruitfulness will emerge when the time is right—whether or not we realise it in the moment.



Jesus' curse is a metaphorical assessment of spiritual barrenness when it arises from complacency or from spiritual 'sleepiness.' "The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep" — Mt 25:5 NIV. Like the foolish virgins who were unprepared when the bridegroom arrived, we are challenged to examine where we may be spiritually asleep. Sleepwalkers don't express love, justice, or compassion. Even when it does not seem that fruit is expected of us, we are called to be vigilant, awake, and deep in trust.

Ideally, how to be fruitful? Am I supposed to choose the fruit, ripen it, and give to others to eat? I could use my aptitudes, what I've learnt, and my willpower in such ways. Or rather am I supposed to align myself with the heavenly kingdom — something that is often beyond delicate, beyond subtle, even beyond certainty?

Many things interfere with both deliberate fruitfulness and alignment—my energy levels, desires, moods, and the demands of daily life. All these can form obstacles to spiritual harmony.

We need to be mindful of these factors and of their effects, because many of their effects interfere with our higher alignment. Not to be mindful or watchful of them is like walking in thick fog, or like sleepwalking. In the Gospels, Jesus is shown several times exhorting, challenging his listeners to watchfulness. "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" — Mark 13:37

What is at stake here is the need, the imperative, for inner transformation and the alignment of one's heart with divine will. Fruitfulness in this sense is tied to vigilance, to spiritual maturity and to the flourishing of the soul in its union with God. A trusting faith, then, becomes the fertile ground from which true spiritual fruits emerge.

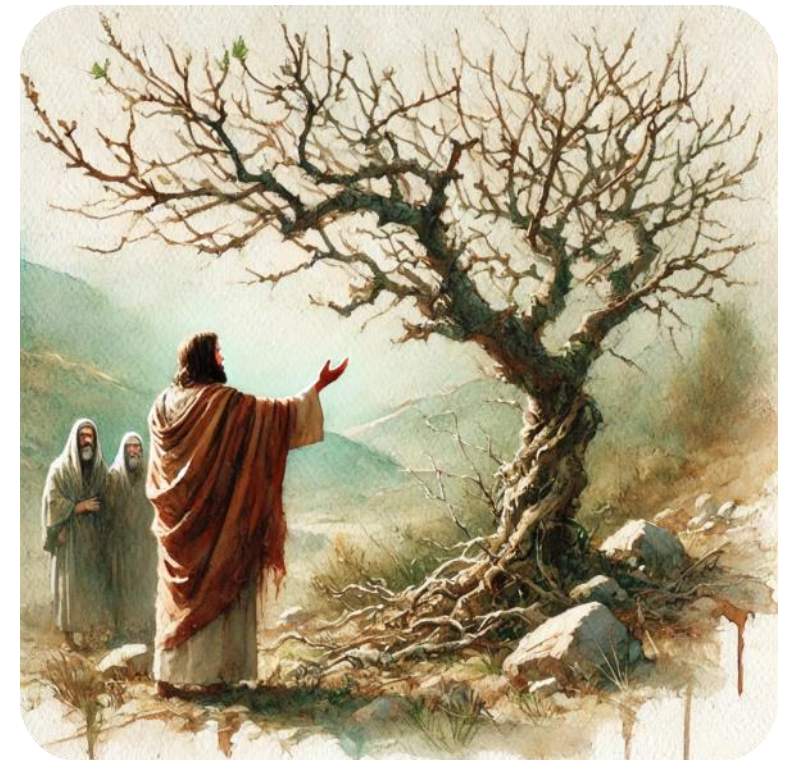
Voluntary Unfruitfulness: A Missed Potential

This episode invites us to reflect on our own hunger. What are we hungry for? Are we truly seeking to align ourselves with God's will, or are we distracted by the daily grind of life? The fig tree reminds us that we are called to more than just "getting by." Our true purpose is to bear spiritual fruit, but how often do we fall short of such alignment? How often do we excuse ourselves from the call to live fully in God's grace? Unfruitfulness will probably result, and in such a case we might perhaps call it voluntary unfruitfulness. It seems to be just such a voluntary unfruitfulness that Jesus

was shockingly opposing.

Jesus' words in the Gospels repeatedly call us to vigilance: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" — *Matthew 26:41*. Just as the fig tree did not produce fruit when needed, we too can become complacent, missing our opportunity to bear fruit for the Kingdom. It may not feel like the right season for bearing fruit, but it probably is. *In God's time, every moment is ripe for love, justice, and spiritual growth.* There are several other occasions in the gospels where Jesus calls for watchfulness, for vigilance.

"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,"



we find in Proverbs 11:30. The actions of a righteous person—aligned with God's will—bring life, nourishment, and spiritual growth to others. Like a tree bearing fruit, their goodness positively impacts those around them reflecting God's life-giving presence.

We are called to align ourselves with God's will, but what exactly does that mean? Is God's will for me a specific story that I am supposed to fit into? A great start in understanding this might be with Jesus' exhortation:

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" — *Matthew 5:48 (KJV)*.

The original word translated here as "perfect" is τέλειος (teleios). This word conveys a broader sense than just moral perfection. It is used in philosophy in the notion of "teleology" or goal-orientation of a phenomenon. It can also mean "complete," "mature," "whole," or "fulfilled." The term *teleios* implies reaching an intended end or fulfilling a purpose. Arguably a more nuanced translation of the phrase might be *"Be complete and whole and be as you are intended to be, just as your Father in heaven is complete and whole and acts always according to his nature."* So, rather than an unreachable moral flawlessness, we seem to be pointed towards authenticity, integrity, spiritual maturity and fulfilment.

Is it possible, then, that I myself may *be* God's will for me? Can we be God's fruit, the grapes in Christ-vineyard? It might be so, if we "abide in Christ. "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." — John 15:4. If "I myself" may be God's will, then the phrase "I myself" here surely is not simply

the small self, the psychological ego with its slow maturation and its addictions and biased narratives and false directions. And then what would it mean to align myself with God's will to tap the Source of grace and fruitfulness? We have to look deeper, deeper. In humility and in trust.



The Call to Deeper Trust and Surrender

In the verses following the fig tree story in Mark's Gospel, Jesus teaches about the power of faith, this word usually meaning trust in God, telling his disciples that faith can move mountains — *Mark 11:22-24*. His dramatic act of cursing the tree serves as a striking reminder of how vital it is to live out one's faith in a way that bears visible, meaningful fruit.

Faith is not passive—it is active, transformative. In mystical terms, it is the fertile

ground from which spiritual fruits arise. Jesus challenges us to ask: Are we rooted deeply enough in faith to produce fruits of righteousness, even in difficult or uncertain times?

Deeper fruitfulness is about vigilance and about living in alignment with divine purpose, trusting that the fruits of our labour will follow. *The small self, driven by addictions to security, esteem, and control, may accomplish impressive things in the world, but without watchfulness, it can easily deceive itself into thinking these are the fruits of the Spirit.* True fruitfulness is born from surrender to God, not from ego-driven motivations.

In the Bhagavad Gita, we find a similar call to selfless action: "Perform your duty, but do not be attached to its fruits. The fruits of action must never be your motive" — *Gita 2:47*. Jesus is at pains to emphasise selflessness in Matthew 6:1-4, urging us to act well without seeking recognition or reward: "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets... Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Jesus' act of cursing the fig tree is a call to all humanity to rise beyond mere survival, beyond profit and comfort, and embrace a life of spiritual fruitfulness. His challenge is clear: Don't wait for the "right time" to



bear fruit—our lives are meant to reflect God’s goodness and love in every moment. *No season is barren in the life of the Spirit, even when external results are not visible.* Taoism offers a view from another culture on this same need to bend to divine will: “The tree that is unbending is easily broken” — *Dao De Jing*.

The Mystical Call: Union with Divine Will

Sometimes, depending on our age and on goodness knows how many other psychological, cultural, and other factors, we may believe that fruitfulness is mostly about doing, about getting visible results in the heavenly Kingdom on earth. At other times in our life journey, we may understand fruitfulness more as a matter of *being* than a matter of doing.

From a contemplative or mystical perspective, this episode of the cursed fig tree reminds us that true fruitfulness comes only from union with God’s will. The fig tree becomes a symbol of the soul that has not yet fully surrendered to divine life. Jesus’ seemingly harsh condemnation of the tree reflects his urgency for us to transcend our self-centred desires and align fully with God’s purpose. What is being rebuked, fundamentally, is the human spirit that resists yielding to divine transformation. *Difficult though it may be to accept, results may not be evident or may appear only after years.*

Jesus told his disciples about the spiritual harvest, emphasizing that they are reaping the benefits of others’ labour: “Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.” John 4:37-38. And Paul,

Questions for reflection or discussion:

1. Fundamentally, what was Jesus challenging – a moral failing or a spiritual one?
2. What values, behaviours, and contemplative practices can train and prepare us to surrender to God’s grace and ensure that the living water keeps flowing?
3. In the poem, why is the stream called a “freedom stream”?
4. Why and how to practice practical kenosis, or self-emptying?
5. How do we recognise when we are spiritually “unfruitful,” and what steps can we take to align or realign ourselves with God’s will?
6. In what ways can we remain spiritually vigilant and ready to bear fruit, even during times of personal difficulty or spiritual dryness?



References:

Jesus’ calls to watchfulness. In the Gospels, Jesus is shown several times exhorting, challenging his listeners to watchfulness: Mt 24:42, 43, 46, 50; 26:41; 25:13. Mk 13:32-33, 37. Lk 12:40.

Jeremiah 8:13. “There will be no figs on the tree, / and their leaves will wither. / What I have given them / will be taken from them.” — Holy Bible, NIV.

Proverbs 11:30. “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life.” — Holy Bible, NIV.

Bhagavad Gita 2:47. “Perform your duty, but do not be attached to its fruits. The fruits of action must never be your motive.” — Eknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita* (Nilgiri Press, 2007), p. 65.

Dao De Jing. “The tree that is unbending is easily broken.” — Stephen Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching* (Harper Perennial, 1988), Chapter 76.

Saint John of the Cross. “To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not.” — *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 1, Chapter 13, Section 11, Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (ICS Publications, 1991), p. 103.

Psalms 1:3. “The righteous person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season.” — Holy Bible, NIV.