



Sounds kind of mean spirited ...

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Jesus had a funny way of putting things sometimes. Well, maybe not so much funny as different, and challenging. Like when Jesus took the familiar laws God had given to Moses and then updated them:

- ▶ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery ..."
- ▶ Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely ...' But I say 'Do not swear at all ...'
- ▶ You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer ...'
- ▶ You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'
- ▶ You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment ... and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." [from Matthew 5 NLT]

Wait a minute. Liable to the hell of fire? Sounds pretty mean spirited, doesn't it? What do you hear in Jesus' voice? Is he yelling? Is he pointing a finger at the crowd and threatening them? If so you have to wonder if this is the same Jesus who took children into his arms and said, "Let the children come to me," or who told the crowds "Love one another as I have loved you." The loving and forgiving Jesus seems to have disappeared and been replaced with a not so kinder and gentler version. Listening to him you may hear judgment. You might think it sounds like it's only a matter of time, and sooner or later, when you make a mistake, God will cut you down ...

Multimedia: God will cut you down

*You can run on for a long time, run on for a long time
Sooner or later God'll cut you down*

*Go tell that long tongue liar, go and tell that midnight rider
Tell the rambler, the gambler, the back biter
Tell 'em that God's gonna cut 'em down
Well my goodness gracious let me tell you the news
My head's been wet with the midnight dew
I've been down on bended knee talkin' to the man from Galilee
He spoke to me in the voice so sweet
I thought I heard the shuffle of the angel's feet
He called my name and my heart stood still
When he said, "John go do my will!"
Well you may throw your rock and hide your hand
Workin' in the dark against your fellow man*

*But as sure as God made black and white
What's done in the dark will be brought to the light
You can run on for a long time, run on for a long time
Sooner or later God'll cut you down,
Sooner or later God'll cut you down*

Reflection: Now there's a haunting thought. If you do wrong, God will cut you down. Is that true? It's an amazing song, but I don't hear God's voice like that. I don't believe Jesus is threatening you and me. I hear it all differently. I hear Jesus warning me. Indeed, he's pleading with me. He could just as easily have said, "Roger, don't you see? Can't you understand how serious this is? If you keep doing these things you are liable to punishment, you are in danger of wandering off from God and living without him ... and why? All because you'd rather be angry? Or because you don't tell the truth? Is any of that worth losing God?" Jesus is asking me to come back to him, not pushing me further away with threats.

One thing to remember, folks: being liable to punishment does not mean you will be punished, just that you could be. If you've ever gone a couple of miles per hour over the speed limit, you have been liable to punishment. I doubt you have been punished, at least not as often as you have broken the speed limit. Can I get an "Amen" to that? So too, Jesus is warning you that your actions have consequences. Some of your actions will take you away from God, and not just now, but they will point you in a direction away from God for eternity. But that's not what God wants for you, or for anyone. Jesus invites you to come back. He may do it with strong words here, but that's because he's serious about grace. I understand that. I'm serious about it too. I don't want to lose God's love because I turned my back on God's invitations. It's true, as the old song says, it was God's grace that taught my heart to fear (because I've been afraid I might lose it), and it was also his grace my fears relieved. God's grace has simply been precious to me from the hour I first believed.

Reading: Luke 13:6-9

Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' " (NRSV)

Prayers and Worship Music

Intro to message: Some people are very expressive. You never have to worry about whether or not they're in a good mood. With them what you see is what you get. You look at them and you know. Or you can tell simply by the way they are speaking. With other folk you're not too sure what's on their mind, or whether they are upset or worried or pleased as can be. Yesterday at lunch I turned on AMC and saw Clint Eastwood in the classic, *"The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly."* Back when he started in moves Eastwood starred in three Westerns, all shot in Spain, with mostly foreign actors and crews. Even my daughter could tell not all the actors lips were matching up with the audio track. I remember reading that the director was asked whether it was hard to direct Eastwood, especially since he only spoke English. The man said no, it was easy to direct Eastwood because he had only two facial expressions. One with the hat, and the other without.

When you come to Jesus, though, it's hard to know exactly what's going on. I mean, in today's story was he angry or frustrated? Sometimes in the Bible's accounts, Jesus almost seems to be a bit sarcastic, as if he was winking at you when he spoke. Or how about this. Do you think Jesus ever had a bad day? You know what I mean of course. I'm sure you've had days like that. My daughter, at age 4, used to complain about something not working just the way she expected. She'd say, *"I'm having a really bad day."* Cute. Of course you have to figure she picked that up somewhere, and I'll leave it to your imagination to decide if she got that from me or my wife. Back to Jesus, though, watch this day unwind and tell me what you think is happening here. But watch out, because Jesus will surprise you here.

Act 1: *Jesus noticed a fig tree a little way off that was in full leaf, so he went over to see if he could find any figs on it. But there were only leaves because it was too early in the season for fruit. Then Jesus said to the tree, "May no one ever eat your fruit again!"* [from Mark 11, NLT]

Reflection: To many people I'm sure, Jesus sounds angry here. Does he have good reason? There's a fig tree along the road with lots of leaves but no fruit. Mark tells us it might have been simply too early in the season for fruit. The tree looked good, it was green and in full leaf, but it didn't have any fruit. Why does Jesus curse the tree? If you're God you could make figs appear on it all by yourself. Just a little miracle there. Or maybe if you are God you can get away with cursing the tree. Or does this episode simply show Jesus' more human side? Is this an isolated incident, an angry outburst or just Jesus having a bad day? Well, just watch what happens next:

Act 2: *When they arrived back in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the merchants and their customers. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those selling doves ...* [from Mark 11, NLT]

Reflection: OK, so next on the agenda, Jesus goes into the Temple and throws out those people who were buying and selling, he pushes the tables over, even uses a whip to lash out and make his point. The Temple is to be a place of prayer, not this marketplace. Now what do you think about Jesus? Is

he angry, out of control, or just having a really bad day? Then there's this:

Act 3: *The next morning as they passed by the fig tree he had cursed, the disciples noticed it was withered from the roots. Peter remembered what Jesus had said to the tree on the previous day and exclaimed, "Look, Teacher! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" Then Jesus said to the disciples, "Have faith in God. I assure you that you can say to this mountain, 'May God lift you up and throw you into the sea,' and your command will be obeyed. All that's required is that you really believe and do not doubt in your heart. Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it. But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too."* [from Mark 11, NLT]

Back to the message: OK, so the tree Jesus cursed had withered. Only what did that tree ever do that was so bad? Here's evidence Jesus must have been having a bad day. Curse a tree, kick people out of the Temple, yell. Not a happy picture of God, whether that anger was well deserved or not. Seeing the tree withered up so quickly must have made the disciples nervous.

Imagine if Jesus had been having a bad day when Peter tried to walk across the water. Jesus might have let him sink. That Peter had always been a bit of a dead weight. What about when a woman was caught in adultery and Jesus quieted the crowd by saying, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." On a bad day, Jesus might have stared at the crowd, and then, because he alone was without any sins, he might have gone ahead and thrown that first stone. Yup, a lot to be worried about here. Or not. Don't forget, it's not always easy to tell what a person is feeling, even if you hear them yell.

But that's not all. Jesus withers the tree miraculously. Only, as miracles go, this is an embarrassing one, right? It's the kind of story that makes modern people even more nervous than all those stories of healings and feeding the crowds. At least those miracles had a positive impact on folk. They did something good. On the whole, I think many Christians are also a little embarrassed at this miracle. They don't know what to make of it. Does this fit with the teachings of Jesus or his other miracles? Let's look again. We've said:

1) Jesus did not entertain or do party tricks. The miracles were all teaching moments.

(2) You can think of miracles as acted out parables. They are dramatic, they are easy to remember. They make plain something that is hard to explain.

(3) Miracles transform people inside and out ... they not only teach they transform people. Miracles take you to a new place.

(4) Miracles show God's power so no one can boast of doing it themselves.

(5) And finally miracles are not wasted on small things. Miracles

are not wishes that come true. They are the mysterious ways in which God enters into a situation and keeps things going according to plan.

So are these things happening here as Jesus curses the tree?

First, cursing this tree was the ultimate teaching moment. It is amazingly cool to me that Jesus did this miracle right before going into the Temple to throw the money changers out. Jesus is on his way to the Temple, and pauses to give the disciples a preview. His actions are deliberate and for effect. Jesus wants to teach his followers (and you too, by the way) that God is serious about all this. Bad choices can have bad consequences. The money changers were pulling people away from God. They, like the tree, were not bearing any good fruit at all. They might have looked good, on the outside, lots of green leaves, but they were not producing anything good. Remember when Jesus first came on the scene there was preaching about *"Bear fruit that shows you are seeking God,"* and *"every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the furnace."* Jesus is simply acting these teachings out, with great seriousness, because after all he knows he only has a few days left before he will be arrested and killed. Remember earlier this morning we heard the parable Jesus told about the farmer giving a second chance to the fig tree that wasn't bearing fruit? Well, here Jesus is acting the story out for his disciples again. Jesus is saying something like, *"See this fig tree? That could have been you. You are all liable to the same punishment if you do not bear fruit. But instead of this, you have a second chance, another year."* Sure, he's being dramatic, but it worked. His message has been remembered for centuries. Maybe not always understood, but then ... we are still talking about it today.

Jesus finishes the story by telling the disciples the power to do things like this is God's, but they can tap into it too ... Jesus promises them full access to the power of God so they would be able to do all things ... like moving mountains around. It's easy to get caught up in these promises and miss what Jesus is saying. *"Wow, all I have to do is believe hard enough and I can have God's power to command!"* Well, no. In practice this doesn't seem to work. No matter how hard I try I can't seem to move mountains. I'd settle for moving much smaller things around to be honest. Just moving my daughter to do her homework without complaining would be a great start ... Did Jesus really mean all this or was he using a bit of exaggeration, to get his point across? Has Jesus just winked at the disciples while he was telling them this? Maybe. But keep reading. Jesus has been promising this power in order to get to the real point in the story. After all these promises of doing miracles like the one he did with the tree, Jesus adds, perhaps in a more serious tone, perhaps with the smile gone from his face and a steady eye, staring into the face of each of his followers: *But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against.* I think the reason you don't see more mountains moving is that we are so very bad at forgiving everyone we know. It's so hard for any of us to forgive those people who do not deserve it. You know the ones. You remem-

ber what they have done to hurt you year after year. If forgiving people like that has to come first, as Jesus says here, then it's no wonder the mountains stand so still.

Jesus is very serious about forgiveness. For the price of a tree, he gives you a dramatic way to remember forgiveness, both in your need to forgive others and in God's willingness to forgive for you. For the big story here isn't the tree, it's that God is willing to give you a second chance. Yes, he still killed a tree. That sounds harsh I guess. But I think of it this way: imagine you're driving down the street and you've taken your eyes off

the road for just a second. You look up and see a toddler on a tricycle coming down a driveway and into the road in front of you. You have to make a choice. Slam on the breaks and hope you don't hit him, or slam on the breaks and veer off to the side of the road where you will surely hit a tree. Child or tree. Which is it? Come on folks, decide now. Well, I'm betting all of us would choose the tree. Because compared to the life of

Jesus is saying something like, "See this fig tree? That could have been you. You are all liable to the same punishment if you do not bear fruit. But instead of this, you have a second chance, another year."

a child, the life of the tree is less important.

In the same way Jesus sacrifices a tree in order to make his point clear, and in order to save you. Jesus is serious, dead serious in wanting you to know you are getting a second chance at God's forgiveness, and to bear good fruit yourself. God has the power to wither up any tree that does not bear good fruit. All are liable, but mercifully, not all get burned. Today that's not for you. You've been given another chance, another day in which to live more for God than for yourself. The real question is what you will do with your second chance. And remember it wasn't just the tree that died to give you a second chance. Jesus himself, days after this miracle, would die on a cross to give the world a second chance. That reminds me of the final scene in *Saving Private Ryan*. All through the movie a squad of men with Tom Hanks in command has been trying to get one man, Private Ryan, home to safety. But it was a mission in which many got burned ...

Video clip: Saving Private Ryan

After all that has been done to give one man a second chance, you hear the challenge, "Earn this. Earn this." Only with Jesus there's no way I could earn his forgiveness. He freely gave it to me. I can't earn it, but I can repay him for it. Today, right now, God is giving you a second chance to bear fruit. How will you use your second chance? Knowing what God has done for you, what are you willing to do for God in return?

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