

ENGAGE

This week is more of a topical study on the *Rhema* (spoken word) of God.

- The prophets of old, the disciples, as well as many Christian individuals throughout history have on many occasions spoken from a place of power, with the power of the Holy Spirit.
- We are called to be like Jesus and filled with the Spirit of God. The message today will look at Jesus speaking to the fig tree and the call to each of us to bear fruit.
- That fruit is stated clearly in Galatians 5 and illustrated in many passages as action contending against the powers of this world and the flesh.

EXAMINE

Read Galatians 5:22-26

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Read Mark 11: 12-25

There is a story about children who recently became excited about limes when they learned they could sell limeade and make their riches. One day they found a large tray full of them. Large, richly green, beautiful limes—which they immediately started plundering. Jackpot.

Except they were plastic. A bowl full of limes holding out the promise of gallons of limeade, only decorative.

Many things can masquerade as the real thing but fail upon closer inspection. Jesus deals with this mismatch in a shocking episode in the Gospels: the cursing of the fig tree ([Matt. 21:18–22](#); [Mark 11:12–14, 20–25](#)). In this inverted miracle we see precisely the stakes not only of failing to produce fruit, but of giving a fruitful impression and failing to back it up

Examining the Episode

Jesus enters Jerusalem amid exultation from the masses gathered for Passover. In the morning, as he travels from Bethany, he spots a fig tree “in leaf.” At this point in late spring, most fig trees haven’t developed mature fruit ([Mark 11:13](#)). But this particular tree draws Jesus’s attention because it already has a full covering of leaves. It’s an early bloomer. Its foliage signals that it should have early figs.

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With that expectation, Jesus inspects the tree. He is immediately disappointed. All leaves, no fruit. All expectation, no satisfaction.

In a shocking turn, Jesus curses the tree and makes it wither from the roots, never to yield fruit again. We are taken aback; this seems stunningly out of character for Jesus, the child-welcomer, compassionate healer, and storm-calmer.

What should we learn from this peculiar scene?

On the surface, it's an object lesson on the power of faithful prayer ([Matt. 21:20–22](#)). But more is going on behind the scenes. The fig tree cursing, an enacted parable of sorts, is also a sober warning for us today—in at least two ways.

1. Fruitlessness leads to judgment.

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is described as God's vineyard, tree, or planting ([Judges 9:8–15](#); [Isa. 3:14](#); [5:1–7](#); [Jer. 12:10](#); [Ezek. 17:2–10](#); [19:10–14](#)). As any agrarian Israelite knew, the firstfruits of the harvest belong to God ([Ex. 23:19](#); [Neh. 10:35–37](#)), which helps conceptualize their relationship to God: as his own special planting, they must yield spiritual fruit as his covenant people ([Ps. 1:3](#); [Jer. 17:8–10](#)). Israel's fruitfulness (literal or otherwise) is not the basis of their relationship with God, for it is God who gives fruitfulness ([Deut. 7:13](#); [28:4](#)). A lack of fruitfulness is a sign of God's curse for their rebellion ([Deut. 11:17](#)).

This foundational metaphor for Israel's spiritual health vividly blooms in the prophetic era. The time had come for God's people to yield fruit that would bless the world ([Isa. 27:6](#)). Several times the prophets describe God as inspecting Israel for "early figs," as a sign of spiritual fruitfulness ([Mic. 7:1](#); [Jer. 8:13](#); [Hos. 9:10–17](#))—but he finds "no first-ripe fig that my soul desires." So in two exiles (Assyrian and Babylonian), God pours out the curse of barrenness ([Hos. 9:16](#)), and Israel becomes a rotten fig ([Jer. 29:17](#)).

But all is not lost. God promises to one day replant Israel and produce healthy figs from her again ([Joel 2:22](#); [Amos 9:14](#); [Mic. 4:4](#); [Zech. 8:12](#); [Ezek. 36:8](#)).

With this web of background images, light bulbs would've immediately gone on in the minds of Jesus's disciples as he re-enacted Israel's history by cursing the fig tree.

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The fruitless fig tree draws us back to prior points in Jesus's ministry, when God's people were called to produce spiritual fruit ([Matt. 3:8–10](#); [7:16–20](#); [13:8](#); [Luke 3:7–9](#)). Jesus has pursued the children of God with compassionate seriousness ([Luke 13:34](#)). And the Jewish crowds—gathering to celebrate God's *past* act of redemption (Passover/exodus)—have just hailed Jesus as “king” while he leads a *new* exodus on a meaning-laden donkey ([Zech. 9:9](#)).

The eschatological restoration has arrived. Everything is lining up. Israel's fruit will now be harvested; blessing will now pour forth. While the rest of the nations—the other fig trees—are not yet in season, this *one* tree is “in leaf.” And both Matthew and Mark, by “sandwiching” the fig tree episode, focus the lens on where it will all transpire: Jerusalem.

- Matthew: Jerusalem → Fig tree → Jerusalem
 - Mark: Fig tree → Jerusalem → Fig tree
- Except there's no fruit. The fig tree, once again, has failed. The Passover celebration, the tumult, the crowds, the singing—it's all a show. Jesus enters God's house of prayer and finds it a “den of robbers” ([Mark 11:17](#)). Lots of action, lots of bustle, but no righteousness. Leaves, but no fruit.

So upon inspecting the fruitless tree, Jesus pours out divine judgment via two sign-acts: the future-pointing act of cursing the temple, and the enacted metaphor of cursing the tree.

2. Think about your own figs.

But all is not lost. When the disciples ask Jesus to explain what just transpired, he pivots and talks about prayer. Why? Though they do not yet fully understand, they will be the new caretakers of God's people ([Matt. 21:33–45](#)). They will be instruments by which Israel is transformed—when the Jewish nucleus of Christ-followers extends branches worldwide and brings forth fruit from all nations (beginning in Acts). And, as Jesus teaches here, they will do this by the power of faithful prayer.

Thus the fig tree cursing is not just about historical Israel. It's about us. It's about all the people of God throughout time.

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The Old Testament expectation that God's covenant people bear fruit did not wither on that road between Bethany and Jerusalem when that poor fig tree met its expeditious fate. In fact, the mandate that God's people bear spiritual fruit has actually *intensified* in the new era, not weakened ([John 4:36](#); [15:2–16](#); [Rom. 1:13](#); [6:21](#); [Gal. 5:22](#); [Phil. 1:11](#); [4:17](#); [Heb. 12:11](#); [Jas. 3:17](#)). Not to *earn* God's gardening affection—but to yield that which he has (re)made us to do.

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Soberingly, this passage does not just remind us that a Christian by definition must produce spiritual fruit (even if only small early figs). It's also about the threat of and temptation toward false pretenses of fruit.

The fig tree, like the bustling temple courts during Passover, was putting on a good show. And that made it all the worse. It's one thing to lack fruit out of season. It's another thing to lack it while pretending you have it.

So let us be warned.

Our personal lives can look like "in leaf." Our leaves may look like those of a supermom, a winner, a perfect family, an A-team Christian with an overstuffed schedule of ministry activities. But the root may be withered. There may be no fruit of holiness and no intimacy with God. What's worse—our leaves may even fool us.

And our churches can do the same. A church's leaves may look impressive: booming attendance, capital campaigns, clever pastors, impressive music. But what will the Lord find upon close inspection? Will he find *only* leaves? Or will he find figs, too?

What is a "*rhema*"?

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Scripture for personal application

Logos—*The Word of God*

There are two primary Greek words that describe Scripture which are translated *word* in the New Testament. The first, **logos**, refers principally to the total inspired Word of God and to Jesus, Who is the living Logos.

Biblical Examples of Logos

The following passages of Scripture give examples of the *logos* of God:

- *"In the beginning was the Word [logos], and the Word [logos] was with God, and the Word [logos] was God"* (John 1:1).
- *"The seed is the word [logos] of God"* (Luke 8:11).
- *"Holding forth the word [logos] of life"* (Philippians 2:16).
- *"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word [logos] of truth"* (II Timothy 2:15).
- *"For the word [logos] of God is quick, and powerful"* (Hebrews 4:12).
- *"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word [logos] of God, which liveth and abideth forever"* (I Peter 1:23).

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Rhema—*The Spoken Word*

The second primary Greek word that describes Scripture is *rhema*, which refers to a word that is spoken and means “an utterance.” **A *rhema* is a verse or portion of Scripture that the Holy Spirit brings to our attention with application to a current situation or need for direction.**

Every word of God is inspired, and “*all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*” (II Timothy 3:16). It is the Holy Spirit Who illuminates particular Scriptures for application in a daily walk with the Lord.

The words of Jesus are significant on this point. “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word [rhema] that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus also stated, “*The words [rhema] that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life*” (John 6:63).

When God gives a *rhema* for us to act upon, He often **confirms** it by a second *rhema*, that “*in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word [rhema] be established*” (II Corinthians 13:1).

Biblical Insights Into Rhemas

The following passages of Scripture provide insight into the *rhemas* of God:

- “*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word [rhema] of God*” (Romans 10:17).
- “*And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word [rhema] of God*” (Ephesians 6:17).
- “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word [rhema]*” (Ephesians 5:25–26).
- “*If ye abide in me, and my words [rhema] abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you*” (John 15:7).

Biblical Examples of Rhemas

The following passages of Scripture give examples of the *rhemas* of God:

- When Jesus told Peter to cast the fishing nets on the other side of the boat, Peter answered, “*Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word [rhema] I will let down the net*” (Luke 5:5).
- When the angel told Mary that she would have a child, “*Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word [rhema]*” (Luke 1:38).
- Simeon recalled the promise that he would see Christ before he died: “*Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word [rhema]*” (Luke 2:29).
- God gave John the message he was to preach as a forerunner to Christ: “*The word [rhema] of God came unto John*” (Luke 3:2).
- God reminded Peter of His Word: “*Then remembered I the word [rhema] of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 11:16).
- Jesus told Peter he would deny Him. “*Peter remembered the word [rhema] of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice*” (Matthew 26:75).

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How do I get a rhema?

In the regular course of our daily reading of God's Word (*logos*), we need to **ask God to speak to us through His Word and give us insight into it**. The Holy Spirit can cause certain passages to stand out with significant meaning or application for our lives. These are the *rhemas* of Scripture and should become a part of our daily thoughts and actions.

QUESTIONS

- What is essential for fruit to grow? i.e. good soil, cultivation, attached to the trunk or vine, etc.
- In a spiritual way, how is the fruit of the Spirit grown in our lives? *i.e.* remain in Christ, walk in the Spirit, etc.
- If living like Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit in us which bears the fruit of being like Jesus, what thoughts, words and deeds would need to change to reveal that we are bearing the fruit of being like Christ?
- In what ways might we show ourselves as thriving Christ followers but really are not growing any fruit?
- Jesus spoke directly to the storm, the wind, the tree, etc. How should our speech reveal the Spirit working through us?
- The *rhema* word of God cannot go against the written *logos* word of God. How can I understand and apply Scripture in my life but also in my speech?
- How can I "engraft" God's Word into my life?

Pray that we all begin knowing the written Word, and speaking with the power of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and into other lives as well.

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