

NOTHING BUT LEAVES by Carl McMurray

I was visiting at my Dad's a few weeks ago and learned something. He was showing me his flowers and we happened to pass by the back of the deck where he has a fig tree. My mother uses the figs from this tree to make a delicious strawberry-fig preserve, but that is not what I learned. I already knew about her preserves. I learned that the fig tree is the only tree that bears fruit without blooming. It actually starts bearing fruit before the leaves come on in the spring, which is what I witnessed. It really helped me understand some of the words of Jesus.

Matthew 21:18-22 records a moment in the last week of Jesus' life that caught the disciple's attention and should likewise catch ours. It sure caught mine.

Traveling on the road into Jerusalem each day to teach, Jesus passed a lone fig tree. Now, we are to understand that this variety of fruit tree is unusual, as I mentioned above, in that it puts forth its fruit before it puts out leaves. By the time the tree is covered in leaves, the fruit is ripe and ready for picking. Verse 19 tells us, however, that when Jesus came to the tree hungry He "found nothing on it but leaves only..." It appears this fig tree was a "lying" fig tree. It gave the appearance of good health, but something was wrong. It spoke of refreshment, "Don't you see my leaves? That means I'm fruitful," when it was actually unfruitful and good for nothing.

There are valuable lessons to be learned from this deceitful tree. It appears that "leaves" are not what this particular type of tree was meant for. The little bit of shade that this fig tree gave with its leaves did not seem to offset the disappointment of the Master in finding a fruitless fruit tree. This tree was not fulfilling its intended purpose.

I wonder sometimes if we can become "lying" fig trees. We put out leaves and take the form of a "Christian." But are we fulfilling our God-intended purpose? Are we bearing fruit and refreshing men who will praise God for His gifts? That IS our purpose, you know.

We put out leaves when we obey the gospel. We take the appearance of a "Christian" fig tree when we take Christ's name and take our place in the kingdom, singing praise, giving thanks, and eating His body and blood. These are all outward things that can be seen by men. These are leaves. However, the fruit is born when love, joy, and peace

become our character traits. When our outward actions are controlled by patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, THEN we are fulfilling our intended purpose.

When we act like the above (bearing the fruit of the Spirit) then Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:12 that God will be glorified. And when God's Excellencies are proclaimed, then once more we are fulfilling our purpose as His possession according to 1 Peter 2:9.

Anyone who has ever seen a business meeting at church go awry with challenges, attacks, tempers, and obstinacy has seen "lying" fig trees. Whoever allows perverse talk, gossip, or backbiting to slip off their tongue is showing "nothing but leaves." When we are greatly concerned to be seen at worship once a week and little concerned with Bible study, prayer, or good works all week long then we need to ask ourselves seriously, "What real good am I to the Lord's purpose? Does my light only shine with other Christians? Am I going through the motions (baptism, attendance) of appearing like a fig tree without any refreshment for men or praise for God?"

Leaves and appearance was not what the Lord desired in this tree. There are far more beautiful trees than the fig tree and trees that offer far more shade than this species of tree. It also was not the purpose of the tree to "look like" a fig tree. Its purpose was to bear fruit. When it didn't, the Lord cursed it so that it died. It was only good for firewood. If we're not going to bear fruit, then I fear we also will only be good for firewood.

Let's learn the lesson of this "lying fig tree" and go for more than just the appearance of a Christian. Let's strive for the heart of Christ.