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S E R M O N XLVIII.

THE BARREN FIG-TREE.

B Y

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MARK xi. 12, 13, 14.

And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry, and seeing a fig-tree afar off, having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon, and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet: And Jesus answered and said unto it, no man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it.

FRUITFULNESS in religion, love, faith, humility and devotion towards God; purity, temperance and chastity towards ourselves; and righteousness, truth, mercy and charity towards our neighbors, are of infinite importance. Not bringing forth fruits meet for repentance, barrenness, or unprofitableness, are heinous evils indeed. They dishonor God, frustrate the design of the

bleſſed goſpel, injure ſociety, and entail certain ruin upon the immortal ſoul. This we have finely illuſtrated, and ſtrongly enforced in this hiſtory before us, of our Lord's deſtruction of the barren fig-tree.

Before we proceed to the intention of Chriſt Jeſus in this tranſaction, and the uſe which we ought to make of it, ſome obſervations may be made upon the objections which have been offered to this relation. As St. Matthew relates this ſtory, there is no difficulty attending it whatſoever. He informs us what our Lord did with reſpect to the fig-tree, without adding any circumſtances of the action. But St. Mark has occaſioned ſome perplexity, and many evil remarks from prejudiced readers, by his more particular and circumſtantial account. He has added two expreſſions, from which the enemies of Chriſtianity have endeavored to give a diſadvantageous idea of its author. To what St. Matthew ſays of this fact, St. Mark ſubjoins theſe two circumſtances ; the one, *If hap-ly he might find any thing thereon* ; and this other, *for the time of figs was not yet*.

By the *fiſt* of theſe expreſſions, it appears that the expectations of our Lord were raiſed by ſeeing a fig-tree aſar off, he hoped to relieve his hunger, ſuppoſing there might be fruit on a tree, which promiſed ſo well at a diſtance. But, *when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves*.—Here this queſtion has been reproachfully aſked, to the ſtumbling of the weak, and the diſtreſs of the ſincere, “ How can

“ this consist with the divinity and perfection of
 “ Jesus Christ, that he should be deceived or mis-
 “ taken?” But this may be easily solved. Outward
 objects made the same impression upon our Saviour
 which they did upon other men. In common life
 he acted as men ordinarily do in similar circumstan-
 ces. Therefore, the fig-tree presented to his sight
 when he was hungry, raised in him the desires and
 sensations it would have done in another. Hunger
 was a sensation our Lord felt in common with other
 men. It was a natural appetite, and to be satisfi-
 ed in the usual way. He never wrought miracles
 when there was no need of them, or no important
 end to be answered by them. Hence, we find him
 sending his disciples to buy provisions; he asks
 water to drink of a Samaritan woman, &c. Our
 Lord, notwithstanding he thought it no robbery
 to be equal with the Father, and did claim equal
 homage and worship, and was a divine person, yet
 was truly and really man; subject to all the appe-
 tites, infirmities, and imperfections proper to hu-
 man nature, sin only excepted.

In this view, we can easily explain that observa-
 tion of St. Luke, relating to our Saviour, *That he*
increased in wisdom and stature; that is, he improv-
 ed in body and mind; he grew wise—he advanced
 in knowledge and understanding, as he advanced
 in years. He acquired human knowledge as o-
 thers do in a way of observation, experience, rea-
 soning and reflection. Jesus Christ, as man, was

not born with a fund of knowledge, or with all that stock of ideas which he was ever to have.

These remarks plainly obviate the difficulty.—No imperfection can be imputed to our Lord from what is here said in this passage, only such as is the necessary consequence of human nature. Though his knowledge, as man, was not absolutely perfect, it can no more be a diminution of his character, than it can to any other person, that his science is not infinite.

I have not gone into these observations on the imperfections of the human nature in Christ, merely to solve the difficulty in this text, but to place this subject in a just and true light. A proper idea of this matter will render many apparent difficulties in scripture easy and plain. The want of attention here often leads to confusion in the minds, and discourses of some, while they seem to talk and think as if the human was swallowed up in the divine nature.

The knowledge of Christ may be considered in a threefold view; as divine, human and inspired. His divine knowledge, as God, is infinite and infallible—his human, as man, was limited, uncertain, and acquired by degrees—his inspired knowledge was also partial, and communicated to him at seasons.

In relation to the first sort Simon Peter must be understood to speak, when he ascribes all know-

ledge to Jesus, even of the secrets of the heart.—*Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee.*—Of his human knowledge St. Mark here speaks in our text. His prophetic knowledge, mentioned in many places, is plainly confirmed in the beginning of the revelation. *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him.*

Further, It is proper to be remarked, with regard to the actions of our Saviour, they were often done upon very different motives from what appeared at first to the spectators. His actions, as well as his discourses, were designed for instruction. There was often a moral in his behavior, as well as in his parables. When he girded himself with a towel and washed his disciples feet, he had more in view than merely to cleanse them. His intention was to teach them humility, condescension, kindness, love, and a train of virtues, in the most moving and sensible manner. Yet they did not take his design, till it was expressly explained to them. Thus is the case before us; he went to the fig-tree not merely to satisfy his hunger, but to instruct his disciples throughout all ages; to teach them, who were present with him, the future destiny of Jerusalem for their misimprovement of the most distinguished advantages; and all others, the danger of barrenness, and the absolute necessity of fruitfulness in the ways of God. This was not adverted to by the disciples, till our Lord explained his conduct. From hence, in this transaction, at-

tending to all the characters our Lord sustained, it is evident, he was neither deceived nor mistaken. He might have known it was barren, and have gone to it for this reason, to illustrate his purpose, and exhibit the great evil of barrenness in religion to all mankind.

The *second* difficulty imagined in the text is derived from these words, *The time of figs was not yet.* Therefore, some prejudiced readers of the New Testament, have triumphed in an objection found here to Christianity, as though it absolutely demolished the whole system. As if the total sum of evidence, in favor of the Christian religion, was really confronted and set aside by the ignorant and superficial force of a single remark. Our English translation of these words is, perhaps, not so happily expressed, but the original is plain, obvious, and easy to every candid and fair mind. *The time of gathering in the figs was not yet.* That is, they were now ripe on the trees, fit for use or to eat, but not yet carried in, or laid up in their stores. Now could there possibly be either folly or weakness in expecting to find fruit proper upon this tree, which had leaves as other fruit-bearing trees, and looked green and flourishing at a distance. We have another precisely similar phrase used by St. Matthew, which has never been objected to by any, because plainly translated. *The time of the fruit.* The fruit was ripe, the season of harvest come, therefore, the husbandman sent his servants

to receive the fruits of his vineyard; but he also was mistaken or disappointed.*

I should not have made these remarks for the removal of seeming difficulties in our text, only for the sake of some, who are extremely fond of objections against the scriptures, and desirous of improving every little thing in criticism, or in their chronology, to weaken, if not to destroy their pretensions to a divine original.

We shall now attend to the moral sense and design of our Saviour, in this action of destroying the barren fig-tree, and the improvement which we ought to make of it.

To illustrate the intention of our Lord in this action, it may be observed, that the prophets in the Old Testament, to express their prophecies and the comminations of heaven against the Jews, employed not only words, but such symbolical actions, as did in the most lively manner, paint their

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* *Kairos buchoon*, and *Kairos toon Karpoon*, Matt. xxi. 34. are phrases communicating precisely similar ideas, and with regard to time or season, the ideas are the same. Both of them signify the season of harvest, or the time of gathering in the respective fruits.

I shall only mention one authority, out of many, in support of this interpretation. It is Dr. Macknight, in his Harmony of the Four Gospels, vol. 2, page 104.—“*Kairos buchoon*, properly signifies the season of gathering figs, as *Kairos toon Karpoon*, Matt. xxi. 34. signifies the season of gathering the fruits. In construing this passage, the latter clause must be joined with the words, *he came if haply he might find any thing thereon*: for the Evangelist tells us, that the season of gathering figs was not yet come, to shew that none had been taken off the tree, and consequently having its whole produce upon it, there was nothing improper in Christ’s expecting fruit then.”

folly, their stupidity, sin and punishment. This, Jesus, who taught superior to men, and astonished them with his doctrine, imitates in this branch of his conduct. It is evident, that by the fig-tree, is intended the Jewish nation, the then church and people of God, who had long enjoyed the means of grace, and the most eminent privileges, both civil and sacred; its barrenness signifies their unfruitfulness, their ingratitude, baseness, rebellion, backsliding, and wickedness; by Christ's cursing it, is pointed out their awful doom, their extermination as a kingdom, their excision as a church, and their total ruin and dispersion through all nations. They, who were once the most favorite people of heaven, became the most contemptible people on earth. Are the savages in our wilderness, the inhabitants of Ethiopia, or the Hottentots upon the African sterile shores; are any of these so hated, so persecuted, so evil entreated, or so despised, as the barren, ejected, and dispersed Jews? Look upon the fig-tree, it withers, dies, and is no more; look upon the Jews for seventeen hundred years and more, and you are ready to say they are damned.

This horrid state of the Jews, a people favored of heaven above all nations of the earth, had been often delineated by their Messiah in the strongest images, and in striking parables of obvious application. An instance of which let us select from the twenty-first chapter of Matthew.

"A certain householder planted a vineyard, manured and hedged it, furnished it with every convenient building, every utensil, and every apparatus; in this fair and inviting situation he rented it to tenants; and when the time for receiving his income came, he sent his servants to collect it; the tenants having lived well, and by this time finding themselves rich, they supposed themselves the lords of the manor; they stood ready to dispute title; they beat one servant, killed another, stoned a third, and drove them off the land. Other servants were sent, the same treatment, and worse ensued. Lastly, he sent his son, in rational expectation that he would awe them into reverence and submission. But they were too far gone in wickedness to be reclaimed. When they beheld him, their wicked hearts exulted, saying, this is the heir, come, let us kill him and possess all. No sooner is their horrid resolve formed than executed."

Our Lord applies this stinging parable in a pointed address to the Jews. *What is proper for the Lord of the vineyard to do to those men? Their guilty consciences constrain them to answer. He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and let it out to others who will render him the fruits in their seasons. Then saith Jesus to them, this justice will God perform; the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.*

This same thing the prophet Isaiah had long before predicted, and in the most beautiful, moving, and eloquent manner represented. Attend to the picture he draws. *My well-beloved hath a vine-*

yard in a very fruitful bill; he fenced it, gathered out the stones thereof; planted it with the choicest vine; built a tower in the midst of it; and also made a wine-press therein; and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah; judge, I pray you betwixt me and my vineyard! What could have been done more for my vineyard that I have not done in it? Therefore, I will utterly destroy it and lay it waste; there shall come up briars and thorns in it; and the clouds shall rain no rain upon it. Thus the house of Israel was barren, wicked, and unprofitable, and destruction to the uttermost came upon them.

Having thus illustrated our Lord's intention in this action of blasting the barren fig-tree, it is easy to collect what instruction it affords, and what use we ought to make of it. The slightest consideration of it will serve to teach us these two lessons.

I. That where God grants eminent blessings, and affords the means of grace, he reasonably expects the fruits of holiness.

II. That unfruitfulness under the bounties of heaven, and the light and ordinances of the gospel, is a dangerous and evil condition. Our Saviour's coming to the tree to seek fruit, fully suggests the one; and his cursing it for its barrenness, the other.

In respect to the *first*, when God bestows his favors, he expects proper and suitable returns;

where he grants the means of grace, the gospel and its ordinances, he reasonably expects the fruit they are calculated to produce. How is it to be wished, that the generality of Christians were more sensible of this! If we lived more deeply under this impression, we should maintain a more lively sensation of the necessity of holiness and virtue; there would be hopes then we would make it more seriously our study and care to comply with the obligations of religion. Multitudes in the present day seem so regardless of practical piety, that it is to be feared they adjust their opinions to their conversation and conduct. They separate the branches of religion, and reduce its importance in such a manner, that their minds are quiet and easy, though their lives are exceedingly irregular. One, who is notoriously intemperate in drinking, yet he declares himself an honest man in all his dealings; this renders all peaceable and safe within. Another is addicted to profane swearing; but he thinks no harm, and is charitable, kind and benevolent, and this supports his hope. A third, covetous, griping, and unjust; yet he prays, goes constantly to church, and his seat is never empty at sacrament; his peace is joy, and his hope assurance. A fourth carries a bitter, censorious, false, flattering and backbiting tongue; but he was convinced and converted in mode and form, at such a time and place; therefore, his mountain stands strong, and his comfort cannot be shaken by little immoralities. A fifth is mean, churlish, peevish, trou-

blesome, and vexatious to his family and all around him; but he can tell an excellent story of experiences, therefore, his conscience calmly basks on the mountains of tranquility, without any painful fears or doubts. Thus deluded man poises virtues against vices, balances down immoralities with greater religion, calms the furies of his conscience, and floats down the current of perdition.

If, my brethren, we attend more to reason and revelation, and less to the false dictates and prejudices of our own corrupted hearts, we should surely be better Christians. We should be effectually convinced that God has immoveably fixed the uniform religion and obedience of his rational creatures at too high a value to dispense with any branch of them. Universal holiness and righteousness are of such infinite moment with God, that he sent his only begotten Son to suffer and die for the world, in order that men should be made holy, and reduced to the obedience of the laws of rectitude and purity. With this view he has granted the revelation of his will—his sabbaths, statutes and the means of grace. He instructs by his word—admonishes by his providence—alarms by his threatenings—allures by his promises, and deals with us by his holy spirit. Surely God has high designs in conferring rich temporal mercies, and spiritual immunities, privileges, and blessings upon his people and his church. It is that they may be fruitful, rich in good works, pure and holy in all manner of conversation.

Does the husbandman plow and sow without view to a crop? Does he dig, manure and dress his vineyard without expectation of fruit? God is often, in holy writ, compared to a husbandman; the reason is obvious, and the above queries sufficiently suggest it. Can we suppose that the majesty of heaven, who does not suffer the abuse of temporal mercies to pass unpunished, will not resent the misimprovement of spiritual and heavenly things? Did he display the light of his glorious gospel only that a rebellious and obstinate world might shut their eyes against it, and harden their hearts? Did he give his Son, his only begotten Son, that the Jews and Gentiles might first shed his blood, and the more impious and ungrateful Christians afterwards trample on it as an unholy thing? Does he bestow his spirit to move upon the heart merely to be quenched and grieved?—Surely such conduct is a contradiction of heaven, and a reception of its grace in vain.

Are there any expectations of God, in consequence of his bestowment of great and eminent blessings, improper or unreasonable? Is it not infinitely just and fit that he should expect a due improvement of the means and advantages we enjoy? That we should be grateful for his benefits? That we should love him, and render him the most chearful duty and obedience of heart and life? That we should walk by the light of his revelation, believe in Christ, submit to the gospel, renounce sin and the world, and be no longer slaves to them?

These things are the dictates of reason and scripture. Our wickedness cannot hurt God, nor our righteousness profit him; yet an holy God expects the fruits of holiness from us. How often does the blessed Saviour compare his word to seed, and his hearers to ground, which he pronounces good or bad according as it does, or does not bring forth fruit?—The gospel every where testifies that the great end of all the benefits of God the Father and God the Son to men, is, *that being made free from sin, and become the servants of God, they should have their fruit unto holiness, and, in the end, everlasting life.*

Now, my brethren, look into your hearts and lives. You enjoy all the means of grace and salvation. Are you made better by them? You have the word of God to read, and it is abundantly preached unto you. Do they make any proper impression upon your hearts, are you sanctified by them? Are you awakened to any serious concern about your souls? Do you make conscience of prayer and the duties of piety and devotion? Are you diligent in moral and relative duties? Are you peaceable neighbors, comfortable friends, good husbands, affectionate wives, faithful parents, dutiful children, kind masters, and obedient servants? Are your hearts thus established in grace, your lives shining in godliness, and your fruits the fruits of righteousness?

After all the pains of heaven, and the mercies God hath bestowed upon you—after all the love

of God—the sufferings of Christ—the strivings of the spirit—the labors of ministers, and the prayers and tears of parents, are there not many of you still under the power and dominion of sin, in the gall of bitterness, and bonds of iniquity? Remember, O sinners, your day of grace and mercy will come to an end! If you spend the residue of life, as that which is past, who can paint the horror of the ruin and destruction which will be your fate? Your meditations ought to be infinitely interested in these things. This will be readily discerned, and glare like sun-beams from a sea of glass, in the next observation; that,

II. Upon Christ's cursing the fig-tree, it was immediately blasted, and perished from the roots. From hence we infer, that barrenness or unfruitfulness, under the blessings and ordinances of the gospel, and the means of grace, is an awful and dangerous State. Hear what St. Paul says in this case; *The earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God; but that which beareth thorns and briars is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned.* Attend to the words of our Lord, the deciding and final judge of the conduct of men. *Behold, these three years, I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none; cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?* Oh! how soon may a poor careless sinner be hardened into a reprobate sense, and hurled into irretrievable woe! Soon the

day of grace may set, and rise with you no more for ever! You may exhaust eternity in excruciating groans, *That the harvest is past, and the summer is ended, and we are not saved.*

Behold, O careless sinner, the barren and fallen leaves around you! How many are drying up from the roots, and dropping into the invisible world? Some dying in a miserable—some in a doubtful state; some in the full career of their sins, and others amidst the purposes of future repentance.—Dost thou, O barren sinner, dare the justice, omnipotence and jealousy of Almighty God? Or dost thou still foolishly presume on despised grace and insulted mercy? He who spared not the angels who fell—who spared not his only son, will he spare you, O stupid Christians, who persist, in defiance of light, to despise his grace and mercy? He that spared not his chosen people, the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob his friends:—What? Shall the question drop from my lips? Will he spare and save you?—No. The blinded mind, and even the seared conscience must spurn the thought. Alas! is the indignation of heaven—the wrath, tribulation and anguish from the eternal king lost, as the passing wind, upon you? Have the torments of hell no terror? Arouse, O barren soul! open thine eyes! shake thyself! flee destruction, before thou art inwrapped in liquid sheets of endless flames!

If preaching, and the other ordinances of God, cannot effect your adamantine hearts, and bring

forth the penitential resolve, and induce you, in sincerity, to yield up your hearts to the blessed Jesus, to walk in the ways of righteousness, and to become fruitful Christians, attend the dying rooms of barren souls, closing their eyes upon all terrestrial things! Follow them in your contemplations to the land of darkness; and, in your retired moments, consider their final doom, and ask yourselves, where is it probable they are gone? See how friends and relatives bend over the departing life; they render strong groans for weak; they sigh at the intervals; they restrain their own breath to hear the departing—the long intermitted gasp returns no more! Loud laments fill the chambers—open the creaking, groaning doors—flash through the inferior apartments—burst forth in horrid peals, and follow the barren spirit down to eternal perdition!—*Now is the accepted time—now is the day of salvation*—is the last voice to gospel reprobates this side hell!

Lord, have mercy upon us! Amen.

