

Matthew: And Found Nothing

Discussion Guide for August 1 and 2, 2026

Summary

On His way back into Jerusalem, Jesus curses a fig tree that has leaves but no fruit, and it withers immediately (Matthew 21:18-22). The tree becomes a living picture of Israel and the temple: full of outward religious appearance but lacking the genuine fruit of devotion to God. When the chief priests and elders confront Jesus about His authority, He turns the question back on them by asking about John the Baptist, exposing their unwillingness to submit to truth even when it's in front of them (Matthew 21:23-27). The passage confronts us with two questions: is our faith genuine fruit or just leaves, and will we submit to Jesus' authority?

Ice Breaker

Think of a time something looked impressive or promising on the outside but turned out to be empty or hollow underneath. What did that experience teach you about the difference between appearance and substance?

Key Verses

1. Matthew 21:18-22
2. Matthew 21:23-27
3. Matthew 15:8
4. John 15:4

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus curses the fig tree not simply because it lacked fruit, but because its leaves promised fruit that wasn't there. In what ways might your life show the "leaves" of faith (appearances, habits, words) without the "fruit" of genuine devotion?
2. Dean Deppe notes that the fig tree points to the temple's coming destruction, since Israel had stopped being a true-life source pointing people to God. Where might you be relying on religious activity or appearance instead of a real relationship with God?
3. Jesus quotes Matthew 15:8, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." Where do you sense a gap between what you say about God and what's actually true in your heart?
4. John 15:4 says we cannot bear fruit unless we abide in the vine. What practices or rhythms currently help you abide in Jesus, and what tends to pull you away from Him?

5. When questioned about His authority, Jesus exposes the religious leaders' unwillingness to submit to truth, even though they knew the right answer. Where in your life do you find it hardest to acknowledge and submit to Jesus' authority?

Life Application

This week, use the Daily Examen as a rhythm for self-reflection: Invite God into your day, give thanks, reflect on where you saw Him at work, confess where you fell short, and look forward with hope. As you do, ask honestly: are there areas of "leaves without fruit" in my life, places where I look faithful, but my heart isn't truly engaged? Bring those areas to God in prayer. Also consider: what are you currently hoping for that you haven't prayed for? What are you currently worried about that you haven't prayed about? Bring both to God this week, resting not in the absence of doubt but in His character and promises.

Key Takeaways

- 1.** The cursed fig tree was a prophetic sign of judgment against Israel and the temple, a warning that outward religious appearance without genuine fruit will not stand.
- 2.** Jesus condemns the appearance of faithfulness that isn't backed by real devotion to God; honoring God with our lips means little if our hearts are far from Him.
- 3.** Genuine spiritual fruit only comes from abiding in Jesus; we cannot manufacture it on our own strength or through religious performance.
- 4.** When we pray in faith, the object of our faith is God Himself; faith isn't the absence of doubt but the means by which we overcome doubt by resting in who God is.
- 5.** Jesus holds ultimate authority, just as John's authority pointed to Jesus' greater authority, we are called to acknowledge and submit to that authority in our own lives.