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FIGS AND OLIVE BERRIES

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"Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?" James 3:12

There is only one answer to the question; of course, the fig tree can do nothing of the kind. It would be quite contrary to its nature, and hence the apostle argues that Christians ought to act according to their nature. If we are indeed the children of God, we should act as his children, and always act as his children. We are not consistent if at one time we speak as heirs of heaven should speak, and at another time speak as the heirs of wrath speak. James truly tells us that a fountain cannot at the same time pour forth sweet water and bitter, salt water and fresh; and he therefore rightly argues that from the same mouth there must not proceed blessing and cursing, there must be consistency of conduct in those who are the Lord's.

I am going, in the first place, to take the question of our text out of its literal connection; and in the second place to come closer to it; and perhaps in the third place to come closer still.

I. So, first, "can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?" No; and IT IS VERY UNDESIRABLE THAT IT SHOULD; there is no need for it to do so, and there would be no gain if it should do so. I am, of course, taking the question altogether apart from its connection. A fig tree is better employed in bearing figs than it would be in bearing olives. The olive tree is meant to bear olives, and the fig tree to bear figs, and it would not be any advantage if it were to leave off bearing figs, and begin bearing olives, or if it alternately bore figs and olives.

Now, beloved friends, all of us that are as trees of the Lord's right-hand planting are bringing forth fruit to his praise and glory. If we are carrying out his great purpose concerning us, we are producing the peaceable fruits of righteousness, the fruit of the Spirit, fruit unto holiness; but this fruit does not always take the same shape in every one of us. We cannot all do the same work; and even when our work is similar, we have various ways of doing it. I cannot do your work, my brother or sister, and you cannot do mine, and the two of us together cannot do a third person's work. There is a certain tree that produces a particular kind of fruit, and a certain plant on which a special sort of seed is found; but no tree produces

all kinds of fruit, and no plant bears all sorts of seeds. So is it in the Church of God; all true believers are members of the mystical body of Christ, but all the members have not the same office. It would be very foolish if any one member of the body were to attempt to perform the work of all the organs of the body; or, indeed, of any one beside its own. The best thing is for the eye to see, and let the ear do the hearing; for the ear to hear, and let the mouth do the speaking; for the feet to carry the body wherever the brain directs, and for the hands to perform their own special handicraft, and not to usurp the office of the organs of locomotion.

But why is it that the fig tree cannot bear olive berries, and that one Christian cannot do all kinds of work? I answer, first, *because the variety is itself charming*. If anybody had the power to destroy all the fruit trees in the world, and then to make a tree that would bear all the fruits at once, what a pity it would be! It is much better to have three trees to bear figs, olives, and grapes than to have one tree bearing figs on one bough, olives on another, and grapes on a third. It might seem a fine thing to have Christians who could do everything, men who could preach and pray and sing, who could be entrusted with great wealth and great talents, who could lead the Church and who could at the same time control the world; but that is not God's plan for any of his children. There is a beautiful variety in the Church of God; one exercises this gift, and another exercises that; one is entrusted with one form of grace, and another is entrusted with equal grace but in quite a different form. It would be no improvement if all flowers were of one colour, or if all precious stones were of equal brilliance, or if all stars gave exactly the same amount of light. Variety is a great part of beauty, and God delights to have it so.

We have here, in the next place, *a display of divine sovereignty*. It is God's will that makes yon bird that looks the sun in the face into an eagle, and that other that sits moodily on the ivy-mantled tower into an owl. It is he who makes one of his creatures into an archangel and another into an aphid crawling on a rose-leaf. None may ask him why he acts thus, for he has the right to do as he pleases; and, as Elihu said to Job, "He giveth not account of any of his matters;" or, as Paul put it to the Romans, "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" It is quite certain that there are great differences among men; in the very size and shape of our bodies, and in the natural conformation of our minds, we are not all alike; let us say what we may, there are differences of capacity which are with us from our birth, even as God intended that there should be. He is in this matter, as in everything else, both Lord and King; so what folly and sin it is for us to quarrel with him about our condition, or to attempt to arraign him before our judgment seat! If God makes some other brother to be like the fruitful tree that bears olive berries, shall I be jealous of him if my fruit is of another kind? Shall I not rather be thankful to resemble the tree that bears figs? And if we two see another brother whose fruit is like the grapes of Eshcol, shall we envy him because we cannot bring forth such welcome clusters? Oh, no! but let us all three bless the Lord for the sweetness of the figs, the fatness of the olives, and the lusciousness of the grapes that he enables us severally to produce to his praise and glory.

Further, *these diversities of gifts should excite in us humility*. What if the olive does bear its rich purple berries? It cannot bear sweet figs; and sweet as the figs

are, they cannot supply the oil which gives a relish to the peasant's bread, feeds the lamp which lights his cottage in the evening hours, and furnishes the medicine which heals him when he is sick or wounded. When the Lord entrusts thee with talents, my brother, thou art naturally inclined to be proud; but when thou hearest of another whom the Lord has honoured far more, do not quarrel either with the Lord or with thy brother, but rejoice that there is someone whose Master thinks he may be trusted to a very high degree, and remember that the responsibilities of thine own position are quite sufficient for thee. I am often amazed at the stupidity of certain Christians. They will not do what they can do, and they want to do what they cannot do. They are not satisfied with walking, so they take up David's cry, "Oh that I had wings like a dove!" The Lord knew that they would not make a proper use of wings, so he did not give them any. No doubt they think, if they had wings, they would fly away, and be at rest; but I question whether they would be able to rest if they flew away from their right place and the work God has committed to their charge. Many a man is a first-rate Sunday-school teacher; but that does not satisfy his ambition, he must be a preacher. When he gets into the pulpit, the only part of his discourse that is appreciated by his hearers is the end of it; yet he says that he must preach. Many a good worker has been spoilt through imbibing the notion that he must do something for which God has not fitted him. This is a humbling truth, that we cannot do some things which others can do well, just as the fig tree cannot bear olive berries though the olive tree growing close beside it is laden with the precious oily berries.

This fact ought also *to promote in us brotherly admiration*. It is one of the most beautiful exhibitions of a Christian spirit when a Christian man admires the gifts and graces of others more than he admires his own; when, instead of thinking of anything in which he excels others, he delights in those things in which they excel him. We ought to emulate the spirit of that noble Roman who, when he was beaten at an election, said he was glad that his country had so many better men than himself. It is not always easy to feel, "I am happy in knowing of a brother who is so much more brilliant than I am, for the world sadly needs far more light than I can give." It is not always easy to play the least important instrument in the band, and to rejoice that somebody else can beat the big drum, or blow the silver cornet; yet that ought to be our feeling. You remember how prettily Bunyan speaks of Christiana and Mercy admiring each other after they had been in the bath: "They could not see that glory each one on herself which they could see in each other. Now, therefore, they began to esteem each other better than themselves. 'For you are fairer than I am,' said one; 'and you are more comely than I am,' said another." So should Christians see and admire the work of the Spirit in other Christians, and should bless God that there are such gracious men and women in the world; while those who are thus admired should, in their turn, see greater excellence in others than they see in themselves.

And once more, *this variety of gifts and graces helps to foster fellowship*. I often feel, when I am conversing with some of the poorest and feeblest members of this church, that I am greatly profited by what they say to me. They usually speak very kindly concerning the comfort they receive from my preaching, and any advice I am able to give them when they come to see me; but I am certain that I derive benefit from them. It is impossible for two Christian men or women, who are in a right state of heart, to converse with one another about the things of God

without both of them being thereby spiritually enriched. As different countries have different products, and one nation sends its produce to supply the needs of another nation, and thus, by mutual exchange, commerce is created and each nation's wealth increased, so is it in spiritual things. You with your olive berries, and this brother with his figs, and that other brother with his clusters of grapes will interchange your various fruits, and all of you will benefit by the transaction. It is a great blessing for a bold and confident believer to have a talk with a trembling, desponding Christian, and the poor timid soul will be strengthened by coming into contact with the more fully- established saint. The man who has a very sweet disposition is apt to develop a sugariness which is most nauseating, so it will do him good to meet with a Christian who is very straightforward and outspoken; while *that* brother, by associating with the more gentle spirit, may be kept from becoming too rough and coarse. I need not multiply instances of this helpful fellowship beyond just reminding you of how often, in God's mercy, a Christian husband and wife are the counterpart and complement of one another, so that what is lacking in one of them is supplied by the other, and *vice versa*; and thus they both become the better, the holier, the happier, and the more useful in the service of their Lord.

II. Now, in the second place, I am going to take the text more nearly in the way in which it was used by the apostle. "Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?" No; IT WOULD BE ALTOGETHER CONTRARY TO ITS NATURE.

It would be a monstrosity, a thing to be wondered at and stared at as unnatural and absurd if a fig tree started bearing olive berries; and *it is just as unnatural for a Christian to live in sin*. Can he so live as to bear the fruits of iniquity instead of the fruits of righteousness? God forbid that it should be so! If the fig tree should ever bring forth olive berries, we might have good reason to question whether it was a fig tree, for a tree is known by its fruits; so, when one who professes to be a Christian lives as worldlings live, there is grave reason to fear that he is a worldling notwithstanding his profession. If we are to know him by his fruits, which is our Lord's infallible test, how can we imagine that he is a partaker of the divine life when he acts as he does? Inconsistency of life casts a very serious doubt upon many who call themselves the children of God. No wonder they are themselves often the subjects of doubts and fears, as they *ought* to be; for, if they judge themselves by their fruits, they may well question whether they have ever been born again. Those who are new creatures in Christ Jesus seek to live as he lived so far as it is possible for them to do so.

Besides, if a man for a while brings forth the fruits of righteousness, and then bears the fruits of iniquity, *he casts a slur upon all his former goodness*. Suppose I saw a fig tree bearing olive berries, and its owner assured me that it bore figs last year, I should say, "Well, I should not think the figs were worth much to judge from the look of those olives." So, when a man is in a passion, and makes use of very strong language, perhaps even cursing and swearing as Peter did, one naturally asks, "Can that man ever have been a Christian?" "Well," says someone who knows him, "he used to speak very kindly and lovingly, and seemed to be a sincere Christian." That may have been the case with him, but it is a poor sort of Christianity that can even occasionally produce such iniquity. May God save all of us from bearing two kinds of fruit in this unnatural and dishonouring fashion! Suppose the whole Church of God should act thus, and at one time be eminent

for holiness and at another time be notorious for sin, what would be the consequence? Suppose, for instance, that certain people were very particular about their attendance at public worship, and yet were known to frequent the theater, would it not be a strange state of things? Should we judge them to be Christians or worldlings? If a man is sometimes a sinner and sometimes a saint, we should need to have an almanac to tell us which he was likely to be, or a tide-table to let us know whether, like the tides of the sea, he was ebbing or flowing. Think, too, what the consequences would be to such a man if he were to die, or if the Lord were to come just when he was bearing the fruits of unrighteousness. I am only imagining a monstrous case, such a case as must not be ours. O my dear friends, let it never be so with you; if God be God, serve him and follow him; or if the devil be God, serve him; but to try to serve God and the devil at the same time is to attempt a compromise that God abhors, and which even Satan is not mean enough to approve. Even his disciples laugh to scorn those inconsistent professors who seek to serve God and mammon, and to walk at the same time in the narrow way that leadeth unto life and in the broad road that leads to destruction. The other day, I saw a man trying to walk on both sides of the street at once; of course, he was drunk; and whenever I see a man trying, spiritually, to do the same sort of thing, attempting to serve God and to serve the devil too, I know that he is intoxicated, or infatuated, under a fatal delusion, or he would never imagine that such a combination could be possible. Oil and water will not mix, nor light and darkness, nor saintliness and worldliness; you must have one or the other, you cannot have both at once; so "choose ye this day whom ye will serve," Christ or Belial; you cannot serve both, for "no servant can serve two masters." The true Church of Christ is "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners;" but an inconsistent church, a double-dealing church, a worldly church, (what an anomaly!) a church that holds with the hare and runs with the hounds, a church that makes a great profession but has little or nothing worth having in possession, such a church is the scorn of the world, a mere blown-up football for men and devils to kick wherever they will. An unholy man or woman, who pretends to be a Christian, is a stench in the nostrils of the thrice-holy God, and a by-word and reproach among those who make no pretence of being the Lord's. How can you rebuke sin in others while you are living in it yourself? How can you preach the Christ whom you dishonour in your daily life? How can you reprove worldliness when you are yourself worldly? We speak with contempt of Satan rebuking sin, and of the pot calling the kettle black; so, if in any degree any of us have been guilty of this great crime against God, may we now sincerely repent of our sin, and may the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit preserve us from such evil walking for all time to come!

III. Now, thirdly, and this is the point upon which I want most strongly to insist, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR A FIG TREE TO BEAR OLIVE BERRIES, and it is impossible for an unconverted man to produce the fruits of righteousness, that is a task which is altogether beyond his power. The real text of this last division of my sermon is this,

"YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN."

Unless you are regenerated, born from above by a new and heavenly birth, you are not Christians, whatever you may be called, and you cannot produce the fruit which is acceptable to God any more than a fig tree can produce olive berries.

Let us suppose that we are in the South of France, and that we are standing by a fine fig tree. We want to make it bring forth olives, and we will, for the sake of my argument, imagine that it is quite willing to do so; how shall we go to work?

Well, first, *let us label the fig tree* "OLIVE." Get a label, write the word "olive" on it, and hang it on the fig tree. We have done that, entered its name on the list of olive trees, and when the next olive season comes round, we will bring our basket, and gather the olives. At the appointed time, we do come, but what do we find? I cannot see an olive on the tree; there are fig leaves, and figs, but nothing else. Ah! but we *called* it an olive; yes, but calling it an olive did not change its nature, for it is a fig tree still; and calling a person a child of God will never make that person really to be a child of God. I remember reading of someone being taught to speak of "my baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven;" and if I recollect rightly, that expression is often used by those who do not show any sign of having been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and adopted into the family of God. It is just a case of hanging a label on them; their nature remains the same as it was when they were born, and by nature they are children of wrath. Persons are said to be Christians because "they were born in a Christian country." I have often heard and read that England is a Christian country, but I have never seen any evidence of the truth of that statement, though there are some Christians in England, as there are some in India, China, Africa, and other countries which no one regards as Christian. Yet according to some people, all Englishmen are Christians, though some of them never enter a place of worship, and others are drunk every night in the week, and many do not even believe in the existence of God. To call a horse an angel will not make him an angel, and to call a man a Christian will not make him a Christian. You may label, and enroll, and number the unsaved as much as you like, but you will not make even one of them a Christian by that process any more than putting the name "olive" on a fig tree will change its nature, and make it produce olive berries.

As re-naming the fig tree is no use, *let us try to trim it into the shape of an olive tree*. That will not be an easy task, for the two trees bear very slight resemblance to one another; still, we will see what we can do with axe, and knife, and shears, to make the fig tree look like an olive. When we come again, at the proper season, to gather the olive berries, how many shall we find? Not one, though we search diligently from the trunk to the topmost bough. If we have not ruined the tree by our cutting and shaping, we may find figs on it, but we shall gather no olives there. So we may be very careful in trying to shape our children's lives and characters, we may teach them to be truthful, honest, upright, amiable, heroic, and so on, and we may succeed so far that some of them may even look like young Christians; but if the grace of God has not made them to be new creatures in Christ Jesus, all our training, and trimming, and shaping, and directing will leave them unsaved, and we shall search them in vain to find in them "the fruit of the Spirit." There is far more needed than anything *we* can do; there must be a deeper, more enduring work than making them look and act like Christians, there must be a divine work in the heart, a complete change of nature which can only be wrought by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit.

In our next attempt to get olives from the fig tree, *we will treat the fig tree as if it*

were an olive tree. When at Mentone, I have often noticed the men in the olive gardens digging a trench all round the trees, and filling it with old rags; and, somehow, the trees seem to draw suitable nutriment out of that strange sort of manure. Very well then, let us treat our fig tree in the same fashion, and dig about it, and dung it with all the old rags we can find. We do so, and wait patiently for the result; and then discover that we have wasted all those precious bales of rags which might have made the olive trees bring forth an abundant crop, for there is not a berry on the fig tree, and probably even fewer figs than it would have produced if we had given it the nourishment suited to its nature. So you may take your young people, and treat them as if they were Christians, and do all that you can to nourish the divine life that has not yet entered their souls; but all your efforts will be in vain, for you cannot give them new natures, you cannot make the children of Adam into the children of God. You will do far more lasting good by entreating the Lord to accomplish the great work of grace which is altogether beyond your power, and by teaching each unsaved one, old or young, to pray David's prayer, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

Here is our fig tree without a single olive berry on it; now *let us surround it with olive trees*, and see what a change that will make in it. The tree is very lonely where it is, so we will see what helpful associations will do for it. It will be another difficult task for us, but we will not shirk it, for we are determined to transplant it right into the middle of an olive garden; and we will tie it up to a fruitful olive tree, and then, when it has no other trees near it, surely it must bear olives. But will it? Oh, no! when the time of figs arrives, it will bear figs unless we have destroyed its fruit-bearing power by disturbing it; but there will be no olives on it except those that fall among its branches when the tree by its side is beaten to yield up its thousands of purple, oily berries. So, here is an unconverted man right in the midst of Christian people. He is not very comfortable, for he feels that he is out of his element; he would be much more at home in a public-house or at a music-hall, or at home reading a novel or the newspaper; yet here he is, surrounded by Christians. Possibly, like the fig tree tied to an olive tree, the man is united to a godly wife, yet that is not enough to make him a Christian. He has a gracious, loving daughter; she has persuaded him to come with her to-night in the hope that he may get a blessing here, as I most sincerely hope he may. But, my dear friend, let me tell you that it is not sufficient for you to have a Christian wife, or Christian children, or Christian parents; unless there is a work of grace within your own heart, unless your very nature is changed by the Holy Spirit, so that you are made a new creature in Christ Jesus, all these hallowed relationships and associations will only increase your condemnation. I must repeat to you Paul's message to the Philippian jailor, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and *thou shalt be saved;*" and very likely then it will be possible to add in your case as in his, "and thy house." God grant that it may be so!

Now suppose we *take that fig tree to the top of a hill, like the Mount of Olives, and plant it there;* it is a fig tree still, and it brings forth nothing but figs. Ay, and if the Lord were to take an unconverted man up to heaven, just as he is, he would remain unconverted even there. Unless and until he was born again, the mere change of place, even from earth to heaven, would not make him acceptable to God. He would be like that man without the wedding garment; and the King would say to his servants, "Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast

him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Perhaps someone asks, "But, sir, what is it to be born again?" Well, it is not a mere outward change of life; it is not simply a giving up of certain sins, and a desire to possess certain virtues. It is as great a work as if you were to be annihilated, to pass absolutely out of existence, and God were to make a new man in your place. Everyone who is in Christ Jesus is a new creation; old things have passed away, and all things have become new.

"But can such a change as that be wrought?" asks an anxious enquirer; "it would be a glorious thing for me if it could be wrought in me." Yes, my friend, it can be done by the almighty Spirit; and if you are ever to be found in the presence of God in glory, this change *must* be wrought in you. I am speaking to some of you who have been very moral and admirable from your youth up, yet you have never experienced a saving change of heart, so to you I must repeat those solemn words of the Lord Jesus, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

"Well," says some self-satisfied person, "I feel quite good enough already." Ah! that is the very strongest possible proof that you are not good enough. Do you remember the people, in our Lord's lifetime on earth, who thought they were good enough, and do you recollect what Jesus said concerning their righteousness? "I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven;" and that is what he says to you who think you are good enough. The man who has been born again confesses with sorrow and shame that he has no goodness of his own, and he ascribes all that is good in him to the almighty grace of God alone. With Toplady, he sings,

"Because thy sovereign love
Was bent the worst to save;
Jesus who reigns enthroned above,
The free salvation gave."

"Ah!" says another friend, "but if that is true, it makes my case so hopeless." That is just what I want you to feel, so that you may look right away from yourself, and look alone unto Jesus. You cannot regenerate yourself any more than that which is not in existence can create itself. It must be a work that is accomplished by omnipotence, and therefore no power less than that which is divine can accomplish it. So you are obliged to own your absolute dependence upon the grace of God. If he leaves you to yourself, you will be most certainly lost; and he is not bound by anything but the love of his own heart to interpose to rescue you. Therefore if, in his infinite sovereignty, as King of mercy and of grace, he deigns to smile upon you, and to create you anew in Christ Jesus, you will have reason to praise and bless him for ever and ever, will you not? That is the point to which I want to bring you, so that you will admit that, if you are ever saved, it will be all of God's grace and all God's work from first to last.

"Oh, that I had this new birth!" cries one. That very wish, if it be the sincere desire and prayer of your heart may be the first evidence that you have already been born again, even as the Lord's testimony concerning Saul of Tarsus,

"Behold, he prayeth," proved that he had already uttered the first cry of a newborn child of God. Remember that text which the Lord blessed to my conversion so many years ago, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else;" and do as I did then, look and live. Look this very instant, by faith, to Jesus hanging on the cross of Calvary, for

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One;
There is life at this moment for thee:
Then look, sinner, look unto him, and be saved,
Unto him who was nailed to the tree."

If thou wilt do this, that faith-look of thine will be the evidence that this new life is already pulsating within thee; and as this life is everlasting life, thou hast received that life which neither devils nor men can ever take away from thee. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life;" and no man ever truly believed on Jesus, and yet remained unregenerate. Faith in Christ is one of the first signs and tokens of the new life within the soul. If I find on thee even one olive berry, I know that it has the oil of grace within it; and that is proof positive that thou art one of the good olive trees in the garden of the Lord. If I found figs on thee, I should know that thou wast a fig tree; but if I find only one little olive berry, I know that the hidden life that can produce one berry can produce bushels of the same sort, and even larger and richer ones, to the praise and glory of the great Owner of the olive garden in which thou hast been planted by his own right hand. The little feeble faith that thou hast already exercised is the gift of God; and, under the gracious nurture of his ever-blessed Spirit, it will grow until thou art, like Abraham, "strong in faith, giving glory to God." May the Lord enable thee to have done with thyself, and to have begun with himself! The end of the creature is the beginning of the Creator. When you own that you cannot save yourself, and trust him to save you, he will do it. Cast yourself upon him this very moment, and then, by an act of almighty grace, the fig tree shall be changed into a fruitful olive tree, and your fruit shall be unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.

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