

Rev. Dr. Dustin Daniels | River Bible Church
Matthew 21:18-22 | The Fate of Fruitless Trees
Sunday August 3, 2025

WELCOME:

- Bibles in the back—our gift to you.
- My sermon notes are in the foyer—please take them home with you.

REVIEW:

It's been a few weeks since we've looked at Matthew's Gospel, so let's review:

In Matthew 21:1-11, we looked at *Jesus' Desination and Destiny*.

The Triumphal entry sets the stage for the last week of Jesus' life.

But chapter 21 also reveals Jesus doing some things that seem out of character.

In verses 12 and 13, we saw the first event that was uncharacteristic of Jesus.

The event was fueled by his anger—righteous, holy anger. : *Anger not like ours - Divine*

The event itself was the cleansing/purifying of the Temple.

The Temple represents the holiness of a Holy God.

And the reason Jesus cleansed the Temple was because God was not being worshiped, honored, and revered.

The Temple was being used as something common rather than uncommon, worldly rather than spiritual—a combination of a shopping mall and a barn.

Jesus as the Son of God will not put up with that—and neither should we. *today.*

In verses 14-17, we saw the importance of a Simple Church.

KEYPOINT:

When the Temple is cleansed, the real work of the Gospel is done.

Once, Jesus took authority over the Temple and kicked out all the religious businessmen who worshiped money.

Once Jesus overpowered the religious politicians who worship authority, influence and control— then prayers can be prayed, Psalms can be sung, and God's word can be taught.

We are to be a simple church because everything changes when the church allows the world in.

A simple church only has three primary functions—a simple church exists to:

1. Worship God together.
2. Teach God's Word.
3. Make Disciples.

We are called to be separated and set apart from the world.

But when the church looks like the world, talks like the world, and ultimately acts just like the world— then we are no longer a simple church, but rather a civic organization working with human means producing a human product.

It all comes down to who we worship.

KEYPOINT:

When our worship is wrong—everything is wrong.

When we think Jesus is our buddy, instead of the King of kings and the Lord of lords—everything is wrong.

When we think that the church is a tool for social reform or political power—everything is wrong.

Our worship is wrong when we view the church as a

1. Church Hotel instead of a Church Home.
2. Point of Transaction instead of a Place of Transformation.
3. Personal Ambition instead of Spiritual Growth.
4. Worldly Commodity instead of a Godly Community
5. Temporarily Happy instead of Eternally Holy

And everything was wrong in the Temple when Jesus cleansed it.

Don't miss the fact that Jesus judged the worship in the Temple.

INTRODUCTION:

Which brings us to today's passage, because Jesus is not done.

Today, we come to a passage that has caused much confusion for the Church.

But it's caused more angst for the world—especially for all the green folks—
Radical environmentalists.

Our friends who are trying to save “Mother Earth.”

They do not like this passage.

It's commonly called The Cursing of the Fig Tree. *Barra Fig Tree*

Let's find out why they don't like it, but more importantly, how it applies.

- 1) To your personal walk with the Lord today.
- 2) For the community of your church.

Please stand for the reading and honoring of God's Word.

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 21:18—Early in the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry.

Matthew 21:19—Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, he went up to it and found nothing on it except leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" At once, the fig tree withered.

Matthew 21:20—When the disciples saw it, they were amazed and said, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?"

Matthew 21:21—Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you tell this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done.

Matthew 21:22—And if you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

These are the holy words from the authoritative, inerrant, inspired, infallible, sufficient, and efficacious Word of Almighty God.

PRAY:

How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers! Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)

EXEGESIS:

Matthew 21:18—Early in the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry.

First things first...

Matthew gives an abridged version of this ~~account~~ *Event*.

Mark, on the other hand, gives a chronological account.

Mark makes it clear that this episode happened in two stages, over two days (Mark 11:12, 14, 20–24).

Matthew condenses the two days into one account.

There are no contradictions, as Matthew and Mark are writing to different audiences with different themes.

Matthew 21:18— *he was hungry.*

Jesus is staying with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in a little village called Bethany.

Bethany is only a few miles from Jerusalem.

Knowing Mary's personality from other passages (high-strung, worried, and type A), it seems inevitable that she would have prepared breakfast for Jesus. *Controlling*

However, I'm guessing that Jesus skipped breakfast and left the house early that morning to pray.

One of Jesus' favourite places to pray was the Mount of Olives—and it was nearby.

Regardless, Jesus is now hungry.

Matthew 21:19—Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, he went up to it and found nothing on it except leaves.

Later in the morning, Jesus and the Twelve are walking to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Jesus is hungry and sees a fig tree. *in the distance.*

Scripture has much to say about ^{Fruit} figs, trees, and vines.

In fact, the first fruit tree mentioned in Scripture is in the Garden of Eden.

Genesis 2:16— And the Lord God commanded the man, ^{Adam} "You are free to eat from any tree of the garden,

Genesis 2:17— but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die."

We have God's instructions in the form of a command—we also have God's consequence in the form of judgment.

Genesis 3:1— Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden'?"

Genesis 3:2—The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden.

Genesis 3:3—But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, 'You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.' "

Genesis 3:4—"No! You will certainly not die," the serpent said to the woman.

Genesis 3:5—"In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Genesis 3:6—The woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Someone could make a good case that this forbidden tree was a fig tree...

Genesis 3:7—Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Adam & Eve

They grabbed the closest thing that was available to them and covered their shame.

From this moment on, the Lord uses figs, other fruit and trees as analogies and illustrations of spiritual life.

In the Old Testament, figs get a lot of press.

Practically speaking, fig trees were common in Israel.

Fig trees are big—growing twenty-five feet tall.

Because of their abundance, figs were also a staple of the Hebrew diet.

Examples of how figs and fruit trees are used throughout Scripture.

Provide a few.

As the Lord was bringing Israel out of slavery and into the Promised Land.

Deutonomy 8:7—For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams, springs, and deep water sources, flowing in both valleys and hills;

Deutonomy 8:8—a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey;

The Lord uses figs as symbols of romance in the Song of Songs:

Song of Songs 2:13—The fig tree ripens its figs; the blossoming vines give off their fragrance. Arise, my darling. Come away, my beautiful one.



There's a reason Jewish men were not allowed to read the sacred book of the SOS until they turned 30 years old!

Figs and vines are also symbols of Israel.

Hosea 9:10—I discovered Israel like grapes in the wilderness. I saw your ancestors like the first fruit of the fig tree in its first season.

Just as the presence of the fig tree was a symbol of blessing and prosperity, its absence would become a symbol of judgment.

Psalms 105:33—He struck their vines and fig trees and shattered the trees of their territory.

Jeremiah 8:11—They (false teachers) have treated the brokenness of my dear people superficially, claiming, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace.

Jeremiah 8:12—Were they ashamed when they acted so detestably? They weren't at all ashamed. They can no longer feel humiliation. Therefore, they will fall among the fallen. When I punish them, they will collapse," says the Lord.

Jeremiah 8:13—"I will gather them and bring them to an end." This is the Lord's declaration. "There will be no grapes on the vine, no figs on the fig tree, and even the leaf will wither. Whatever I have given them will be lost to them."

Micah 7:1—How sad for me! For I am like one who—when the summer fruit has been gathered after the gleaning of the grape harvest—finds no grape cluster to eat, no early fig, which I crave.

That's a summary of the O.T.

In the NT, John the Baptizer told the Pharisees.

Matthew 3:10—The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Also
Fig trees were used for shade and rest.

We see this when Jesus called Nathanael to discipleship,

John 1:47—Then Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

John 1:48—"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you," Jesus answered.

Jesus used the fig trees in parables.

*↳ prayer, worshipping,
studying the word.*

Luke 13:6—"A man had a fig tree that was planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none."

Luke 13:7—He told the vineyard worker, "Listen, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it even waste the soil?"

Luke 13:8—"But he replied to him, 'Sir, leave it this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it.'

Luke 13:9—Perhaps it will produce fruit next year, but if not, you can cut it down.' "

Using another illustration involving fruit,

John 15:5—I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.

KEYPOINT1:

~~No~~ figs and fruit are crucial illustrations of our spiritual lives.

Back...
Matthew 21:19—Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, he went up to it and found nothing on it except leaves.

There are dozens of different varieties of fig trees in Israel.

Fig trees normally bear fruit twice a year, the first time in early summer.

Passover is in April, and in early spring, a fig tree would not usually have either fruit or leaves, because, as Mark states, "*it was not the season for figs*" (Mark 11:13).

However, if the tree produced leaves early, it should have produced fruit early.

Typically, a fig tree produces fruit before it sprouts leaves.

However, this particular tree was deceptive—it only had the appearance of fruit.

With all its green leaves, there should have been fruit.

There should have been something. But, there was nothing!

This fruit tree, which had the signs of fruit, was found to be fruitless.

The tree looked alive but was dead.

What good is a fruitless fruit tree?

What good is your phone that can't make calls?

What good is your car that doesn't start?

What good is anything that doesn't do what it was created to do?

Matthew 21:19— And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!"

This statement is where the world gets angry at Jesus because Jesus curses the tree to judgment.

Is Jesus acting like a spoiled child who's not getting his way?

No, Jesus has already proven that he could go without food for more than a month.

Jesus went without food for forty days in the wilderness—He could have turned stones into bread, but didn't (Matt. 4:3).

We also know that Jesus could have produced fruit from the tree if he wanted.

Remember how He multiplied the loaves and fish with the feeding of the 5,000 Jews and 4,000 Gentiles? (Matt. 14:19)

So what's going on? Why would Jesus seem to make such a rash/impetuous decision to curse and kill an innocent fig tree?

Jesus doesn't curse the fig tree for personal reasons—but spiritual reasons.

Jesus' actions are symbolic.

From a distance, this tree falsely advertised fruit—it had leaves.

Just as from a distance, the Temple falsely advertised true worship.

So let's keep this narrative in its correct context.

We have studied two symbolic actions so far.

1. The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem by which the Lord presented himself as Israel's true King,

2. The cleansing of the Temple, by which the Lord presents Himself as Israel's High Priest.

Now, we find a third symbolic act, the cursing of the fig tree, by which Jesus presents Himself as a Prophet.

Jesus is Prophet, High Priest, and King! Just as the OT Scriptures proclaim!

So at this moment, Jesus is acting within His role as a Prophet.

think about this:

Compared to the other prophets, Elijah and Elisha, cursing a fig tree is tame.

Remember when Elijah kept calling down fire from Heaven and roasting people?!
(1 Kings 18:25, 2 Kings 1:10)

Remember when little boys were making fun of Elisha? He curses the children, and then two bears come and eat the children! (2 Kings 2:24)

When you look at the Old Testament prophets and see the severe judgment—Jesus cursing a fruitless fig tree should pose no problem for us.

So let's address the question, why?

Three reasons why Jesus cursed this tree:

1. The tree represents Israel. Israel had outward signs of life (leaves) but was spiritually dead and bearing bad fruit. *false Teaching*
2. The tree represented centuries of unrepentance. Judgment is now unavoidable.

God's mercy and grace do come with a deadline!

3. This event foreshadows the destruction of the Jewish sacrificial system.

Those are reasons for this curse and judgment—a curse equals death—look what happens next.

Matthew 21:19—At once the fig tree withered.

Withered—Greek verb is *xērainō* (say-ren-o).

The picture is this—Jesus commanded this tree to be dried up from the roots.

The tree withered—it was completely free of liquid and moisture.

Pause:

Question:

When Jesus was looking up and down this tree for a fig, do you think He would have cursed it if it had produced one little fig?

We've already learn that...

Matthew 12:20—He will not break a bruised reed, and he will not put out a smoldering wick,

that's what the world does — breaks people — smother people.

KEYPOINT 2:

Jesus did not curse that tree because it did not have enough figs—He cursed it because it bore no figs.

"All hat and no cattle"—It pretended to be something it wasn't.

Matthew 21:20—When the disciples saw it, they were amazed and said, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?"

This question is quite telling—they knew *why* it withered because they watched Jesus curse it.

But they didn't know *how* it could wither so fast.

The Disciples' response implies the question, *Can we do that too?*

Matthew 21:21—Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you tell this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done.

Jesus' answer to the Disciple's questions doesn't seem to make any sense.

"How did the tree wither?" (Matthew 21:20)

Jesus says— *Have faith, don't doubt, and talk to a mountain.*

Let's be careful with how we interpret and apply this verse to our lives—especially when we don't understand it at first.

Because if we get it wrong—and we start naming it and claiming it, we'll be disappointed, frustrated, and even angry at God.

At first glance, it seems that Jesus shifted the subject from judgment on Jerusalem to the power of prayer.

Matthew 21:21—Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith...

Faith in Who? Faith in What?

Mark's Gospel tells us.

Mark 11:21—Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."

Mark 11:22—Jesus replied to them, "Have faith in God."

Throughout the rest of the NT, we'll see how God is the subject of our faith.

Examples:

Acts 20:21—I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.

Romans 3:22—The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ...

Galatians 2:20—I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.

Ephesians 3:12—In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him.

Philippians 3:9—not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—

Colossians 1:4—for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...

The world says that all you need is faith.

It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere.

The Greek term: *bull-lone-eye-ee*.

As Christians, our faith is in Christ—*In Christ alone through faith alone.*

Matthew 21:21—Jesus answered them, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt,

Doubt is a plague w/in the human condition.

Doubting, wavering, and hesitating are all signs of where God is building our faith—none of us has arrived.

Thomas is the poster boy for doubting—*Doubting Thomas.*

John 20:25—So the other disciples were telling him, “We’ve seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “If I don’t see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

Isn’t it tragic how one mistake can label you for the rest of your life?

But here’s the good news—the Lord Jesus forgave and redeemed Thomas (John 20:28).

The Lord will also forgive and redeem the worst mistakes of your life through confession, repentance, and faith in Christ alone.

Matthew 21:21—you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you tell this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done.

We’ve all seen the shirts and bumper stickers that say, “Faith can move mountains.”

Can it? Can faith move a literal mountain?

Jesus has said this before:

Matthew 17:20— "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will tell this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

What's the problem with that?

Nowhere in Scripture does faith move a literal mountain.

Why?

Jesus isn't speaking literally—he's speaking metaphorically.

He doesn't need to explain the metaphor because the Disciples know what he means.

Today: *Pushing a boulder uphill/Heavy lifting/clearing the runway.*

The metaphor Jesus is referring to is "rooter up of mountains."

Great rabbis were called "rooters up of mountains" because they could solve significant problems and seemingly do the impossible.

That is the idea Jesus had in mind.

KEYPOINT 3:

Jesus did not say "faith moves mountains."

What does he say?

Matthew 21:21— but even if you tell this mountain,

The phrase "this mountain" is an important distinction.

In the Bible, a mountain is often a symbol of political power and pride.

Most capital cities were on mountains, since they are typically easier to defend; Jerusalem and Samaria were both on mountains.

Here's what's happening in real time.

As Jesus traveled from Bethany to Jerusalem, he saw two mountains: the Mount of Olives and, more importantly, Mount Zion, which is where the Temple is located.

This is the same Temple that Jesus just cleansed and judged.

The Temple that teaches false doctrine and provides no hope to the nation, because its fruit is rancid.

You can't eat the fruit that the Temple produces—it will make you sick!

Have you eaten a bad piece of fruit? Or did you get food poisoning?

It's because of this bad fruit that Mount Zion needs to be moved—not physically, but spiritually.

And the Temple was, spiritually speaking, thrown into the sea 40 years later when God allowed the Romans to destroy it along with its false worship and sacrificial system.

Matthew 21:22—And if you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

Today, we hear things like, "I choose to believe that..."—As if they themselves have the inherent power to make something supernatural come to pass.

Jesus was not speaking about faith in faith or faith in ourselves.

We are commanded to have faith in Christ.

Prayer is not magic—it's the means to a relationship with the God of the Universe!

We are not to use the Lord's name as a magic incantation demanding that things happen through prayer.

We have no power, and that's why it's a demonic lie to "believe something into existence."

Matthew's Gospel teaches that prayer has very little to do with the one who is praying—and everything to do with the God to whom we are praying. (8:10; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; 17:20).

What Jesus taught about prayer here must be understood in light of everything else He taught about prayer.

He was not saying that if we ask anything, believing in His name, it will happen.

KEYPOINT 4:

People with true faith in Christ who pray according to God's will see great things happen.

↳ not ours

Here's why—true faith is trusting in the revelation of God's Word.

God's power for us today ^{is} in through God's Word.

Mountain-moving faith is activated through our confession of sin, our repentance, and turning away from our sin by turning to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith.

God wants us to ask and keep asking, to seek and keep seeking, to knock and keep knocking. (Matt. 7:7).

In other words, don't stop praying — "Pray w/o ceasing."

Jesus encourages us to pray often, well, and Biblically.

One last question— *why did Jesus respond this way to the Disciple's question?*

The disciples asked, "*How did the fig tree wither so quickly?*"

Jesus responds, "*Have faith, don't doubt, believe and pray.*"

On the surface, it seems to make no sense, and it's almost like it's a separate answer to a different question.

Context is king. What's the bigger picture?

Jesus has now taught three symbolic actions:

1. The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem by which the Lord presented himself as Israel's true King,

2. The cleansing of the Temple, by which the Lord presents Himself as Israel's High Priest

3. The cursing of the fig tree, by which Jesus presents Himself as Prophet.

Jesus is King, High Priest, and the Prophet.

Jesus not only fulfills all those roles but is the object and subject of our worship.

When Jesus cleansed the Temple, he said,

Matthew 21:13—He said to them, "It is written, my house will be called a house of prayer,

He's telling the Disciples, don't worry about the "how"—move your focus to the "who."

And the "who" is Jesus—Prophet, High Priest, and King.

how the fig tree withered

APPLICATION:

As I close today, I'd like us to consider:

KEYPOINT 1:

Figs and fruit are crucial illustrations of our spiritual lives.

Look at spiritual fruit from two perspectives:

1. Corporately as a church (Body of Christ: If there is bad fruit in the body, the entire body suffers.)
2. Personally.

Start with the church:

The Lord Jesus told Peter to *"feed His sheep"* (John 21:17)

The church is commanded to feed its members with healthy food—ripe fruit.

The church does that through the worship of music, reading, exposition, the application of God's Word, along with celebrating the ordinances.

When the church doesn't do that—when it only serves cheap fast food—fruit that may taste good for a moment but doesn't last—the church will starve.

Personally—

How do we know if we're bearing spiritual fruit?

How do we know if our lives bear sweet fruit?

How do we know if we're bearing tart, sour, or bitter fruit?

Galatians 5:22—But the fruit of the Spirit (supernatural qualities) is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

Galatians 5:23—gentleness, and self-control.

Unfortunately, many times, rather than looking inward and examining ourselves to see whether or not we are fruit bearers...

It's easier for us to look outward and critique others, becoming a fruit inspector.

My encouragement to you this week is to take this spiritual fruit test that the Lord gives us in Galatians 5:22/23.

~~Ask the Lord~~: Have your Bible open and your pen ready and pray. *ASK Him*

Am I more loving than I was last year/last month?

Am I willing to always and ever put the needs of others before my own?

Do I love my enemies? Do I pray for them?

Joy—

Do I have great pleasure...regardless of my current circumstances?

Or are my emotions dictated by how I feel?

Do I wear my emotions on my sleeve?

Peace—

Am I free from worry? Or still a slave to it?

Do I have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ?

Do I have harmony with most of my relationships?

Have I done everything that I can with those relationships that are not peaceful?

Patience—

Is my life in Christ characteristic of long suffering?

Is there a sense of Holy Spirit endurance in my life?

Or do I have a short fuse— still acting like that old unregenerate fool that I used to be? ☺

Kindness—

Scripture doesn't say "nice", the Lord says "kind."

Am I a kind person? Am I warmhearted and considerate to others?

Or am I a bull in a china closet? Always talking and never listening to others?

Goodness—

Is my faith growing? Can people see me changing?

Can people see the moral excellence in Christ working itself out in me?

Or am I stagnating and stuck? Is my faith dry?—Repent!

Faithfulness—

Am I a trustworthy person?

Reliable and dependable...doing the things I say I'm going to do?

Or am I a faithless person? All talk...all leaves...looking good from a distance?

Gentleness—

Is my behavior mild and even-tempered?

Or am I living life that resembles a roller coaster—not able to handle the reality and the depravity of life's circumstances?

Self Control—

Am I able to control my sinful desires?

Or do I allow them to control me?

There should be a spiritual war going on in my life when it comes to these divine qualities.

~~If you haven't met these standards, don't worry—neither have the rest of us!~~

Do you know how wine is made?

First, the grapes need to be harvested—Timing is key!

Next, those grapes need to be crushed and pressed immediately.

Lastly comes the aging process—where the sugar converts to alcohol.

The better the wine—the longer the aging process.

So it is with our walk with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord is sovereign, and his timing is perfect.

He has chosen to forgive you, and this life is all about turning you into the person He has created you to be.

He is sanctifying you at this moment.

Whether it's through health trials, financial trials, relationships...maybe all of them at the same time.

And it's through this pressing and crushing—where you experience fruitfulness.

PRAYER

BENEDICTION

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. (Col. 3:15)

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