

Verses 19-20 prohibit the armies of Israel from cutting down food bearing trees when besieging a city. Such trees were highly prized in the near East. Edible fruits harvested from trees included olives, dates, pomegranates, figs, almonds, and pistachios.

Sparing the fruit trees was in contrast to the Lord's frequent instructions to destroy all the livestock of a conquered city, as King Saul fails to do after conquering Amelek in 1 Samuel 15. The distinction may be the time it takes to restore a grove of trees compared to a herd of animals. The Lord avoids a multi-generational curse upon the fruits of creation that He has promised to mankind. In Judges 9, the wicked king Abimelech sows salt on the fallen city of Shechem in violation of this principle. The contaminated soil

would leave Shechem uninhabited for almost two centuries (1 Kings 12:25).

John the Baptist echoes these verses when he says, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." He is warning the people of Israel of the imminent arrival of the King who will bring judgment on the world. Later Jesus will make a fig tree wither for not bearing fruit.

Note here that all trees who do not yield fruit may be cut down and their wood fashioned into siegeworks for the armies of Israel. Those who do not bear fruit may still serve the Lord's purposes but will receive none of His blessings.

Questions:

1. What is the main lesson for Israelite armies about to face battle?
2. Who is excused from fighting? Are there any instances in Scripture where this happens?
3. What might be the reason for taking the field with less than a full army?

4. Does this rule apply to all campaigns?

5. Who is to be offered terms of peace rather than destruction?

6. What clan in Canaan will take advantage of the command to spare people who live at a distance from Israel? (See Joshua 9.)

7. How is the Lord's mercy shown in this passage?