

## The Real Jesus, The One About the Cursed Fig Tree, Mark 11:12-27, 10/30/22

Brain Teaser- What does a withering fig tree, overturned tables and a mountain thrown into the sea all have in common? Well, they all show up in our passage today and they are all symbolic of the power of Jesus to overthrow religion and our hearts. We've been walking verse-by-verse, story-by-story through the Gospel of Mark and have seen the real Jesus. Not the Jesus created in our world or the one that we create in our minds, but the real one according to the Bible. Well Jesus is as real as it gets in this story today, we will see a side of Jesus we haven't yet seen, and it may make us uncomfortable. But uncomfortable is good if it leads us to be challenged to see him accurately and be confronted to do something with this Jesus.

***12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.***

Context: We are Monday morning of Passion Week. On Friday night Jesus would be betrayed and crucified on a Roman cross outside of the city. Just the day before Jesus came to Jerusalem on a colt, what is called Palm Sunday traditionally. Jesus did all of this in fulfillment of OT prophecy that the Messiah would come as a king to his people. Well, then why didn't he just take the throne? Because before Jesus could reign, he first had to come as the suffering servant in fulfillment of Isaiah, to deal with sin that keeps us from a holy God. So Jesus has unfinished business and he is intensely preparing himself in just a few days to suffer and die, taking on the sins of humanity. Jesus was in Jerusalem, headed from Bethany where he would stay overnight, coming over the Mount of Olives, down into the Kidron Valley and back into the temple where he was the day before. All of this works up an appetite.

***13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs.***

***14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.*** Does this story make anyone uncomfortable? If you aren't a little uncomfortable you aren't paying attention. It should. On the surface, it would seem like Jesus is irritable and hangry. It seems like an abuse of his power. And on top of that, it makes him seem like he doesn't really know much about fig trees. Not a good look for the son of God? One commentator- "It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill temper (for the supernatural energy employed to blast the unfortunate tree might have been more usefully expended in forcing a crop of figs out of season); and as it stands it is simply incredible."<sup>1</sup> What is going on here?

**[Blank Slide]** Middle Eastern fig trees at the time of Jesus bore two kinds of fruit. In the Fall, the figs would be ripe and ready to eat. When we go to the Holy Land in October there are figs on the ground everywhere. But in the Spring, at the time Jesus was here, the leaves were starting to come in, and little nodules would grow which were abundant and very good to eat. Travelers like to pick them off and eat them as they made their journey. If you found a fig tree of this type in full leaf but it had none of these nodules, you would know that something was wrong,

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<sup>1</sup> T.W. Manson, "The Cleansing of the Temple"

diseased or dying, no signs of this fruit means that the figs were in trouble too. Jesus looked from a distance and it appeared to be fruitful, but upon closer inspection, it was a façade. Jesus was hungry for fruit from a tree that looked good from the outside, but was end up being fruitless. And so Jesus curses the unproductive fig tree, which we find out down in verse 20-21, within the day it was withered down to its roots. OK, still a weird way to use power, right? But, Jesus does nothing without intention. He never missed a moment to teach his disciples and us. What is the lesson? Hold that thought.

*<sup>5</sup> On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there.*

*He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves,*

*<sup>16</sup> and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. <sup>17</sup> And as he taught them, he said,*

*“Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”*

Again, does this make anyone uncomfortable? Does it again seem that Jesus is irritable...and still hangry! I mean, he’s flipping tables, making accusations, the other gospels say Jesus made a whip and he’s snapping it at these people to drive them out of the temple courts. This does not seem like the meek and mild, peace and love, kumbaya Jesus, does it? Come to me all who are weary...Jesus, first put down the whip. What is going on here?

The area that Jesus entered was called the court of the ethnos...nations, or gentiles [Show Picture of Temple]. This was the section of the outer court that non-ethnic Jews could enter. This court was intended for gentile seekers of God, and converts and came to worship Him. This is why Jesus quotes from Isaiah 53.

*v.3 Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.” And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.”*

*<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;*

*for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”*

This was the intention of God for the temple- to be a city on a hill to the nations so that the world would see the blessing, grace, truth of God and gather to worship him. But instead of worship and prayer in the court of the nations, the Jewish leaders had turned the court of the nations into a money-making enterprise, a cash cow at the expense of the gentiles. They took the currency exchange tables and the place to purchase animals for sacrifice which was originally outside the temple, and they brought it into the court. Historian Josephus tells us that the week of Passover there were 255,000 animals bought and sacrificed...can you imagine how

crowded, noisy, chaotic and smelly it would have been in there? But if that wasn't bad enough they were extorting the gentiles. They were charge up to 25% cost to exchange money, up to 5x inflation to purchase sacrificial animals. "The court of the Gentiles should have been a place for praying, but it was instead a place for preying and paying."<sup>2</sup>

To all this, Jesus quotes Jeremiah 7. <sup>11</sup> "Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching!" declares the Lord. Just like the leaders of Israel in Jeremiah's day, the leaders of Israel had become corrupt and self-deceived. They claimed to have security in their outward worship and religion. They were doing sacrifices, reading Scripture, gathering together, observing the laws on paper...but they were inwardly they were greedy, callous, racist and cold. Outside they looked good, but there was no true fruit of worship to God. Jesus was hungry for true worship that looked good from the outside but instead he only found hollow religion. And just as Jesus cursed the fig tree so that it withered from the inside, Jesus cursed the religious leaders and their systems and purged them from the inside.

What is Jesus trying to teach the disciples and us today? Two Lessons about worship for us today- one theological, one personal.

**Theological Lesson- Jesus came to end the old, corrupt way to worship God (ushering in the new way).** As we can see from the fig tree and the purging of the temple- this isn't reform. There is a tectonic shift taking place in this narrative that is not obvious at first glance but becomes clear when we look at the trajectory of this story through to the cross, resurrection. What we see in this narrative is the beginning of the end of the old way to worship through the Old Covenant temple system along with its endless sacrifices. The same way the cursing of the fig tree was the beginning of the end of the tree, the purging of the temple was the beginning of the end of the temple system. In less than a week the temple system with all its endless sacrifices and segregations would be rendered obsolete by the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and the veil of the temple is torn into town from top to bottom. And a new system began at his resurrection. It's no wonder then, that just 40 years later the temple would be utterly destroyed by the Romans, and there hasn't been a temple in Jerusalem since that day. So where does worship take place? Remember in John 4 when Jesus said to the outside Samaritan woman at the well that there would come a day when worship will no longer take place in this mountain or on Jerusalem's mountain? I think we get a clue of this when Jesus delivers a lesson at the end of this section. <sup>22</sup> "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. <sup>23</sup> "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,'

**and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.** Clearly this is a metaphor, but a metaphor for what? Jesus is standing in the shadows of the temple mount as he's talking about how they can throw the mountain into the sea. I believe he is telling his disciples the same thing he said to the woman at the well. Whenever someone turns to Jesus in faith, the mountain of their religious system (in this case the temple) is thrown

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<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, [\*The Bible Exposition Commentary\*](#), vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 151.

into the sea...it's rendered obsolete. We don't need to come with our sacrifices, with our religious effort, our good works. Through faith in Jesus we remove mountains and we can worship God in spirit and truth wherever we are. What a joy it is!

**Personal Lesson: Jesus is seeking hearts of worship.**

Just as Jesus was hungry for fruit and found none, and hungry for true worshippers in the temple and found none, Jesus is hungry for true worshippers in his church today, is he finding them? We love outward appearance. And we are easily fooled by it. We see a well-dressed, well-behaved family come in the door. We greet each other, God bless you brother, lots of smiles and amens, singing, oh that was a great sermon pastor...we give our money. But these things tell us nothing of true worship. They are leaves, not fruit. They are outward temple walls, not inward worship. We can get busy like the temple court in the church. Committees, tasks, events, services, groups...but it can be all transactional, not transformational. **1 Samuel 16:7** *People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*

Behind the appearances, God sees 5 Hearts that enter for worship.

**#1 The "I'm going through the motions" heart.** Callous, obligatory because that's what we've always done, or because someone dragged us here. Thinking about what we are going to eat for lunch, hoping we end on time, looking forward to the Eagles game. Not penetrating us, we remain unmoved.

**#2 The "I love to be seen" heart.** Approval and affirmation heart. We want to look good in front of other people and impress them and have them tell us how great we are, we might serve, sing, lots of activity, but it is really about us.

**#3 The "What's in it for me?" heart.** Consumer heart. We are here to get something from people, from the services, activities and events. We want to feel good, get entertained, get social networking, get away from our kids, or maybe more sinister- we want to get control, or pity, or money and resources out of people.

**#4 The "You Owe Me God" heart-** The religious heart. We believe by coming regularly, giving money, serving that we are somehow earning God's favor, we are making salvation deposits and therefore God owes us. Where Jesus says, "You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me." (Matthew 15:8)

**#5 The "I want more of God and his people" heart-** This is the heart that is humble and seeking and hungry for more of God, for an encounter with Him, to know him and be changed by Him, it's the heart that is here to love God and love others. They are here because they cared so much about you that they came to serve you. This is the heart that has truly been converted by the power of the gospel. This is the fruitful heart, only this heart can produce true transformation in someone's life. Not just behavior modification. This is the heart Jesus is hungry for.

Evaluate, where is your heart? Why are you here? Now if we are honest, every one of us has some level of divided hearts and motives. Me too...I have had all five of these hearts, but a life that has been truly transformed by the gospel, will look like this heart at the core.

At the end of this episode in the temple, Mark cues us to something ominous. <sup>18</sup> *The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.* It is this event that is the final straw for the religious leaders and it puts in motion the betrayal, arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus in a few short days. Now, they may have been dead wrong about Jesus but the reaction makes perfect sense and I want each of us to consider this. *You can't just say about Jesus "What an interesting guy!" You'll have to kill him or you'll have to crown him.* -Tim Keller. That's what the Real Jesus series is all about. There is a reason they wanted him dead. You don't go through all this trouble to kill a nice guy or a good teacher or man of peace.

Jesus came to overthrow your religion- if you think you can get to heaven by being good, or going to church, or saving the planet, or pursuing issues of justice.

Jesus came to overthrow your heart- to purge whatever else was in there. Whatever we have made king. I want that throne.