

Mark: Upset Over a Tree

Mark 11:12-24

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(Previous message on Mark 11:1-11 not transcribed)

Turn with me now, if you would, to the Gospel of Mark once again. We began last Wednesday...we began in Mark 11, and we were looking together at the triumphal entry as Jesus and His disciples come from the region of Bethphage and Bethany to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus gave instructions for a colt to be brought to Him, and we saw something of the significance of Jesus' riding in this almost comical fashion on a colt, on a donkey, into Jerusalem.

Well, as we shall see, Jesus and the disciples each evening, it seems, go back to Bethany. Bethany is the place where Mary and Martha and Lazarus, whom He has just raised from the dead, live. It was His home from home; it was the place He resided when He came down to Jerusalem, and it seems to be there that He spends the evenings in the last week of His life. We pick up the reading tonight in Mark 11, at verse 12, and we'll be reading through to the end of verse 25. And let's hear now the word of God. Before we do, let's pray.

Our Father, again we bow in Your presence. We are always in need of the instruction of Your word. We are by nature like lost and erring sheep, and we need the direction and comfort of the Scriptures to guide us, to rebuke us, to instruct us, to furnish us with a knowledge of Your will and of Your purpose for us. Now bless us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And He began to teach and say to them, 'Is it not written, 'My

house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a robbers' den.' The chief priests and the scribes heard this and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.

When evening came, they would go out of the city.

As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, 'Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.' And Jesus answered saying to them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.' [And then, verse 26, which isn't in all of your copies and translations of the Scriptures — one of the disputable texts] — But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.

Amen, and may God add His blessing now to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Well, this story which begins with the cursing of the fig tree has been the source of some fairly critical assessments of Jesus. Now, the twentieth century philosopher, Bertrand Russell, said, "I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some people known to me in history." T. W. Manson, the famous critic of the New Testament, speaks of this story as "a story of miraculous power wasted in the interest of ill temper." A. M. Hunter, another New Testament scholar of note — liberal, to boot! — speaks of this passage as "frankly incredible." William Barclay, author of the famous series of commentaries on the New Testament ...the story, he says, just doesn't ring true. Another says about the story that it is "irrational and revolting." (Obviously a tree hugger!) And even J. B. Phillips, whom I usually like and respect, speaks of Jesus' "venting His feeling of frustration and despair upon the fig tree." Oh, my! What are we going to do with this story? All of this over a tree...!

It looks as though Jesus is coming back now from Bethany on the Monday morning, and having ridden into Jerusalem on a Sunday, gone back to Bethany. Now, overtaken with pangs of hunger — Bethany is only a couple of miles away (of course they're on foot, remember), it's a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem, and Jesus is hungry and sees the fig tree. We don't know what size of a tree. Fig trees can grow to a pretty large size, at least 10, 12, maybe 15 feet.

It's Passover time, remember, so that makes it late March, early April, and the

tree is full of leaves and at least the expectation is that perhaps there might be some early figs. Now, figs don't come into season until late August-September — that's when you would pick figs — but figs begin to grow in that bulbous form of theirs over winter, and at least by May some kind of edible fruit...it's not quite the fig and sweet, sometimes a little juicy, especially if it's picked fresh — but by at least mid-May or late May there would be something there that would be edible. This is not May. This is late March and early April, and in all likelihood (despite some commentators who want to try and say that there could possibly have been figs on this tree) there probably never was any possibility of figs on this tree.

Jesus is perhaps at best creating now an expectation and interest on the part of the disciples in order that this tree be utilized as a parable, and for the life of me, I don't understand why people get bent out of shape for using a tree as a parable. If the tree had feelings, I'm sure the tree would be honored to be used as a parable in the interest of the kingdom of God! But what is going on here? What is this story all about?

I want us to look at it along three lines of thought, and let's take it along the journey itself, the journey into Jerusalem, the visit to the temple mount, and then the journey back the next day.

I. The journey to Jerusalem.

In the first place, then, along the road from Bethany. Bethany, as I have just suggested, is about two miles or so from Jerusalem, and Jesus is hungry. Creating now this expectation or anticipation in the eyes and ears of His disciples of perhaps something edible in this tree, and using it now as an object lesson, because here is a tree that's full of leaves, at least purporting and looking to all intents and purposes as though it might contain fruit, but in actual reality it does not; and seeing this fig tree as the perfect symbol now for Israel, for Jerusalem, for the Jews — full of leaves and purporting to be in possession of so much, in reality to be devoid of fruit.

Together with the olive and the vine, the fig tree is employed in the Old Testament over and over again by some of the great prophets: Isaiah, Hosea...all of them use the fig tree as symbolic, as depicting the nation of Israel. And just as Israel is called a vine, she's also referred to as a fig tree. It was a fig tree in the Garden of Eden, not an apple tree as we often think. But it was fig leaves that they employed, and quite possibly the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that Adam and Eve were prohibited to eat from was quite possibly a fig tree.

Israel is just like this fig tree, sprouting leaves but bearing no fruit; no fruit unto repentance. It is the promise of something without the consequent practice of something. It is to say one thing and do another.

I'm reminded of the story that Billy Graham told, and it has been repeated, I'm sure, many times. When Billy Graham is on board an airplane and there's a man (it was in the days before September 11, I'm sure) — but a man was behaving badly, because in all likelihood he was drunk. And the flight attendant (or the stewardess, as she would then have been called) saying to the man in no uncertain terms to sit down. And as he sits down, he catches a glimpse of the person who's sitting behind him, namely Dr. Graham. And saying to Dr. Graham as he puts out his hand to shake Graham's hand, saying to him that he had changed his life ten years ago! Of saying a great deal, but in actual practice failing to bring forth the fruit that is necessary. This is an acted parable of what Jesus now thinks of Israel, of the lack of fruit that would be evident in the city of Jerusalem in this very week. It's a prelude to what Jesus will actually do in the temple precincts itself. It is something that is going to be cursed. Within days Jerusalem will call for Jesus' crucifixion. They're waiting for Messiah, but when Messiah comes they reject Him.

Oh, there's a lesson for us, too, I'm sure. It's one thing to call ourselves Christians, and it's one thing to bear the name of Jesus Christ, but it's another thing altogether to reveal and disclose those consequent fruits that Jesus looks for in our lives.

II. Travel to the Temple.

Well, in the second place (and of which this story is just the prelude), we follow now Jesus and the disciples as they move from the Mount of Olives region and down into the valley below, and up Mount Zion and into the very precincts of the temple.

This is the third temple. There was Solomon's temple, you remember; and then there came the temple that was built in the time of Haggai and others, the so-called Zerubbabel temple which existed for around 500 years and was, in the period just before Jesus was born, in a state of some disrepair. And Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C., began this monumental building project of constructing the temple like as if it had never been done before, on gigantic architectural design.

Now, the size and dimensions of Herod's temple are impressive indeed. The temple was of course made up of four quite distinct parts. The outer part was the Court of the Gentiles, and it measured around 500 by 325 yards (that's 35 acres; it was an enormous piece of ground), and then surrounded by columns that were 35 feet high. And according to Josephus, it would take three men holding their hands together in order to encircle each of those columns.

Standing freely within this court were three other divisions of the temple: the Court of Women; and the Court of Israel into which only circumcised Jews could

go; and then of course the Holy of Holies itself, where only the high priest could go, and that only once a year and that with all of the ceremonial and cultic ritual that we've been looking at in part in the Book of Leviticus of late. And in this large expanse of 35 acres, throngs of people would gather.

This is Passover. If Josephus is to be believed—and he's not always to be believed; he has a tendency to exaggerate—but if he is to be believed, there could be somewhere in the region of two million people and more, upwards, coming now into the city of Jerusalem. Every male of twenty years and older was required to pay the price, the shekel price, for Passover.

They would have to bring the ceremonial sacrificial lambs for the slaughter. Josephus says that in A.D. 66, over 255,000 lambs were sacrificed at Passover. There's a graphic, a blood-curdling description, as you can imagine the smell of 255,000 slaughtered lambs and the rivers of blood that went down from the temple precincts, down into the Kidron Valley below, requiring some enormously complicated design work to get all of that away from the people and from the city.

Much easier, of course, to bring money to the outer courts of the temple and buy the lamb on the spot than to carry this lamb...for the diaspora Jews who would come hundreds of miles away taking several days, sometimes several weeks in order to get there. Much easier, much more convenient...the American Express version of Passover: You come into the Court of the Gentiles and swipe your card and get your lamb, and no problems here about the lamb having lost an ear along the way and therefore not being suitable for sacrifice. You can imagine what took place: price gouging. You know all about it!

These merchants could charge whatever they wanted, because there was religious obligation on the purchase of these lambs. They could charge double or triple the going rate for a lamb, because they had no alternative now. They couldn't go back home, finding out that the price...I mean, when you're at the baseball game and you want a hotdog it's too late then to say let's go home and bring one here. You've got to pay that \$10 for something that you could cook yourself for 50 cents! Well, that's what's taking place here, and it's taking place on a gigantic scale.

And then there's the shekel money, the half-shekel that had to be paid for every male from thirty years and upwards. Cressius, for example, says that when Jerusalem was ransacked in the middle of the first century, he took with him the equivalent in today's currency from the temple ten million dollars. That's a lot of money. There was a lot of money being exchanged.

Now, the reason of course why the money was being exchanged was that the half-shekel had to be paid in a certain currency. You couldn't use Roman currency. You couldn't use Roman currency because it bore the image of the emperor and was inherently idolatrous, so you had to use the Tyrian coinage.

Well, for the merchants this was manna from heaven, because there was a rate of exchange! Not only could they price-gouge the price of the lamb, but they could also charge exorbitant rates to exchange the Roman coinage for the Tyrian coinage. There's buying and selling and merchandising on a scale that is beyond even our imagination here; the noise, the bustle, was deafening.

And Jesus now overturns the tables and drives them out. It's not clear whether this was on a fairly small scale in one corner of the Court of the Gentiles, which perhaps it was. I think the Roman soldiers would have probably got involved had it been on a larger scale than that, but the Court of the Gentiles was meant to be a house of prayer for all the nations. [He's quoting here...Mark is quoting there from Isaiah 56:7.]

That was the purpose of the outer court of the temple. It was to be a house of prayer for the Gentiles, for those who are seeking the true faith; that they could come at least to the outer courts of the temple and there to engage in the solemnity and the reverence and the sense of the presence of God, and to bow their knees and to engage in prayer to the heavenly Father. And instead it's a mall; it's worse than that, it's a marketplace for commerce and making money, and price gouging has taken over. And the temple is desecrated, and the holiness...the holiness of Jesus takes over, that the Lamb of Passover who is Jesus becomes now the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

There's a place somewhere in one of C.S. Lewis' books, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, where the Lamb changes at one point into the Lion, and that's almost what's taking place here as Jesus drives out these money changers, because the temple precincts and the worship of God has become a Barnum and Bailey Circus.

And, my friends, I need not tell you that in the church of Jesus Christ as you survey what is happening in our own time in the early twenty-first century, that there is much of what we see here in the Court of the Gentiles true of the modern church also, where the church has lost its sense of worship and dignity and reverence, and the sense of the presence of God, and of place being given to the word of God, to prayer; and instead, it's about commercialization, and it's about entertainment, and it's about noise, cacophony; and it's about man and pleasing man, and finding the inner strength that lies within ourselves, and all about externals and no heart involvement. And it seems to me that there's something here of which, if Jesus were to come into the modern church in our time, that He'd come with a whip of cords and drive out the entertainers and remove the soft plush seating and remind us afresh of what the purpose of worship really is: the bowing in the presence of the majesty and the glory of God.

It's one of the great blessings, and it is an enormous blessing, this prayer meeting. It's like an oasis in the midst of a desert, and in all of my travels to come

back and witness something that is always the same and never seems to change...and long may it continue for the glory of God, that we might seek God's face.

And do you see what Jesus is saying here, at least in part? That the Court of the Gentiles was meant to be a house of prayer for the nations—for the nations—and there is a sense in which the Gentiles are being prevented by the merchandising activity here from coming and beholding and sensing the presence of God. And you know what Paul says in I Corinthians 14? That there's a sense in which, when an unbeliever comes into your midst, he says, and he's talking in the context of speaking about tongues and prophecy and other things, but one of the things that is true about worship is that an unbeliever should come into the midst of the people worshipping God and say, "God is in this place. God is in this place." And these Gentiles were being prevented in doing that.

III. The return

Well, then, in the third place—on the road now, they leave again in verse 19. When evening comes they leave and they go out of the city, and then in the morning (in verse 20) they're coming back again along the road, Jesus and the disciples, and they pass by this poor benighted tree again and this tree now is described as withered away to its roots. [Just an interesting side remark here on verse 21: It's Peter who speaks. And remember here the tradition that the Gospel of Mark is actually Peter's gospel, and Mark is actually recording here Peter's words, because Peter by tradition is almost dictating much of the material of the Gospel of Mark to John Mark.] And Peter remembered and said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that You cursed has withered." (And all those New Testament critics are crying all around the base of it!)

Well, what is it here? Because there's something deeply, deeply significant here. This isn't a casual remark. Jesus didn't do this as a piece of spite, or pique, or a temper tantrum. Jesus was teaching a very profound lesson here, and what is that?

Do you remember back in verse 16 we read, "He would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple"? It's sometimes thought that the temple precincts had become a sort of thorough-way, like a thoroughfare, a shortcut from the inner part of the city to the Mount of Olives, and they would cross through the Court of the Gentiles on their way, perhaps, out of the city and home to the Mount of Olives, and they'd be carrying their shopping bags with them as they went. And that may be true, but perhaps that's not quite what Mark is intending us to see here. But, rather, what He's doing is He's actually preventing the sacrifices from taking place, because, in driving out the money changers and overturning the tables, the whole ritual of Passover cannot take place for some of these worshipers.

And it's as though Jesus is pronouncing now a curse, or at least pronouncing the beginning of the end for the very temple and its sacrifices; as though this is some kind of enacted parable for what actually will become true: that the days of the temple and the days of the sacrifices of lambs and of blood that is slain on these altars (of which we sang in a rendition of a hymn by Isaac Watts at the beginning of our prayer meeting this evening)...that those days are numbered because the true Israel has come, the true sacrifice is here, the Lamb of God is here to be slain.

You remember how, in John's earlier account...and there may well have been two cleansings of the temple, and John has a similar account of a cleansing of the temple back in the second chapter of John's Gospel, at a much earlier period in Jesus' ministry...and do you remember He spoke then of "destroying this temple", and in three days building it again? They never forgot that. Even at His trial that was brought up against Him again: that He was an insurrectionist, that His mission was to destroy the temple and the cultures and the nation of Israel. And in a sense, He had come to do just that, to bring to its fulfillment and its culmination all of that which Passover and the sacrifices and the ritual of temple worship had always been pointing to, namely, Himself as the Lamb of God who is slain on behalf of the sins of God's people.

And here He is by this fig tree that is now withered from its very roots, as though this fig tree representing Israel is saying, 'Israel's days are finished, and the true Israel is to emerge: the Israel which is Christ's, and the Israel which is Christ's people, Jew and Gentile, who have faith in Jesus Christ, the Israel of God.' And it seems as though Jesus is saying that true religion is approaching God through faith in Jesus Christ. That's why He seems to say in verse 22 now, "Have faith in God." There are some surprising things that are going to happen in the days that are just about to transpire. You will see some astonishing things. You will see Jesus being nailed to a tree and killed and buried, and raised again. Have faith in God, He's saying to the disciples.

And now, as though two examples of the kind of fruit is evidently missing in the courts of the temple, He says to His disciples there are two things that should emerge from you as a consequence of faith in God, faith in Me.

One is prayer...one is prayer. And He talks about prayer with great faith, of mountains being taken up and thrown and cast into the sea — believing prayer. Not that Jesus is saying here the "name it and claim it" kind of prayer; not "believe that God is going to give you a Mercedes Benz and He will give you a Mercedes Benz." Not that kind. Look at verse 23. You are to believe that what He says will come to pass! Yes, what He says will come to pass, and what does He say? That which is promised in His word. Yes, prayer according to the will of God. Believe that; believe that every promise that God has actually made will come true.

And the second thing that He says is a forgiving heart: a willingness to forgive others that otherwise will be an impediment to your prayers. That's the kind of fruit He wants us to bring and to bear. Why is Jesus saying that here? Because if you retain a stubborn, bitter heart, an unwillingness to forgive others no matter what they've done to you, then you're just as phony as those who are in the Court of the Gentiles in the temple in Jerusalem. You're no better than them. That's why.

Well, may God bless this word to our hearts. Let's pray together.

Father, we are once again thankful and grateful to You for Your word, and especially tonight again for the revelation of Jesus as the fulfillment of all of that which Scripture speaks. We thank You for the gift of faith, and we pray tonight that You would fill us with faith in believing all that You have promised to us. Make us men and women of prayer. We want people to think about us here in First Presbyterian Church as men and women who love a place of prayer, who love to pray. And we pray, O Lord, give us the grace of forgiveness and remove from us the impediment of a bitter heart. And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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