

Introduction: Casing the Temple (v11)

11 And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple.

*And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late,
he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

1. Cursing the Fig Tree (v12-14)

12 On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.

*13 And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf,
he went to see if he could find anything on it.
When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves,
for it was not the season for figs.*

So let's get this clear:

it is not the season for figs.

In other words, no one in their right mind would expect to find figs on the fig tree.

But Jesus, knowing that it is not the season for figs,

responds to the barrenness of the fig tree by cursing it.

This has caused considerable consternation –

why does Jesus curse a tree that could not *possibly* have borne fruit?

Some have tried to argue that a tree that was fully in leaf might have had some early fruit

(although most people agree that the “green” fig is not especially palatable!)

But Mark will not let us think that Jesus hoped to find fruit.

It was not the season for figs.

Jesus' frustration is horticulturally unreasonable!

So why does Jesus curse the fig tree?

The fig tree is referred to more than 60 times in the scriptures.

In Solomon's day the symbol of prosperity

is that everyone sat under his vine and fig tree (1 Kings 4:25),

and when Sennacherib of Assyria invades,

he promises that if Jerusalem submits,

everyone will sit under his own vine and fig tree (18:31).

(In other words, Sennacherib's emissary, the Rabshakeh,

understands Israel's history – and speaks the language of God's covenant blessing).

Jeremiah speaks of the enemies of God's people devouring their vines and fig trees

so that there is nothing left for the harvest (Jer 5:17; 8:13).

Hosea explicitly connects the fig tree with Israel:

“Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel.
Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers.
But they came to Baal-peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame,
and became detestable like the thing they loved.” (Hosea 9:10)

Likewise Jeremiah 24 distinguishes between “good figs,”
the exiles whom God will bring back,
and bad figs (“so bad that they could not be eaten”)
the faithless remnant that remained in the land during the exile.

Habakkuk 3:17 describes the barrenness of exile
in terms of the barrenness of the fig tree.
“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,”
Likewise, Haggai 2:19 says that the barrenness of the fig tree, the pomegranate
and the olive tree are pictures of the exile.

And for that matter, Micah speaks of the restoration of the kingdom
as the restoration of the Solomonic picture of peace:
“they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.” (Micah 4:4)

And Zechariah 3:10 uses the same language,
that when the LORD restores Israel:
“In that day, declares the Lord of hosts,
every one of you will invite his neighbor
to come under his vine and under his fig tree.”

(And it is worth pointing out that when the call of Jesus comes to Nathanael in John 1,
Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree –
resting in a false peace.
Jesus calls his disciples to leave their vines and fig trees and come follow him.)

And so now Jesus comes to a fig tree.
And he looks for fruit – but there is none, because it is not time for figs.

The timing of this is not accidental.
The fig tree is in leaf, but has no fruit.

The point here has nothing to do with the fig tree.
The point is that Israel “looks good” – but is fruitless.
We are not supposed to think about this in terms of horticulture
(after all, if Jesus had not cursed the tree, it *would* have borne fruit!),
but rather we are to think of this in terms of eschatology:

*14 And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."
And his disciples heard it.*

A wooden translation of Jesus' curse reads,
"No longer unto the ages may no one eat fruit from you."
This is an eschatological curse.

So in light of all this,
there would be no confusion among the disciples as to what Jesus means!

Jesus is saying that Israel is like the barren fig tree.
No doubt the disciples don't fully understand what Jesus is saying.
But we need to remember that Mark is writing this
to people who *do* understand what Jesus is saying!

The Son of David has come to Jerusalem –
the Messiah has come to destroy his enemies and restore his kingdom.
And he starts by cursing the fig tree.

He starts by proclaiming eschatological judgment *against* Israel.

Watch what happens next.

Because there is a double meaning in all of Jesus' public actions and words.
The crowds will get excited about what Jesus says and does in Jerusalem.

But quite frankly, the Pharisees and chief priests have a much better understanding
of what Jesus is doing.

2. Cleansing "My House" (v15-19)

15 And they came to Jerusalem.

*And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold
and those who bought in the temple,
and he overturned the tables of the money-changers
and the seats of those who sold pigeons.*

16 And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

Often we have this idea that Jesus was really meek and mild –
he never got angry and was always really nice to people.

By now Mark should have cured you of that.

Jesus has spit in a man's face,
called a Gentile woman a dog,
and now he is driving out those who buy and sell.

Actually, the word here is "ekballo" –
which certainly can mean "drive out" or "put out"
(it is used that way elsewhere in Mark's gospel).

But the most common use of *ekballo* in Mark's gospel
is to refer to Jesus casting out demons.

In other words, Jesus has been casting demons out of Israel by his word.
And now he is casting the demonic out of the temple physically.

And he does so physically.

It is true that the normal way of fighting spiritual warfare in this age is *spiritual*.
But every now and then *spiritual* warfare takes on a physical aspect!

(The story is told of the Rev. George Moore, a Presbyterian minister,
who in 1828 was church planting in Vicksburg, Mississippi.
The church met above the courthouse, which on Sundays doubled as a bar.
When a couple of drunks came up and started disrupting the worship service,
Pastor Moore called upon them to stop.
When they only got louder and threatened physical violence,
he came down from the pulpit and thrashed them and threw them down the stairs.
Sometimes spiritual warfare can require a certain physical effort!)

But once again, Jesus is enacting what the prophets had said.

Zechariah 14:21 – the very last verse in the book of Zechariah –
said that in the eschatological holiness of the new Jerusalem
“there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD on that day.”

That day has come.

If you think about the cleansing of the temple as an attempt to “reform” the temple,
then you will miss the point.

Jesus is not concerned with “reforming the system” in Jerusalem;
rather, he symbolically enacts the eschatological judgment.

And having enacted the promise of Zechariah 14:21,
he then proclaims the meaning of these things:

*17 And he was teaching them and saying to them,
“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?”*

This is a quotation from Isaiah 56:7.
All the synoptic gospels use it – but only Mark includes the last phrase,
“for all the nations” as he points to the inclusion of the Gentiles.
After all, Isaiah had said that when God vindicates Israel
then all the nations will come streaming to the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple is the house of prayer –

it is the place where God meets with his people –
it is the place for the forgiveness of sins and the rejoicing of God’s people.

Jesus will come back to the theme of prayer soon,
but there is another quotation in verse 17.

God had called the temple a “house of prayer,”
But you have made it a den of robbers.”

This is from Jeremiah 7:11-15,
where Jeremiah rebukes the priests and people of Jerusalem
for profaning the temple
(even while they trusted in the temple to save them!)
And as Jeremiah warned of the coming destruction of the temple,
so now Jesus will do the same.

Jeremiah 7 opens with these words (and Jesus takes them up in his rebuke to Jerusalem –
and also in his warning to us, lest we neglect such a great salvation!

After all, as we consider the apostasy of our own day,
you can see that Jesus says this to the church today):

*Hear the word of the LORD,
all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD.
Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel:
Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.
Do not trust in these deceptive words:
‘This is the temple of the LORD,
the temple of the LORD,
the temple of the LORD.’ ...
Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail.
Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely,
make offerings to Baal,
and go after other gods that you have not known,
and then come and stand before me in this house,
which is called by my name,
and say, ‘We are delivered!’ –
only to go on doing all these abominations?
Has this house, which is called by my name,
become a den of robbers in your eyes?
Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.*

And then the LORD reflects on what he had done in the days of Eli the priest.
Back in 1 Samuel God had brought judgment on Shiloh.

The ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines,
and the priests, Eli, Hophi, and Phineas, all died in one day.

As Jeremiah 7:12-15 says,

Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first,

*and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.
And now, because you have done all these things, declares the LORD,
and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen,
and when I called you did not answer,
therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name,
and in which you trust,
and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers,
as I did to Shiloh.
And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen,
all the offspring of Ephraim.*

You cannot claim the protection of the temple
unless you live according to the ways of God.
Israel learned that in the days of Eli at Shiloh.
Judah learned that in the days of Jeremiah at Jerusalem

And now Jesus says that the Jews will learn it once again.

And we, who come to the heavenly temple, must not lose sight of this warning!
Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion.
You *cannot* steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, serve other gods
and then come to Jesus and say ‘we are delivered!’ –
only to go on doing all these abominations!

Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 –

*Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers,
nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy,
nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.
And such were some of you.*

If you are guilty of these things, that does not mean that there is no hope for you.
Idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, and swindlers
all can be forgiven!

Such were some of you!

Our God is merciful to those who repent and come to Jesus in faith!

But if such were some of you,
you are no longer such!

*But you were washed, you were sanctified,
you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ
and by the Spirit of our God.*

Jesus has come to cleanse the temple – to bring eschatological judgment to his house.

And you are that house – that spiritual temple that is cleansed by his blood,
baptized into his death, and renewed by his Spirit.

*18 And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him,
for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.*

The crowd is initially attracted to this radical message of coming judgment.
They see the hope of the restoration of the Kingdom of David.
But the chief priests and scribes understand Jesus far better than the crowds.
They understand that the message of Jesus is revolutionary.
They followed an interpretation of the Law and the Prophets
that placed the Jerusalem temple at the center of God's purposes.
They had corrected (so they thought) the abuses that Jeremiah had condemned.

And now Jesus is claiming that they are no better than the priests of Jeremiah's day!

But having laid down the gauntlet, Jesus walks away.

19 And when evening came they went out of the city.

3. The Cursed Fig Tree (v20-25)

20 As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

21 And Peter remembered and said to him,

“Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.”

In Matthew's gospel the fig tree withers immediately.
Here it appears that it took a whole day to wither.

Let me pause just a moment here.

Some people will use this sort of thing as an argument against the inerrancy of Scripture.

After all, Matthew says that Jesus cursed the fig
the morning *after* he cleansed the temple
and that when Jesus cursed the fig tree,

“the fig tree withered at once” (Matthew 21:19),

while Mark says that Jesus cursed the fig tree *before* he cleansed the temple,
and it was only the next day
that the disciples noticed that it had withered.

Some people respond by trying to harmonize the accounts –

maybe the tree withered at once, but the disciples didn't notice until the next day.

But that misses the point of what Matthew and Mark are doing here.

Matthew tells the whole story of the fig tree *after* the cleansing of the temple.

It serves as an explanation for what Jesus has just done.

Mark sets up the cleansing of the temple by recounting the cursing of the fig tree
before the cleansing of the temple

and then showing the withering of the fig tree *afterwards*.

The question of chronological order really doesn't matter.
Historical narratives are almost never in chronological order!
Historians *always* arrange their material to make a point.
And the gospel writers are no exception to that!

Matthew wants us to see the cursing of the fig tree
in the light of the cleansing of the temple,
whereas Mark wants us to see the cleansing of the temple
in the light of the cursing of the fig tree.

Each one tells the truth about what Jesus said and did.

And Jesus uses this as an opportunity to explain to the disciples the power of prayer –
or more precisely, the power of faith expressed in speech before God.

In the Genesis series we have seen how Isaac's blessing is powerful.
When Isaac blesses Jacob, he pronounces *the* blessing,
so that he is incapable of blessing Esau.
Words have power – or at least they have the potential to have power.

*22 And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God.
23 Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain,
'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,'
and does not doubt in his heart,
but believes that what he says will come to pass,
it will be done for him.*

Why does Jesus use the example of a mountain?
Throwing a mountain into the sea is about as useless as cursing a tree.
Psalm 46:2 speaks of the city of God and the mountains being hurled into the sea.
The image is one of the nations coming against Jerusalem,
and the psalmist says that we will not fear, because God is with us.

So what is Jesus saying?
What is "this mountain" (after all it is not "any" mountain, but "this" mountain)?
Some say it is the Mount of Olives where they stand.
Others say it is Mount Zion – Jerusalem.
But that doesn't matter.

"This" mountain is the eschatological mountain.
"This" mountain is the mountain that rages and totters and then falls into the sea.

Further, the pronouns are important here.
In verse 23 Jesus uses the third person singular.
"It will be done for *him*."

He is referring to himself.

Jesus is the one who will hurl the mountain into the sea.

And because Jesus hurls the eschatological mountain into the sea,

*24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer,
believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

Because of the faith of the third person singular (him – Jesus)
the second person plural will come true.

You may have confidence that because Jesus has cast the mountain into the sea,
therefore whatever you ask in prayer will be yours.

Does Jesus really mean this?

What if I ask for a million dollars?

Does it really mean that if I really believe that I have received a million dollars
it will be mine?

This is the only example of Jesus' teaching on prayer in Mark's gospel.

There is no version of the Lord's Prayer in Mark.

Mark seems to assume that you either know the Lord's Prayer,
or at least that you have learned about prayer from the Old Testament.
Prayer, by definition, cannot be self-centered.

Prayer cannot be *about* me and what *I* want.

Because prayer is not about the coming of *my* kingdom.

Prayer is about the coming of Christ's kingdom –
and only an ego-maniac could claim
that my getting a million dollars is about Christ's kingdom!

But while we shake our heads about the “name it and claim it” movement,
we share the same fundamental flaw:
our prayers are far more about *my* kingdom than Christ's kingdom.

Our prayers should be driven by the glory of Christ.

Our petitions should be oriented towards the growth of the gospel.

If you listen to the prayers found in the scripture,
and if you allow your prayer life to be driven by those prayers –
you will find that the orientation of your prayers changes.

Jesus' comment in verse 25 helps us think about this:

*25 And whenever you stand praying, forgive,
if you have anything against anyone,
so that your Father also who is in heaven*

may forgive you your trespasses.”

Notice the way this works.

We expect Jesus to tell us to *ask* for forgiveness.

(We are sinners after all!)

But Jesus knows that we will ask for forgiveness

(that is the assumption of that last phrase – “that he may forgive you”).

Our problem is that we tend *not* to forgive others!

Jesus says that if you want God to forgive you,
then you must forgive others.

If you are holding something against someone else –
then God will not forgive you!

So what does all this teaching on prayer have to do with fig trees and temples?

That all depends on who Jesus is!

Jesus has said that the temple is to be a “house of prayer” –

this is the place where sins are forgiven – the place where earth and heaven meet.

But whose house is the temple?

4. Whose House? (v27-33)

27 And they came again to Jerusalem.

And as he was walking in the temple,

the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him,

28 and they said to him,

“By what authority are you doing these things,

or who gave you this authority to do them?”

We are the chief priests, scribes and elders.

We have divine authority to be here!

(Actually, they don’t – the high priest is *not* of the proper family

and has become a Roman appointee – but that was usually forgotten!)

But Jesus does not engage them in a dispute over legal authority.

After all,

what happens if Jesus answers them?

If Jesus speaks truthfully, he could be accused of blasphemy!

And he is not ready to go to the cross quite yet!

29 Jesus said to them,

“I will ask you one question;

answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.

30 Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.”

In one sense Jesus is evading their question.

In another sense he is suggesting that if they get the right answer here,
they will also get the right answer as to who Jesus is.

If you understand who John is –
and if you confess that John’s baptism was from heaven,
then you will accept John’s testimony
that Jesus is the one greater than John.

If John’s authority was heavenly,
then so is Jesus’.

31 And they discussed it with one another, saying,

“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’

*32 But shall we say, ‘From man’?”—they were afraid of the people,
for they all held that John really was a prophet.*

Their deliberation reveals their problem.

They obviously believe that John’s baptism was from man,
but they cannot admit it without angering the crowds.

33 So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”

And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Jesus has come to bring judgment on the earth.

Indeed, he has come to take that judgment upon himself first!

But the time has not yet come.

Those who have ears to hear will understand who Jesus is.

Those who refuse to listen will be left puzzling in the dark.

But if you know who Jesus is –

if you understand that he is the Son of God –

then everything you do in life must be oriented around him.

He *is* the new temple – he *is* the place where earth and heaven meet.

He has set you free from the bonds of sin and death –

And so you take your marching orders from Jesus.

His kingdom is what matters to you.