

## The Fig Tree and the Temple

- Mark 11:12-25
- It is time for another Markan sandwich! I have been hungry for one and I know you have, too. Remember, one thing Mark likes to do in his gospel is sandwich the main truth in between two pieces of bread that help the reader understand the main truth. In the passage today, the main truth is the judgment of God on the unfruitful temple. The sandwich bread on either side is made from figs, or in this case, one fig tree that promised what it did not deliver. Let's look at this passage today under three main points: the Problem with the Fig Tree, the Problem with the Temple, and the Promise of Faith's Power.
- **The Problem with the Fig Tree (verses 12-14)**
- Jesus is walking back to Jerusalem from Bethany, where he and his disciples spent the night, and he is hungry. A reminder that Jesus is fully human. Still to this day. The God-Man. He sees a fig tree in full leaf and he walks to it, expecting to find fruit, but there is none. He curses the tree, saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." Now, notice the disciples hear it, but they do not speak. No one says, "Hey, Lord, come on, that's not fair. It's not the season for figs yet!" But Mark tells the reader, "it was not the season for figs." And would you believe that this story has caused problems for 2000 years, even prompting many like the famous atheist Bertrand Russell in the 1950's to accuse Jesus of "vindictive fury," and saying that this episode in Jesus' life tarnished his view of Jesus and writing, "I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history." Like, *you*, Bertrand? Others have ranted at Jesus about his use of supernatural energy in a fit of anger against a poor, unfortunate little fig tree.
- But even the first commentary written on the book of Mark in the fifth century reflected on this as an "enacted parable," in which the cursing of the fig tree was symbolic of the judgment that was coming on the temple. And anyone who knows fig trees understands what was going on here. Fig trees lose their leaves in the winter, but before spring the tree produces what the Jews called *paggim* in Hebrew, little fig knops or buds. By the time the tree is in full leaf in April, the tree should be loaded with *paggim* in various stages of maturity. And those unripened figs are edible and were often eaten by the locals.
- This, the only miracle of destruction in the four Gospels, is a sobering reminder that it is not enough to look like you have something, to look like you are bearing fruit, or to look like you are the real thing! The fig tree is used often in the Old Testament as a symbol of judgment. God speaks through Jeremiah to the kingdom of Judah in the Old Testament, saying, "When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them." (Jeremiah 8:13) Luke (13:6-9) records a parable in his Gospel of a man who planted a fig tree that did not produce for three years. He told his vinedresser to cut it down, but the vinedresser begged for one more year, and if it did not produce fruit then, he would cut it down. The message is clear, that we cannot presume upon the

patience of God. There is a time when that ends, and judgment begins. That leads us to the meat of the sandwich.

- **The Problem with the Temple (verses 15-19)**

- Mark doesn't waste or mince words. He teaches us what Jesus is like, as we have seen, not just by what the Lord says but also by what he does. His actions. In this passage you could say, "He came. He saw. He drove them out." Remember, Jesus has come to replace the temple, as we saw two weeks ago. He will not try to reform it. It is too late for that, and no amount of reformation would satisfy, for the temple was always meant to be a placeholder. A shadow of what was to come, and now He is here. So, why does Jesus drive out those who bought and sold, and why does he turn over the tables and the chairs of the moneychangers and the pigeon sellers? Because they had been allowed by the religious leaders in Jerusalem to turn the temple into a marketplace, an industry, instead of a place of prayer. The moneychangers made bank on people from all over the world because the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin, who managed the temple and profited from it, would not allow foreign currency, and the moneychangers charged exorbitant fees for their services. The Court of the Gentiles had become an enormous livestock yard as people clamored to get the sacrificial animals they needed. Josephus, a Jewish historian, wrote that in AD 66, when the temple was finally completed after 86 years of construction, 255,000 lambs were slaughtered for the Passover that year. The Court of the Gentiles, the only place foreigners could come to worship, had become a huge industrial complex. But not only that. When Jesus says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations," he is quoting from Isaiah 56:6-7. **Look there.** There was a sign hanging in the Court of the Gentiles that read, "No foreigner may enter within the railing and enclosure that surround the Temple. Anyone apprehended shall have himself to blame for his consequent death." It was popularly believed that when the Messiah came, he would purge Jerusalem and the temple of all foreigners. James Edwards writes, "Jesus...does not clear the temple of Gentiles, but *for* them...the temple is not the sole property of Israel but a witness to the nations." Yes! And Jesus has come as the true temple to take the place of the shadow, and welcome all who will, Jew or Gentile, to come to him for refuge and for salvation.
- The next day, as the disciples and Jesus are walking back to the temple, they pass by the fig tree Jesus cursed. It is withered away, all the way down to its roots. Notice the disciples did not defend the tree or accuse Jesus of vindictive fury. They marveled that it was already dead, all the way down to its roots! It reminds me of what John the Baptist said to the religious leaders three years earlier: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the ax 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." (Matthew 3:9-10) The ax is laid at the root of the temple, as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, is ready to lay down his life. The temple is broken down because the Son of God will offer his body to be broken and his blood to be poured out as a ransom for many. The temple will be razed, but the perfect sacrifice, the Lamb of God, will be raised!

- **The Promise of Faith's Power (verses 20-25)**
- Jesus continues to disciple his disciples, and the enacted parable was partly to pronounce judgment on the temple and those who led it, but also to encourage and teach his followers to hold onto faith. They are amazed at a dead tree and he tells them that if they have faith, they can move a mountain! Many believe he pointed over to a mountain that was built by King Herod to the south of Jerusalem, the Herodion. Herod had actually removed a hill next to the fortress and used the dirt to make a volcanic-shaped barrier around it. Jesus may have pointed there to say, "You can uproot even greater mountains through faith and prayer, and throw them into the sea!" Isn't that true? How many people in this very room have seen God remove a mountain in yourself or someone you love, a mountain of anger or unforgiveness or doubt or self-pity by faith that acted through prayer? Jesus says again that it depends on your complete trust in God that he will accomplish his perfect will: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." (verse 24) This is not a blank check that you can hand to God in asking for whatever you want, but it is assurance that as we have been taught to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Our faith stands on God's steadfastness, on his grace, on his unending love for us.
- Jesus closes with this reminder that when we stand praying (or sit or lie down), we need to speak to the Lord with a clear conscience. And there may be sin I cannot see in my heart, in fact I know there is, but one thing my heart knows every time, and that is when I have something against someone and have not forgiven them. So, the promise of prayer power has a prerequisite for prayer power, two of them, in fact. In order to really pray and not just say words, we have to have faith in God and trust in him as our Father who really does love us and care about us. And we need to forgive those who have hurt us. Jesus does not qualify that with, "unless they REALLY hurt you or someone you care about deeply." No, he simply says, "if you have anything against anyone." Forgive. (We are not commanded to forget, because deep wounds will always be remembered). But we can forgive by God's grace. And we must, so that God will also forgive us. Oh, saints, could that be any more important to the life of our families and our marriages and our church than it is right now? Let's go to the Lord who can give us a greater measure of freedom from the sins that control us and hurt others.
- Prayer