

Message #40

Mark 11:12-22

I think one of the saddest things to see around this area and around the country are the places of industry that used to employ thousands of people that today are just empty buildings. Places that just a few years ago were productive are no longer even in existence. Right here in the Kalamazoo and Battle Creek areas, at least five paper mills have shut down and if you drive by some of these mills, all you see now are empty buildings that once enabled families to earn a good living. You see a parking lot filled with weeds that once was filled with cars. It is a sad, sad thing to see a building that once was a thriving business that now is worth nothing. But this kind of thing is what is happening to businesses all over this country.

Another sad thing to see is what is happening to churches. There is a church in this city that sold the property to a Muslim organization. They have moved and are now using a rock band that plays Queen songs and Beatles songs to try to lure in more people. As far as a relationship with God, they are dead. Frankly, it makes me sick; it makes God sick and it should make all Christians sick.

Jesus saw exactly the same kind of thing in His day with the nation Israel. He saw a nation that should have been spiritually alive and it was spiritually dead. He saw a Temple that at one time featured the dynamic presence of God and now it was just an entertainment and money making building. The tragedy of this is that most of the people did not realize how spiritually dead they actually were. But before Jesus would leave this world, He wanted them to clearly understand it, so in this section what He does is show them:

JESUS CHRIST JUDGES A FIG TREE AND JUDGES ACTIVITY IN THE TEMPLE TO SHOW THAT ISRAEL WAS SPIRITUALLY DEAD AND WAS NOT BEARING ANY SPIRITUAL FRUIT.

Now there are three parts to this important section of Scripture:

PART #1 – Jesus curses a fig tree. 11:12-14

Now let's remember from **verse 11** that Jesus had gone into the Temple and looked it over and then as it was getting late, He left and traveled about two miles back to Bethany.

Verse 12 tells us that the next day they had left Bethany and were heading back into Jerusalem. As they were walking, Jesus was hungry. If you follow Him from place to place you realize that He walked most places and just imagine how many calories He burned in a day. He certainly was not eating three square meals a day and He got hungry.

Now remember Jesus is the God/man. He is fully God and fully man at the same time. On the human side, he did get hungry. In fact, Mark is a writer who often brings out things about Jesus' human emotions and needs (1:41; 3:5; 4:38; 6:34; 10:21; 14:33-34).

The reason why Jesus brings out the fact that He is hungry is because this sets the stage for the action regarding the fig tree.

Jesus was hungry as they were walking along and **verse 13** says He looked ahead and saw a fig tree. The name Bethany actually means place of dates and the name Bethphage means place of figs. So this area was known as a place that produced figs.

Now an ordinary fig tree can grow to a height of up to 19 feet. Fig trees usually produce two crops. The first crop comes in May or June. These are the early figs that grow out of the early shoots. But the second crop is usually the better crop both in quantity and quality. That crop comes at the end of summer or early part of fall. Carefully observe at the end of **verse 13** we read “for it was not the season for figs.”

Jesus came to the tree and when He got to the tree He found nothing. He was hoping that there would be a little fruit; but there was nothing. All He found were leaves. There was no fruit, just leaves. The analogy is obvious. He is heading into Jerusalem and even though He knew that this was not the time when Israel would accept Him and it was not the time for the nation to bear righteous fruit, He was hoping that He would at least find a little. He was hoping He would find someone in the city and especially in the Temple who would offer God some righteous fruit, but there was no one.

So when Jesus saw this tree, according to **verse 14**, He said, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” What this does show is that God is able to bless an economy or curse it. God is able to cause agricultural crops to grow or not grow.

Now carefully notice the end of verse 14 “And His disciples were listening.” This is critical to understanding this episode. These disciples would be taught something significant.

Now some commentators don’t like this text and say that this is unworthy of Jesus and He is acting like some spoiled brat. One liberal commentator went so far as to say that this shows that Jesus was ill-tempered and it was a waste of his miraculous power (T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, p. 279).

But those who suggest this are as blind as bats and are missing the point of the context. The fig tree issue is divided up by the Temple visit. This is important. What we do know is that Jesus did not curse this tree simply because He could not go without food. He went without food many times and we may assume when He got back to Bethany the night before they may have had something to eat. Actually He could have done a miracle and had the leaves produce fruit right before the eyes of His disciples if He wanted, much like the miracle of the multiplication of the fish and bread.

The fig tree located on the main road into Jerusalem was a symbol for Israel. This is a metaphorical picture of Israel that is used multiple times in the Old Testament (Jer. 8:13; 29:17; Hos. 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7; Micah 7:1-6).

Also **figs and grapes are often used to illustrate spiritual unfruitfulness (Hos. 9:16-17; Micah 7:1).**

The fact that this tree had great foliage but did not bear fruit was a perfect picture of what Jesus had seen in Jerusalem the night before. That is why He is angry. He had gone into the Temple and saw a lot of action. There were great numbers of people and religious liturgy, but there was no real fruit.

The reason He curses the tree on the way into Jerusalem is because He wants to use this to become a visual object example of what was happening to the spirituality of Israel in Jerusalem. The leaders were not bearing fruit and they were leading people away from God. The condition of the spirituality was unfruitful and the city of Jerusalem was heading to judgment. What He did to this tree would become a visual reminder.

Kent Hughes brought out a very interesting point when he said, “In actuality, he honored that tree, making it the most useful tree that ever grew! It was, and is, a tree from which thousands have learned about themselves and turned back to God. If one soul has been made to consider its life through that tree, it did not wither in vain” (*Mark*, p. 272).

This tree stood out as an example of what had happened to Israel and is still happening to Israel. Israel should be the most fruitful nation on this earth. She should be the one nation blessed by God. But she is spiritually dry today and dead and she will not produce again until Jesus Christ returns.

PART #2 – Jesus cleanses the temple. 11:15-19

Having pronounced a judgment on the tree, Jesus walked on toward Jerusalem toward the Temple. The Temple was built on a raised perch 500 meters or 545 yards north to south and 300 meters or 327 yards east to west.

Now there was an outer court known as the court of the Gentiles which was located on the south side of the Temple area and it had a covered roof comprised of 162 columns set in rows of four. This was probably the area where this occurred.

According to **verse 15** when Jesus went into the Temple, He saw something that made Him mad. This is the second time He has gone into the Temple and found the same thing. When His ministry began, one of His first public acts was to clean out the Temple (John 2:14-22). Now He is back at the Temple again and nothing has changed. He took action:

Action #1 - He began to drive out those who were buying and selling. 11:15a

The Greek uses a strong word here indicating that Jesus threw out or cast out those who were buying and selling in His temple.

Action #2 - He overturned the tables of the money changers. **11:15b**

The money changers would exchange various currencies for a specific coin used for paying their temple taxes. They would charge a fee for the exchange.

Action #3 - He overturned the seats of those selling doves. **11:15c**

Now the selling of doves indicates that they were selling these to poor people (Lev. 5:7, 11; 12:8; Luke 2:24).

Action #4 - He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. **11:16**

The Greek word “merchandise” can refer to fishing gear, clothing and tools. What had happened is that this had become a place of business and commerce. A place that was supposed to be sacred had become totally secular.

Action #5 - He began to teach them. **11:17**

Now Jesus cites two different passages of Scripture to support what He is doing. The main quote comes from Isaiah 56:7. This is followed by a reference to Jeremiah 7:11. **The point of Isaiah 56:7 is that God’s temple is to be a place of prayer and the point of Jeremiah 7:11 is that God’s house has been made into a den of robbers and thieves.**

What He actually taught them here were three lessons about the Temple:

(Lesson #1) - This temple is My house. **11:17a**

The temple was to be God’s house. In this dispensation that is the way the church should be viewed.

(Lesson #2) - This temple is to be a place of prayer for all nations. **11:17b**

This was supposed to be a sacred and reverent place where people gathered to pray and worship God. This was a place where people went to hear the Word of God and to talk with God. This was supposed to be a place where people got right with God.

What Jesus was actually doing here was purging the Temple to show that this place was no place of authentic, acceptable worship.

(Lesson #3) - This temple has been made into a robber’s den. **11:17c**

The word for “robber” means that the priests were robbing God’s property and place of the purity and reverence and purpose for which it existed.

This act was symbolic of what would happen to this temple. It would be purged and destroyed by something fully sanctioned by Jesus Christ and it would not become the place that it should be until He would come back and restore it.

According to **verse 18**, when the chief priests and the scribes heard this they began to try and figure out a way to destroy Him. Now the chief priests were the ruling religious leaders and the Scribes were the experts of the law. **These were the very men who should have been promoting that they needed to believe in Him.** They should have promoted reverent worship. They should have made this Temple a place of prayer and ministry of the Word. They were afraid of Him. The whole crowd was amazed by His teaching.

According to **verse 19**, when evening came, they would go out of the city and back to Bethany.

PART #3 – Jesus returns to the fig tree. **11:20-21**

Early the next morning as they were en route back to the city, they saw that same fig tree withered from the roots up. The tree was totally dead. It was not a sick tree that could be nursed back to health; it was totally dead.

Verse 21 says that Peter saw it and said to the Lord, look, there is the fig tree you cursed. It has totally withered.

The nation Israel was totally dead. The worship was dead. The temple was dead. The religious leaders were dead and the Jewish people were dead. There was no possibility of them bearing fruit.

But notice what Jesus said in **verse 22**, “Have faith in God.”

Don't trust in this religious ritual. Don't trust in these phony religious leaders. Don't trust in yourself. Don't depend on religion for anything. Have faith in God. Have faith in Jesus Christ.