1-5-25

Mark 11:12-21

The account of Jesus cursing the fig tree has left many people wondering. Why did Jesus expect food when it wasn’t the season for figs? Why did He curse the tree? Was He having a bad day; was He vindictive; was this just a fit of uncontrolled anger? These questions have actually led some to abandon Jesus as a miracle worker who simply couldn’t control Himself; someone who had the same faults and failing as any other human-being.

Admittedly, this can be a difficult passage, but let’s see what we can glean from it. This took place during Jesus’ final week before the crucifixion. He and the disciples would spend the day in Jerusalem where Jesus would teach and argue with the religious leaders. Then they would go the town of Bethany to spend the night; presumably at the house of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

The previous day had been Jesus’ arrival to Jerusalem when the triumphal entry took place as Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives into the city on a donkey. Anyone familiar with Zacheriah 9:9 would know that was a Messianic claim. And everyone would have been familiar with Zacheriah 9:9. However, as Mark reports back in verse 11, Jesus had simply looked around at the temple and left for the night: Very anticlimactic.

Now here the next morning, the crowds are all gone, mostly remaining in Jerusalem. Jesus and His disciples are on their way back to Jerusalem. Jesus is a human-being, so He got hungry just as we all do. He headed for a fig tree that was in leaf, expecting to find something to eat. Although it was not yet the season for figs, Jesus’ expectation was reasonable.

Shortly after figs ripen and are harvested in the summer, the tree grows lots of little nodules on the branches that will eventually become figs. The tree then just kind of stays dormant during the winter months. In the early spring, these nodules begin to grow and they are called paggim. As they grow, the tree produces its leaves. Now these paggim are not ripe figs but they are edible and it was common for people to eat them. So, the tree being in leaf gave the promise of having fruit on it. Jesus found the tree bearing no fruit even though, from all indications, it should have.

The apostle Matthew, in his Gospel account, records Jesus clearing the temple and then the episode with the fig tree. Mark wants to make sure we get the point so he puts the clearing of the temple in the midst of the fig tree incident. The two are related.

As we read the Bible, we find that one of the metaphors for Israel is the grape vine; but another one is the fig tree. Also, tending one’s own fig tree and eating its fruit was a symbol of peace. So, Jesus is trying to get a point across with the fig tree. God wanted Israel to bear fruit for Him. They were the chosen people who were gifted with the Law; the revelation of the one true God. In return, God expected them to bear fruit.

They were to treat Him as holy. Israel was to be a beacon to all the nations that Yahweh was God of all creation and they were to help draw other nations to Him. They were to demonstrate the glory of God by following Him and then all would be able to see how He blessed His people. In these things, God would be glorified. Jesus came into the temple where He should have found fruit; instead He found a den of robbers.

Was Jesus being vindictive or spiteful when He cursed the fig tree? No, Jesus is human in all things except sin. Further, although He is God, He laid His godhood aside and did nothing except what He was commanded by the Father, and all His works were performed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not succumb to an outburst of bad temper; He acted in obedience.

All the confusion and questions are laid to rest once we understand that Jesus cursing the fig tree was an acted-out parable or even an acted-out prophecy. The Old Testament prophets were known for this type of thing. Poor Isaiah had to walk around naked for three years to show how the people would be taken captive and in what condition they would be hauled off to another country. Ezekiel had to lay on his side and eat scanty rations of food and water for over a year to demonstrate the siege that was coming. And although he did it unintentionally, Jonah acted out Jesus being buried in a tomb for three days.

Jesus cursing the fig tree demonstrated Israel’s problem; they bore no fruit even though the city of Jerusalem seemed to be flourishing. And they were soon to face the judgement of God in the destruction of the city. Destroying one fig tree is a small price to pay to try to get the message across that the city and temple would be destroyed and many lives would be lost.

We often speak of the promises of God; and we strongly place our belief in these promises. We know that because God made these promises, they will come to pass; He will do as He has said. The thing we often don’t consider is that God promised curses in addition to blessings; He warns us that judgement is coming; and the judgement can be for good or for bad. Whether His people get the curses or the blessing depends on how they respond to His commands.

Back in Genesis 1:11, God had commanded the earth to bring forth plants and fruit trees. The fruit trees were to bring forth fruit bearing seed of their own kind. This fig tree was not doing what God had commanded it to do so we need not be surprised at Jesus, the God-man, cursing it. But again, this was an acted-out parable; and acted-out prophecy. Jesus was well aware that the religious leadership of Jerusalem was not bearing fruit; they were not following the commands of God.

This was eminently displayed by what was taking place in the temple. Having a place to buy sacrificial animals was not a problem. Many came from a long distance so it was impractical to bring an animal that far. It was common, and also legal according to Deuteronomy 14:24-26, to bring money to purchase an offering once arriving in Jerusalem.

Money changers were also necessary. Jews were scattered all over the known world and each nation had its own currency. According to Exodus 30:13-16, the Hebrew shekel was to be used for any payment to the temple. They didn’t have Hebrew shekels at this time so the closest they could get was the Tyrian shekel which had no image on it. They had to have money changers to get the Tyrian shekel.

There were, however, two main problems. The first was the location of the vendors. They were set up in what was called the Court of the Gentiles. The Court of the Gentiles was still part of the temple complex, but the furthest away from the Holy of Holies. Gentiles were allowed to worship here but could come no closer or face the death penalty. This was the third temple; Herod the Great had begun its construction in 10BC and it was not yet finished in Jesus’ day. Still, it was huge; the Court of the Gentiles enclosed 35 acres.

The Sanhedrin, who oversaw the operation of the temple, had allowed the area for the Gentiles to worship God to become a livestock exchange. Imagine trying to have a church service here with sheep and goats running around and money changers yelling for your attention. Part of bearing fruit for God was to spread knowledge of Him to all the nations. The religious leadership was effectively cutting them off for coming to Yahweh for worship.

The second main problem was that the people coming to Jerusalem to worship were being taken advantage of. The Bible doesn’t go into specifics, but its pretty clear what was going on when Jesus quotes from the prophet Jeremiah saying the leadership has turned the House of Prayer into a Robber’s Den. Extra-Biblical sources tell us that the priestly class, or the Sadducees, were making a lot of money from the operation going on in the temple; and they were not doing it honestly.

From a spiritual point of view, God’s temple had been turned, once again, into a place of idol worship. The leadership was worshiping the god Mammon. And they were sacrificing God’s people to do it; both Jew and Gentile.

Small wonder Jesus acted as He did. He deeply loves His Father, and He deeply loves His people; and here the very ones who were supposed to be caring for the sheep at the direction of the Father are disrespecting Him and fleecing the flock. Jesus was desperately trying to get their attention; and He succeeded. I think it’s important to note how Mark says, “*He began to teach*”. That was Jesus’ objective during His ministry on earth. Everything He did or said was to teach something about God and the Kingdom.

While the whole universe cannot contain God, certainly no temple can either. Yet it is helpful to us to think of the temple as God’s house. It helps us to deal with infinity. Jesus teaches what God’s house is to be about by quoting the prophet Isaiah. It is to be a place of prayer. It is not a place of commerce. It is a place to leave the world outside and commune with the one true God. While all the sacrifices were important, if they were not offered in faith and with prayer, they were worthless.

Jesus had everyone attention. The crowds were amazed at His teaching; as has been pointed out before, Jesus taught with authority, not like the scribes who were always quoting someone else. And His authority was absolute because He only spoke what He heard from the Father. He had the attention of the chief priests and scribes too. And they were afraid. Remember how the demons were afraid of Jesus; they knew who He was.

I think the religious leaders knew who He was also, but the demonic influence they were under would not let them admit it. All they could see was their loss of income and power. They began in earnest to find a way to kill Jesus.

Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem that evening and spent the night. They headed back to the city in the morning and, once again, passed by the fig tree. By now, the tree was withered from the roots up. And Peter, of course, was amazed by this and pointed it out to Jesus. The fig tree came under God’s curse and faced destruction. This was the prophecy regarding Jerusalem and the temple that Jesus acted out. Because they produced no fruit, Jerusalem and the temple faced certain destruction. That prophecy was fulfilled in 70AD when the Roman armies razed the city and left nothing standing of the temple.

Obviously, this is not simply a history lesson; this all applies to us as Christians. Although we are under grace, we still have commandments to follow. They can be summarized with *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* While these are not things we can do in our own strength, the Holy Spirit will help us as we work toward it. Jesus did not leave us to fight the battle alone.

Another thing is that we are to bear fruit. Fruit are what will ultimately bring glory to God. They are anything from spreading the Gospel to doing good works. It includes suffering for the Kingdom. Bearing fruit is when we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God; allowing ourselves to be used in whatever way He so desires. It is also transforming your mind away from worldly things and toward spiritual things. It is conforming yourself to Christ.

Also, the Bible tells us that as Christians we are a temple of the Holy Spirit; He indwells us. Accordingly, let us keep in mind that God’s temple is to be a house of prayer. That puts quite an exclamation mark on why we should pray. God made us in the first place to have fellowship with Him and we are looking forward to fellowship with Him throughout eternity. Prayer is our means of fellowship with Him during this lifetime.

God is a God of love but He is also a God of justice. He happily gives blessings, but He will not hesitate to follow through with curses when necessary. The parable of the fig tree was immediately applicable to Jerusalem. But we must still heed it today. God wants us to bear fruit through Jesus Christ and it is only through Him that we can do so. If we are not bearing fruit, something is wrong and we need to deeply examine ourselves to see where the problem lies. Do so in prayer and in fellowship with a brother or sister in Christ.

Prayer

Merciful Jesus, it is startling to us when You do something like curse the fig tree or throw out the dealers from the temple. We cling to that idea of gentle Jesus meek and mild. But things like this remind us that You are God; and You take worship and justice seriously. When You come back to this earth it will be with blood on Your robe and You will rule with an iron scepter.

By the power of Your Holy Spirit, may these thoughts not leave our minds. By Your work on the cross, You have become our brother and our friend, and we are grateful for that. Please help us to never take that for granted. Keep us aware so that we are awake and watching when our Master returns. May we stand in Your favor when You rule instead of withering like the fig tree.

It is our desire to bear You much fruit, but You know that we have a constant battle with the flesh. Sanctify us, Lord, that our flesh might be crucified and our spirits made strong in Your Holy Spirit. Help us to keep this temple of Yours a house of prayer. And may we never be guilty of robbing You or our neighbors.

Thank You Lord, in Your holy name we pray

Amen