

Mark 11: 12- 21
The Fig Tree and the Temple

The passage we're looking at today has vexed scholars over the centuries because, on the surface, it seems that Jesus overreacts to this poor, innocent fig tree for not bearing figs when it wasn't even the season for figs. The late Bertrand Russell, who wrote a book attacking Christianity called Why I Am Not a Christian, included this narrative as one of his reasons for repudiating Christianity. He said this incident displays Jesus as a man who expresses vindictive fury to an innocent plant, manifesting behavior that is not conducive or consistent with even a righteous man, let alone the Son of God.

Why I am Not a Christian [17-19] Russell wrote, with this incident among others in view:

"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."

** I find it odd that a non-believer would try to tell us what righteousness would look like, let alone the Son of God. **

MARK 11:12 On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. 13 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. 14 He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.

15 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 money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; 16 and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. 17 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."

18 The chief priests and the scribes heard *this*, and *THEY began* seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.

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

20 As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots *up*.

The only miracle in the NT that involves a miracle of destruction.

V. 11-15

Dr. JAMES Kelso, an expert on the customs of Ancient Israel, explained it this way: "in Palestine there is a clearly defined season for figs, and most species of figs grow within that season.

So, Jesus, knowing the customs and culture of Palestine even better than Dr. Kelso, saw this fig tree in full bloom, which would clearly indicate that figs—not just edible little knobs, but real figs—would be present on it. He turned aside to satisfy His hunger from these figs. But instead of finding an exotic fig tree bearing delicious figs out of season, He found a tree that was barren."

In this text, Jesus found an object that displayed the sin of hypocrisy. It had all the outward appearance of fruit, but it was empty. It was barren. Hypocrisy was a basic issue that Jesus had with the Jewish leaders. On several occasions, Jesus chastened the religious leaders of His day for their show of spirituality, their show of righteousness, but with the absence of fruit.

Following the Triumphal Entry, Jesus spent a good bit of time teaching in Jerusalem. He also spent a lot of time teaching the people and exposing the Pharisees.

Matt 23:13 ff Jesus delivers The EIGHT Woes against the Scribes and Pharisees. Most of them begin with this expression...

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,

FOR EXAMPLE: You're like whited sepulchers, beautiful, pristine on the outside, but inside filled with dead men's bones. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you clean the outside of the plate, but underneath it's filled with filth"? On several occasions, Jesus chastened the religious leaders of His day for their show of spirituality, their show of righteousness, but with the absence of fruit.

The issue of 'hypocrisy in the church' is often used as an excuse to avoid dealing with Jesus, as he is presented in the gospel. It's a lot easier to find fault with Christians than it is to deal honestly with the claims of Christ.

If someone finds hypocrisy in the church to be a deal breaker for faith, then he or she should stay away so as to NOT ADD TO THE PROBLEM. On the other hand, "There's always room for one more."

WHILE 1 Pet 2 tells us to "keep your behavior excellent among the outsiders", the reality is that all churches are full of sinners. In fact, there is no other organization where the key qualification for joining is admitting that you are a sinner who needs a Savior. The reality of sin in my life or yours doesn't make us hypocritical unless we're doing things that we say we never do.

There is a reason why Mark tells the seemingly insignificant story about a fig tree in the context of Jesus driving the money changers out of the Temple. Why mention the fig tree story? It doesn't advance the narrative of the Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. OR DOES IT?

THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN THE FIG TREE AND SPIRITUAL CONDITION IN THE TEMPLE

v. 15-17

ONE of the OT symbols for God's people was the fig tree. The hypocrisy of the fig tree represented the spiritual condition of the people of Israel and their spiritual practice in the Temple.

The fig tree looked like it was fruitful, but it was not. The leaves promised figs, but it had not produced. So too, with the people of Israel, especially the worship at the Temple. There was an outward appearance of devotion to God but they ignored a key element of their calling.

They were to be a light to the nations. The Temple was to be a house of prayer for ALL nations, but the court of the Gentiles was filled with money changers. It was a den of thieves –

This temple at the time of Herod was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jesus entered around 33 AD; It was not completed until 64 AD, and then was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

The sacrificial worship of the Lord had been restricted to this spot ever since King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (c. 1000 bc). For Jews, the Temple Mount was the epicenter of the world, the meeting place of heaven and earth.

The Temple stood as the center of Jewish worship. It was the place of sacrifices, especially on the Day of Atonement. The Temple was the focal point of the presence of God among His people.

It was divided into four parts: the court of the gentiles, which was the largest part; the court of the women; the court of the Jews; and the holy of holies, where the High Priest would enter on the Day of Atonement. The court of the gentiles was the largest part of the temple complex. It was 500 by 350 yards. Think about five football fields by three and a half football fields. The space of the temple of the court of the gentiles occupied thirty-five acres. That's a big church, thirty-five acres just for one quarter of the building.

Why was there a court of the gentiles?

God had promised Abraham that he would become a great nation and that through him all the nations would be blessed. God called Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations. Israel had the mission of proclaiming the truth of God, not just to themselves, but to all people.

The religious leaders had turned the court of the gentiles into a zoo of animals to be used for sacrifices. The Jews who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Holy days wouldn't bring sacrificial animals with them, so they had to buy them. They could be sure that the lambs they purchased were suitable for the sacrifice, but that assurance came at a price. Merchants could charge what they wanted because there was a religious obligation to purchase the lambs. It was too late to go home to get a lamb, so they had to pay a higher price.

EX; Think about the cost of food at Six Flags or at a Ball Park
And for crowds and vendors...

EX: think of downtown LaFayette during the Honey Bee Festival – vendors filling main street.

Another issue was if they wanted to buy these animals in Jerusalem, they were using currency that was not in use in Jerusalem. Those coming from around the Roman empire could not use Roman currency because it bore the image of the emperor and was idolatrous. So, they had to exchange their money.

Ex: changing currency to travel abroad. There is ALWAYS A FEE
Every male over 20 had to pay the shekel price for Passover so getting the right currency was essential.

The Price gouging in the Temple reflected an entire system that had become corrupt. The Romans had taken over Judea in 63 BC and installed Herod the Great as a puppet king of the Jews. He began to choose the High Priests based on money, not the hereditary line as DESCRIBED in the OT. The priestly leaders were cooperating with Rome and as long as things remained calm, everybody profited. **The Temple in Jerusalem was THE ONLY TEMPLE for Jews in the world. It was the only place for sacrifices, and it brought in great wealth for the temple leaders and Rome.**

In popular Jewish expectancy, the Jews, who hated the gentiles, had the hope that when the Messiah would come, He would cleanse the temple of all gentiles and get rid of them once and for all. But when Jesus came, He cleansed the temple FOR THE gentiles. This place is for people—not for sheep, not for goats, not for rams.

*** APPLY : The church today is the living temple of God, and we too should have a vision for the nations to come to know Christ. We can all have a part in nations hearing the Good News as we Pray, Give, or Go.

With modern mobility we are likely to encounter the nations in our midst.

*** The cursing of the fig tree indicates Jesus' view of hypocrisy and its fruitlessness. Cursing is a form of rejection and is the consequence for being fruitless – Jn 15 – fruitless branch and Lukewarm religion that is external but has no fruit of love for Christ. Rev 3

Not only did the court of Gentiles need cleansing, but the hearts of the people and the religious leaders needed cleansing. Passover was a celebration of God's deliverance through Moses and there was an expectation that God would send the Messiah to deliver them. On the previous day, the people greeted Jesus as the Messiah, the son of David, yet a few days later, prompted by the Pharisees, many show that they really did NOT have eyes to see or ears to hear the Messiah who was right before them.

V. 18 – The religious leaders want to destroy Jesus.

“To destroy”: is a pretty strong expression. WHAT is going on?

Jesus was gaining favor with the people and was a threat to the standing of the leaders.
Luke 19: 47

And He was teaching daily in the temple; but the chief priests and the scribes and the leading men among the people were trying to destroy Him, 48 and they could not find anything that they might do, for all the people were hanging on to every word He said.

Their actions are motivated by fear of Jesus' popularity, fear of losing power (social, economic, and political), and fear of a public uprising (in which case the Romans would intervene). The Jewish leaders correctly saw Jesus' action as a challenge to their authority in the most sacred space in the world.

Rome permitted a significant degree of self-rule as long as the Sanhedrin maintained stability. But Jesus was increasingly becoming a threat to the general order, and therefore a threat to the Temple and to their positions of power and influence. If the Sanhedrin did not maintain order, the Romans would surely intervene and remove it from power.

There were several key events that triggered the desire to destroy Jesus...
(The crucifixion of the King of Glory – Eugenia Constantinou)

#1 The miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. This was just before the Triumphal entry and it created a crowd as the people had heard about the miracle. The religious leaders had also heard, and they convened a council and planned to kill him – John 11:53

#2 The Entry Into Jerusalem – Palm Sunday

Until this point, Jesus had forbidden talk about his identity as the Messiah, but now he openly accepted the cheers and the messianic titles shouted by the crowd.

#3 The Cleansing of the Temple – The Temple was big business for the entire region. Because of the required 'pilgrim festivals' for all Jewish men, it was like hosting a Super Bowl three times a year. The desire for financial gain meant that the court of the gentiles was turned into a marketplace.

The largest area on the Temple Mount was the Court of the Gentiles, a massive plaza open to the general public that surrounded the Temple Courts proper, which were restricted spaces.

Everything that took place on the Temple Mount was sanctioned by the high priest and chief priests, who received a percentage of the proceeds accumulated by the merchants and money changers and also decided who could do business there. **So, Jesus was interfering with business and challenged the Temple authorities misuse of the Temple for personal profit. In addition, this disturbance created an air of instability which would attract closer scrutiny by the Romans and threaten the power of the Priests and Pharisees.**

The word for "robbers" here is striking. It is not an ordinary thief but one who *forcibly* takes the property of another. The chief priests were seizing the tithes of the ordinary priests by force for their own enrichment,

Jesus was not opposing Temple worship or denouncing Temple rituals themselves as empty formalities. On the contrary, he affirmed the sanctity of the Temple, his Father's house, which should be respected and treated with honor and reverence, rather than exploited as an opportunity for financial gain.

The religious leaders didn't care about the reverence that Jesus had for the Temple. His actions interfered with the status quo and they added to their reasons to get rid of him.

As the saying goes, "The plot thickens." We know how it plays out. Jesus knew how it would play out, but those on site in the Temple that day would watch it play out over the next few days.

The religious leaders zealous to preserve the Temple did not recognize the True Temple in their midst. Jesus was God in the flesh, the True Temple. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The astonished crowd witnessing the cleansing of the Temple could not know of the impending end of animal sacrifice, that Christ would soon sacrifice himself as the spotless Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.

THE TABLE represents the full and final sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

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Discussion questions

Why would Mark include the story of the fig tree in the context of cleansing the Temple?

What is hypocrisy? How did Jesus view it?

How do we view it?

In what ways do we risk being hypocrites?

How does the fig tree represent the worship at the Temple?

According to this passage, what was ignored in the Temple ?

What is the definition of *fruitlessness* in regards to a Christian? A church?

What motivated the religious leaders to destroy Jesus?