

The Temple and the Tree.  
Mark 11:12-25

Matthew 5:38-48

Hosea 8:10-17

Responsive Reading. Isaiah 7:14 and 9:2-7

A few weeks ago I had mentioned that when chapter 10 ended it was the ending of Jesus teaching on discipleship, well, that is not entirely true. In a way it is for he is no longer formally teaching him these things about discipleship, but I think today in the story of the fig tree we see a picture of the discipleship that he has been teaching. So with that in mind, let us start this morning by reading our passage here in chapter 11, starting in verse 12-25

I think before we really start diving into this passage and to help us begin to understand and put together an application of the cursing of the fig tree that it is important for us to understand actually how a fig tree bears fruit. The typical harvest season of Figs is from mid-August to mid-October, but after the harvest in late October the fig tree begins to sprout buds on the branches which remain undeveloped throughout the winter. These buds, around the months of March and April begin to swell into green knops known in Hebrew as paggim and then is shortly followed by the sprouting of leaf buds in April. So as we can see the fig tree actually begins sprouting fruit, before even produces leaves. So once a fig tree has leaves, one expects that one would find these paggim in various stages of maturity and while not yet ripened they often were eaten at this earlier stage.

There has been much debate over the meaning of Jesus' action of cursing the fig tree that we read about here this morning. This is the first, and only miracle that Jesus performs recorded in any of the gospels that result in the destruction of something. All of Jesus miracles have been those of healing, of calming the storms, they have had a redemptive, salvific message showing the power and authority that Jesus has over the natural and spiritual realm. Healing the hopeless, such as the woman with the issue of blood, the leper, and the paralytic, and the blind. Casting out evil demonic spirits, raising people from the dead, all of these miracles we can see teach God's saving grace and power to those who have nothing within themselves to bring to this salvation, except faith, which God had granted to them.

Likewise in the other miracles, the feeding of the multitudes, the calming of the storm, even the turning water to wine point to God's provisions, to his abundant grace and care providing for the needs of people. And in this we notice that unlike the healing miracles which Jesus often remarked, your faith has made you whole, in these provision miracles it was his provision provided to those who were in need. I think from these miracles one can make an argument for God's common grace to mankind, that is his mercy and grace upon even the unbelievers. We as believers and followers of Christ thank God for his provision for us, and his watch care and all that he gives, but he also gives and provides common grace to those who are not his people. That is why I had Clay read that passage in Matthew 5 this morning, verse 45, "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

These miracles of provision are showing God's mercy, his grace, and his generosity that he provides what he does for all who are unworthy. And this of course can be broken down into 2 ways, his provision for life, such as the sun, the rain, the days, months, and years that he we are each given, but it also applies in salvation, for he has freely given his Son to die, for us who are not worthy of his blood, who are not worthy of salvation, but because of his love for us, before the foundation of the world he sent his Son to die.

So as we can see in each of these miracle types there is a message, a lesson of redemption, of grace, of mercy, of healing, and provision. But here, in the case of the fig tree he curses the tree and it withers and dies. So what could this mean? What is the purpose of this miraculous destruction? Where before Jesus would heal by just speaking a word, here he destroys by just speaking a word. What purpose does this example stand to teach us? Well, that is the million dollar question that has been hotly debated in the church at least since the post Enlightenment era. And many have contrived some pretty inventive interpretations to try to explain this miracle of destruction. Bertrand Russell who was an agnostic philosopher and no friend to the Christian faith, accused Jesus of having vindictive fury against the tree and blaming the tree for not bearing fruit even though it was out of season and he believed that this entire episode tarnished the character of Jesus. He wrote, "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."

He sees that this account of the fig tree shows a weak spot in the supposedly spotless lamb of God. In a sense saying because of this act, there are many others through out history who show greater wisdom and virtue than this one supposed messiah. But he is not the only one who sees this destruction miracle in such a way, for T.W. Manson who was an English bible scholar found this account to be offensive for he said that this story is out of character for Jesus, and that it is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill-temper. For the supernatural energy employed to blast the unfortunate tree might have been more usefully expended in forcing a crop of figs out of season. As it stands, this story is simply incredible.

And I am sure there are many many more who weigh on on this issue, but lastly in one of the earliest known commentaries on the book of Mark written by Victor of Antioch in the 5<sup>th</sup> century shows that it was understood that this event was an enacted parable, it was an act of judgment to symbolize another coming act of judgment and that was the coming judgment of Jerusalem. And I think that this is rightly understood, for taken in context of Mark's writing here, we see that this story of the fig tree serves as the bread pieces of a judgment sandwich. This is a literary tool that Mark uses a lot, and we have talked about it a few times already, within Mark's account of an event there is often another event that unfolds and both end up pointing to the same lesson, or are part of the same teaching. And here we see the same.

So in this Markan sandwich fashion, we see that Jesus curses the fig tree, goes to the temple and drives out the money changers, then as he passes by again his disciples remark how the tree has withered. Mark's placement of the cursing of the fig tree here, and Jesus' action within the temple in his sandwich pattern of writing signifies that Mark intends his readers to see in the fate of this unfruitful tree the judgment of God on the unfruitful temple. But I also see it as having a further meaning having just come after the teaching on discipleship, and how a true follower of Christ will conduct themselves I see within this fig tree another picture of discipleship but in the negative. Mark records that Jesus seeing that tree having leaves approaches looking for the fruit, but finding none curses the tree. This sounds very much like someone who has an appearance of faith, but no fruit to go with it making the faith void, and worthless.

The reason why I say this is, is because of what we studied in the book of James. Keep this fig tree in mind, as I read from James, chapter 2, verses 14-26. "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, Depart in peace, be warmed and filled, but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?"

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead. But someone will say, you have faith and I have works, show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God, you do well, even the demons believe and tremble! But do you want to know, o foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works and by works faith was made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which says, Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Does this seem similar? I think it does, there is also Jesus warning of the teaching of the false prophets in Matthew chapter 7, verse 15” Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. See did not James just say that your faith will be proven by your works? By your fruits? Continuing on here, Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is what...cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

There is so much that can be said about this passage, and we could go off on some rabbit trails talking about judging fruits, judging a persons faith. Mankind loves to say, do not judge lest you yourself be judged...but Jesus says right here, judge their fruit, if they are good trees they will bear good fruit..but if they are bad trees they will be cut and thrown into the fire. And the same with James, he is saying go ahead judge me...see that my works come as a product of my faith. But if you find that that my claims to faith bear not fruit, have no works of that faith that I am claiming then my claim is false. So I think we are starting to see what lesson the cursing of the fig tree is. This tree which had leaves and the appearance of bearing fruit, even though the season had passed turned out to be deceptive and have no fruit at all. This is a tree with the signs of fruit, but having no fruit. I had said that this lesson of the fig tree was yet another example of discipleship, well as we can see it is the negative example of one who is appearing to be, but who truly is not. Just like I had mentioned last week about the trends that we see in our churches today, focusing on drawing people in through entertainment, and exciting programs but lacking the gospel is like this fig tree having an appearance of Christianity but bearing no fruit of it. It is the same with disciples, there are many who claim Christ, but do not bear the fruit of discipleship, they do not show forth the works of one who is following Christ.

Keeping what we read in James in mind, about faith, and works, working together as I was reading about the growth of fig tree's and bearing fruit another example became apparent how the fig tree bearing fruit is much like that of regeneration of a believer. First the fruit is developed, in this case, the fruit of the holy spirit, faith, and belief and it sits there for a time before sprouting and covering with leaves. Salvation is an inward outward event, not the other way around. First comes the working of the spirit, bearing witness of Christ and out of that sprouts faith, which is not yet ripened, but it hangs on the branches.

We may fight against it, and struggle with it for a time, through a spiritual winter of anguish, depression, but then comes the spring, the culmination of the new birth, repentance, forgiveness, and a new heart, it is then that faith blossoms, and the branches become full of ripe fruit and bearing leaves broadcasting to the world this new birth and the fruit, the works, the faith that we have. Coming to Christ, is very much like the fig tree's cycle of bearing fruit.

But the fig tree is just one part of our passage this morning, it is but the bread holding the true meat of this lesson which is found here in verse 15-19 which has to do with the Temple in Jerusalem. So to set the stage of the temple here, I want to read a bit about this temple here in Jerusalem at this time. This would have been Herod's temple, Israel's 3<sup>rd</sup> temple, following the temples of Solomon, and Zerubbabel, and it was still under construction at the time of Jesus arrival having begun in 20 BC.

The temple consisted of four divisions and was of immense grandiose proportions. The first and largest division was the Court of the Gentiles, an open air quadrangle measuring some 500 yards long, by 325 yards wide, the equivalent of about 35 acres and it was enclosed by a portico supported by rows of columns. According to Josephus, the columns were 30 feet high and so massive that it took 3 people with hands held together surround one of them at the base. The columns were crowned with Corinthian capitals, and the ceiling of the porticoes was ornamented with wood carvings. In the area enclosed by this massive perimeter of porticoes merchants sold sheep and doves for sacrifice and exchanged foreign currency into the Tyrian shekel, the closest available currency to the Hebrew shekel. These temple precincts were overseen by the Sadducees, and the immense volume of trade and exchange in the court of the Gentiles was not only crucial for the maintenance of proper temple worship but also for the financial gain of the Sadducees and Sanhedrin. The volume of the trade that went on in the court of the gentiles was conducted on a scale equal with the grandeur of Herod's temple itself.

The huge quantity of animals in the temple was so great as to be almost unbelievable, Day after day masses of animals were slaughtered and burnt, and in spite of the thousands of priests at the temple when one of these great festivals came around the multitude of sacrifices was so great that they could hardly keep up with them. Josephus wrote, that in AD. 66 the year that this temple was completed 255,600 lambs were sacrificed for Passover.

So we can see that this selling of animals at the temple was a rather lucrative business. The temple was split into 4 sections. The outer section being the court of Gentiles, then there was the Court of Women, The Court of Israel which was only for circumcised Jewish males, and then the Holy of Holies. The court of Gentiles had pretty much become a proverbial livestock market full of animal dealers and money changers which was necessary for the temple sacrifices and practices, it gave the pilgrims to the temple especially during festivals a way to acquire the necessary sacrifices.

In verse 15 and 16 we see that Jesus didn't just disrupt a few merchants and bankers, but it says in verse 16 that He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple and he said, "is it not written that my house shall be called a house of prayer to all nations? But you have made it a den of thieves." The messiah was believed to come to purge Jerusalem and the Temple of the Gentiles, to reestablish Israel as a nation as it once was under King David but as we see Jesus' action here is actually quite the opposite. He did not clear the Gentiles out of the temple, but rather cleared those who were using the temple worship to make themselves rich. This of course was not lost on the religious leaders who witnessed it, for in verse 17 it says, that the chief priests and scribes sought how they might destroy him. They feared him, and the people's response to his teaching. As we have seen throughout this gospel record according to Mark the religious leaders were constantly seeking to discredit Jesus and his disciples I think largely because they had felt threatened by him. They saw his rise in popularity, the crowds that would gather to him and saw him as a threat to their power, and authority. So now having been unsuccessful in their attempt to discredit him, and now here he is in the temple exposing their exploitation of the temple rituals to make themselves rich that they seek to kill him.

These verses are commonly understood as Jesus coming and purifying the temple, casting out those who were corrupt but in the context of the fig tree which bears no fruit I don't think that is actually the intention here. There is a reason that Mark sandwiched this account of Jesus in the temple between the reports of the deceptive fig tree that looks to be bearing fruit, but is instead barren. Jesus action here in the temple is like the curses of the barren fig tree, it is not a cleansing, or fixing, it was a direct attack against the commerce upon which the temple operations depended, he was in a sense, putting an ax to the root of the temple. In the subsequent chapters here in Mark Jesus says that this temple will be destroyed and not one stone will be left stacked upon the other, talking not only of the physical destruction of the temple, but also the necessity of it, for he says that he will build a temple in 3 days that is not made with human hands, speaking of course of his resurrection.

The time of the temple worship has ended, for the fulfillment that it was to point to has come. Now that the messiah has come there is no need for the offering of lambs, and bulls as an atoning sacrifice for the fulfillment of those examples has come. The temple, as a means of communication with God is no longer necessary, and the only way to God is through the Son Jesus Christ, through prayer, and in faith. The old covenant has passed, the temple is obsolete and unnecessary, for Christ, the true temple, who has established a new covenant in his blood, not by the blood of animals, but by his own blood has entered the holy of holies and accomplished redemption for the true Israel, for all of those of faith who are the children of Abraham, the heirs of the promises. And it is on that note that I want to end today, this triumphal message of the arrival of the Savior who has come to Jerusalem to die, on a cross, and to rise again establishing his kingdom and accomplishing redemption for his people. Praise God for his grace and mercy toward us.