

Faith is the Source of Fruitfulness

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 11:12-25 / April 21, 2024

Introduction:

Today we are picking back up in our study of the gospel of Mark with an interesting passage, following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, that shows the danger of fruitlessness and highlights the source of fruitfulness. Living in a farming community, we understand the need of fruitfulness. When the harvest is down all of us struggle in some way. It affects finances, community events, and in some ways, it impacts the overall disposition of the community. A fruitful harvest is important to our community in a way it may not be to others. The scriptures often use the idea of fruitful and fruitless harvests to illustrate truths about the community God's people and economy of God's grace. As we will see, the call of Mark 11:12-25 is for the community of God's people to bear fruit. Before we work through this passage, I want to address a question you may have depending on what translation you are using. The ESV translation stops at verse 25, while yours may include verse 26. This is because verse 26 isn't found in the earliest and most reliable transcripts. This likely means it was not part of the original manuscript, so we won't cover it today. Connect with me after our gathering if you have any questions about this. We are going to approach this passage by asking questions before we draw out the main points. Consider the first question with me from verses 12-14,

Why Does Jesus Curse a Fig Tree?

At first glance, this scene seems out of character for Jesus and an odd inclusion by Mark, but when you observe the story closely, you find there is more than first meets the eye. Look at verses 12-14, "On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it." The scene is quite dramatic, isn't it? Jesus was hungry, sees a fig tree in leaf, finds no figs to eat, and curses the tree. Some suggest this almost paints Jesus like a spoiled, hangry child. The end of verse 13 causes more questions, because Mark says, "it was not the season for figs." What is going on here? Note several details Mark gives. First, verse 12 directly connects this to his account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem by saying, "On the following day." This reminds us of what we saw on Palm Sunday, and how anticlimactic Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was, where He simply entered the temple, looked around, and left. This connection makes this scene an extension of that moment. Second, Mark says the fig tree was "in leaf." Leaves on the fig tree would suggest it had small green buds called "paggim" that would be edible, though not as juicy as full figs. So, it was right for Jesus to expect food. Third, after Jesus curses the tree, Mark says "his disciples heard it." This phrase will appear again and indicates they not only hear Jesus but understand what He meant. Fourth, and most importantly, the statement "for it was not the season for figs," similar to what Mark does in chapters 1, 5, 7, and 13, alerts us to a symbolic meaning through allusion to prophetic truth. On several occasions in Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, and Micah, the fig tree is used to speak of Israel. Two passages are particularly helpful to consider. In Micah 7:1, the prophet weeps over the lack of righteousness in Israel, comparing it to a fig tree with no first-ripe fig that his soul desires. In Jeremiah 8:13, God speaks of going to gather Israel but finding "no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree," and what He gave them passing away from them. This shows the fig tree symbolically represents Israel. Note one more thing. Jump down to verses 20-21. There Mark says, "As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.'" After verse 14, the story of this fig tree pauses and picks back up in verses 20-21. Mark sandwiches the clearing of the Temple in between to indicate a connection between the two scenes. This shows us the symbolic meaning is related to Jesus' clearing of the temple. When connected to verses 12-14, we see the language of verse 20 recalling the first part of Hosea 9:16, where God says, "Ephraim is stricken; their root is dried up; they shall bear no fruit."

All of these details show the cursing of the fig tree is an enacted parable or illustration by Jesus due to the current state Israel, and particularly the temple. So, before we draw out the point being made, let's observe what takes place in the temple. Look at verses 15-16, "And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple." Notice how Mark uses the word "and" twice, saying, "And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple." This indicates a clear continuation in the text. He also records everything happening as though Jesus just walked in and started making a ruckus. This seems hasty until we realized this is a result of Jesus' survey of the temple from verse 11. Now, in this moment, Jesus would be in the first division of the Temple, called the "Court of the Gentiles." This was a 35-acre open section of the temple reserved for the worship of Gentiles. Jesus does two things of importance. He drives everyone involved in exchanging money and buying pigeons, and He wouldn't allow anyone to carry something through the temple. The money changing was an exchange of foreign coin into Jewish currency required to make any transaction in the temple. The purchase of pigeons was specifically for the use of sacrifice by the poor. The religious leaders were essentially forcing Gentiles, in particular, to trade in their currency and buy "approved" animals to make their sacrificial worship to the Lord. It is estimate there were fees and price increases anywhere from 25 percent to 16 times the normal cost. What Jesus saw when surveying the temple was so atrocious to Him that upon His return, he drove out anyone participating in it. Focus in on verse 17, "And he was teaching them and saying 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 den of robbers.'" Jesus is scolding everyone for turning the temple into a place of extortion and keeping the nations from being able to approach God in prayer. Jesus' question comes from Isaiah 56:3-8, that says, "Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. 'And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.' The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, 'I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.'" Do you see what Isaiah was prophesying? God's purpose for His temple was to be a place for all nations who join themselves to Him, and instead they had profaned it with their entitlement and greed, creating barriers to proper worship. Jesus' conclusion comes from God's scathing judgment of Israel in Jeremiah 7:8-12, where the Lord says, "Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel." Jesus draws together two prophetic phrases to speak against what was taking place. One that shows how they had missed the point of the temple and the other showing how they were not truly worshipping God at all. When we pull all of this together, we discover that,

Jesus' Cursing of the Fig Tree Illustrates God's Judgement of Israel's Fruitlessness

When the Messiah came to visit Israel, he found the temple to be fruitless. Like the fig tree, it had the appearance of fruit, as it was beautiful and beaming with activity. But that beauty and activity was a fraud. As we continue in Mark's gospel, we will discover this curse is more far reaching.

As John MacArthur says, “That curse extended beyond the temple, to the religious leadership of Israel, therefore encompassing Israel’s religion and all who were part of it, who essentially made up the whole nation.” (<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/41-57/nothing-but-leaves>). This doesn’t mean the curse extended to every individual in the nation, but on the religious system and structure that had come to define the nation of Israel. Note the severity of that judgment. In verse 14, Jesus says to the tree, symbolizing Israel and the temple, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” Then, in verse 20, the tree was “withered away to its roots.” The Messiah’s judgment effectively shows the entire religious system no longer had a place in God’s purposes. Notice how the religious leaders understand this in verses 18-19, “And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.” Mark describes the chief priests and scribes hearing Jesus’ words just like the disciples did in verse 14. Their desire to destroy Jesus shows they understood what He was saying but their fear kept them from taking action. Jesus and the disciples’ exit from the city and return to see the tree completely withered points to the totality of this judgment. Everything we will see in chapters 11-12 takes place in the temple until Jesus stands outside of it and predicts its destruction in chapter 13. All of this shows Israel’s religious system would bear no fruit again. Yet, the book of Acts shows God isn’t done with the people of Israel, as the believing remnant of Israel begin to produce fruit as they repent and turn to Jesus Christ. Before we move to our next question, I want to consider an implication for us from this judgment. Family, are we bearing fruit? Is GracePoint a place for all peoples to worship God? This action against the temple reveals a dreadful possibility. A church can be beaming with religious activity like the temple was, or look beautiful at first glance, but ultimately be fruitless. It is possible for people to participate in religious actions but as Jesus said in Mark 7:6-7, their hearts are far from God and they are really worshipping in vain. The call of God is to trust in Christ alone for salvation but God always works through that trust to produce fruit in our lives. We cannot be confident we have truly trusted in Christ if we aren’t bearing fruit. This leads to our next question to consider from verses 22-25.

Why Does Jesus Follow the Cursing of the Fig Tree with a Call to Faith?

Mark has shown Jesus cursing the fig tree was to show God’s judgment, but how does verses 22-25 fit with that? Look at verses 22-25, starting at verse 20, “As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and thrown into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” It seems at first like Jesus is shifting away from the subject at hand. Some scholars believe Mark may be inserting other sayings from Jesus’ ministry and we should separate their point from the cursing of the fig tree. However, whether Mark brought these in from other moments or not, it appears he sees a connection. Note three things Jesus speaks about in verses 22-25: faith, prayer, and forgiveness. Faith, prayer, and forgiveness were the essence of temple worship. People went to the temple to pray and sacrifice with faith that God would hear and forgive. What would they do without the temple? Jesus’ call for faith, prayer, and forgiveness, entreats the disciples to trust in God despite the removal of the temple in God’s purposes because something greater than the temple had come. God’s plan of salvation was secure because Christ’s death on the cross would become the perfect and final sacrifice to secure the forgiveness of sins and His resurrection provides eternal access to the Father’s power through prayer. With these truths following the cursing of the temple, we see,

Jesus Confirms Faith is the Source of Fruitfulness

Church, let Jesus' words in verse 22 ring in your ears, "Have faith in God." The word for faith is used three times in these verses showing its importance. Verses 23-25 shows what this faith involves. Look at verse 23, Jesus says, "Truly," drawing our attention in, "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." In verse 23, Jesus uses hyperbole to show the power of faith driven prayer. Listen to these declarations, "it will be done for him...whatever you ask in prayer...it will be yours." These declarations are anchored to the first one, "Have faith in God," showing every request is made through a deep and abiding trust in God that knows His answers are always best. Family, do you approach the throne of God with this kind of faith? That is the confident access we have through the blood of Jesus. Verse 25 shows the importance of the community of faith. As William Lane comments the conjunction of verses 23-25, "Suggests that not only faith but also the willingness of the Christian to forgive conditions the effectiveness of prayer," and in this, "Mark affirms that the right to pray the prayer envisioned in verses 23-24 belongs only to those who are mutually reconciled and united in a community of faith" (William Lane, The Gospel according to Mark, p. 411). The call to forgive others so God may forgive us doesn't make God's forgiveness contingent upon ours but points our hearts away from selfish desires that disregard how much we have been forgiven and refuses to forgive others. And it sets our hearts on our collective community of faith so we don't repeat the mistakes of the temple. Oh, the cry of my heart is that we are a church that shines for the kingdom of God, longing for God to do great things in and through us. Do you long for that? Family, we will not become that kind of church if we are withholding forgiveness from each other. We will not become that kind of church if don't know how to get on our knees and ask God for great things. We will not become that kind of church if our faith has lost sight of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

As we bring this all to a conclusion, and the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, I want to ask a final question, what can we take away from all of this? I see two things. First,

1) We Should Seek to Live in Full Faith

As we have seen, the kind of faith Jesus is calling for has its sights set firmly on Him, believes God accomplishes great things through our prayers, and forgives others because God has so profoundly forgiven us. Is this what your faith looks like? If not, set your heart on the truth of Christ's words today. The point isn't to try and muster up more faith on your own though. Family, full faith never trusts in yourself, rather it leans fully on God. This ultimately isn't a call to try, but to rely. As Hudson Taylor once said well, "God uses people who are weak and feeble enough to lean on Him." If this isn't what your faith looks like, cry out to God for more faith. If you don't have faith in Christ at all and haven't trusted in His grace through the cross for your forgiveness, pray and trust in Him today. Church, let's seek to live in full faith. Second,

2) We Should Strive to Be Fruitful

Jesus' judgment of Israel's fruitlessness should push our hearts to long to be fruitful. We should lay aside any pretense of worship, or distraction from it, and go hard after God in true worship. We should remove any barrier that keeps people from worshipping Christ when they come, no matter how dear it may be to us. We should ask God to help us forgive and remove all bitterness from our hearts. We should repent to each other and seek reconciliation. We should keep the glory of Jesus Christ as the content and focus of our worship, and God's power in the gospel the central theme of our message. We should strive to bear fruit that draws as many people to worship our God as we can. How will you respond today? As you are responding to God's grace you are welcome to come and kneel before God in a posture of humility, sit and reflect on these truths, or stand and sing as you are led. We also have a team of people available to pray with you and for you who will be worshipping on the front rows or the bottom of the stairs in the back with lanyards on. Let's seek the face of God together. Would you pray with me?