



**Mark 11:11-26**  
**Faith and Prayer**

**Summary:** Jesus encounters a tree and a temple that look like they're full of life but are empty, then encourages His disciples in faith and prayer – real practices that bear real fruit.

This morning I've got a message for two types of people. First, the person who thinks religious people are hypocrites or phony – the cynical person who has seen through all the spiritual smoke and mirrors and says it's all just theater, there's nothing of substance behind it. If that's you, if you're suspicious of religion, my message is: you're right. But do you know *why* you're right? We'll look at the answer this morning.

The second message is for the true believer – the person who knows there is a God, and maybe even knows that Jesus is His Son and has found new life by asking Jesus to forgive your faults and failures. You've asked God for help, direction, and strength in living this new life. And now you're trying to figure out: what do I need to do? And how, exactly, am I supposed to pray – why does it seem like sometimes God just doesn't hear my prayers?

Whichever of these two groups you fall into, I think you'll find something helpful today.

So, as we prepare to dig in, let's remember our context. We've come to the final week of Jesus' life. It's also the week of Passover, the largest and most important holiday for the Jewish people. Jews have traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate from all over Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. And here, in the nation's religious and political capital, while Jews from all around the world are in town, Jesus entered the city and making a triumphal procession to the Temple and presented Himself as King and Messiah.

It was a moment foretold by the prophets for centuries. It was meant to be the answer to the nation's prayers. It should have been a time of great celebration and rejoicing - and for some it was - but others, especially those in leadership, opposed, resisted and ultimately, rejected Jesus.

So today we see Him act out a parable - He'll use a fig tree as an illustration to explain what's happening with the nation. Which, I know can sound strange, but we'll work through it together and I've got plenty of pictures to help us understand. Read with me:

**Mark 11:12** Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. **13** And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. **14** In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again."  
And His disciples heard *it*.

OK, wow. What's going on here? This doesn't seem like the Jesus we know. This isn't feeding hungry crowds or casting out a demon, it's not healing a blind man, or raising a widow's son from the dead. Why is Jesus cursing a tree?

Was He just in a mood? Was His blood sugar a little low, was He hangry? Did the Messiah miss His morning coffee?

Actually, it's none of that. Here are four things to help you understand what's happening. First, foraging (which is eating food you found in the wild) was common. Food-producing trees and plants were everywhere in Jerusalem: walnuts, olives, figs, and palm trees which provided dates, just to name a few.



Those planted along the road were considered communal property. If you saw some fruit, and you were hungry, you were welcome to it. Today you can do the same thing in many of our state and national parks and even along roadways - if you see berries growing on a bush or bramble or cane, you're welcome to pick them and eat them so long as you know what you're eating and it's not poisonous and you don't get eaten by a bear.



Second, figs grow fruit and foliage (or leaves) at the same time. New figs start off in early spring as little, green, under-ripe fruit and over the course of several months, the tree produces more and more leaves as the fruit turns purple and ripens. They're usually ready to each sometime around May-June each year.

But Mark is telling us about events that happened during Passover, which typically occurs sometime during March or April, at least two months ahead of when you would expect to see a fig tree full of leaves. That's why this one tree catches Jesus' attention - it seemed to be growing ahead of schedule, but if it was *full of leaves*, then it certainly should have had some mature fruit.

So, there are two things to know about the physical realities of this event, but there are some spiritual realities to understand as well.

The third thing you need to know is: that bearing fruit is a metaphor for living the kind of life that produces things that please God. In fact, the message of John the Baptist, who came before Jesus, was repent (which means to stop doing things that God says are wrong) and "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8). The Bible is actually full of references to people producing what it calls fruit - things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.

And this is true not only of individuals, but also of nations. So, the fourth thing you need to know is that the Old Testament specifically pictures the nation of Israel as a fig tree. And not just once or twice, it's a repeated theme. You can read about it in the prophets, in places like Jeremiah 24, Hosea 9, and Micah 7.<sup>1</sup>

And now that we know all of this, we're able to understand what happened next when Jesus approached the Temple.

**Mark 11:15** So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 16 And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. 17 Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"

Just as with the tree, Jesus was disappointed with what He found in the religious and political capital of the nation. Jerusalem looked as promising as a fig tree full of leaves from a distance, but it turned out to be disappointingly empty as well.



If you went back in history and traveled to Jerusalem you would see the massive Temple complex dominating the city's skyline, it's white stones shining brightly in the Mediterranean sun. And there, in the Temple you would find daily religious services were held every morning and evening. There was a cycle of yearly feasts like Passover that involved a flourish of activity drawing Jewish pilgrims from around the region. Serving in the Temple were the Levites and the priests and of course, undergirding it all were the ancient Scriptures. The spiritual life and religion of Jerusalem looked to be vigorous from a distance – there was all kinds of activity... but there was no fruit.

From a distance the Temple looked like [a house of prayer for all the nations](#), only when you got up close did you discover, it was actually a [den of thieves](#). There was all this religious activity and appearance, but nothing of substance that actually healed, nourished, or satisfied the empty soul.

And so, if you're that person who is cynical or skeptical about religion – this is why I'm willing to say you may be right – and to say something that may surprise you – Jesus saw things the same way. He saw through all the empty words, all the empty rituals, all the

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<sup>1</sup> The KJV and NKJV refer to "fruit" in these passages, but every other translation mentions "figs."

empty worship and saw who and what these people were really like inside. These ‘religious’ people would actually conspire to murder Him. Notice,

18 And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching.

Jesus had come to offer Himself to the city and to the nation, but the leaders were so caught up in their religion and their ways that they had no time or space for Him. If anything, they saw Him as a threat. What they did not know was that just as Jesus rejected the fruitless fig tree, He was going to reject their fruitless religion and the consequences would be the same for the tree and the Temple – they would shrivel up and lose all the signs of life they once had.

19 When evening had come, He went out of the city.

20 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. 21 And Peter, remembering, said to Him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away.”

The same thing would happen later to Jerusalem. In just a few years, the Romans would



come to the city to silence a rebellion and effectively put an end to the Jewish state and the life-less machinery of its religious system. The Temple where Jesus stood was completely torn down and burned in 70 A.D..

Eventually, it became illegal for two Jewish men to be seen talking to each other in public in the land of Israel. As a result, the Jewish people began to migrate all over the world in a global exodus from the Promised Land. The fruitless nation withered just like the fruitless tree.

The Romans then renamed the place Palestine after the Philistines, the historic enemies of Israel, and for 1800 years only a small remnant of Jews lived in the land until the nation was reestablished in 1948 following the tragedies of the Holocaust and the Jewish genocide during World War II.

The point of all this is that there were two fig trees, one literal – the actual tree and one figurative – the city of Jerusalem representing the nation of Israel. Both seemed to be full of life, energy and promise, but both ultimately proved to be empty and unsatisfying. In the end, both were judged and both were destroyed.



So, if you are critical and skeptical of meaningless, showy, religion – you’re right. But remember you aren’t the first person to point that out – Jesus said it too. And He presented a much better way for His followers – a way that centered on faith and relational connection with God through prayer, because that’s how you bear spiritual fruit and do more than just grow religious leaves.

Look at what Jesus says next to His disciples.

22 So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God.

Friends, I think these four words are the key to this entire passage. This is the take away – this is the essence of it all. Religion goes wrong when it’s detached from God. When we try to do it all our own way. When we try to do it by ourselves.

We need relationship, not rituals and routines. It’s not enough to come to church, or listen to Christian music, or even to read your Bible and pray occasionally – all of that could be nothing but leaves. Do you [have faith in God](#)? Do you trust Him? Do you connect with Him? Do you allow Him to direct your life? Do you depend on Him? This is the kind of life that God wants from us. A life that invites Jesus in – into your struggles, into your questions, into your failures and faults – a life that says I *can’t* do this on my own, I don’t *want* to do this on my own – at home, at school, at work, in my relationships, *God, I want You in here with me.*

Jesus then speaks about what that kind of relationship can look like:

23 For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. 24 Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*. 25 ‘And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. 26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’

Moving mountains was a common expression at the time, a way of saying, ‘to do the impossible.’ Jesus never actually moved a mountain or a tree, and there’s no record of any Christian ever doing this in history – it’s not meant to be taken literally. But He is making a point – He’s saying that if you are in a relationship with God, if you have faith and belief in Him, you will see Him do amazing things through you.

Jesus is saying your life can produce stunning, shocking, ridiculous displays of fruitfulness, IF you have *and retain* a connection with God. If God is at work in you, you can have both appearance AND substance, both leaves AND fruit because you’re not just you going through religious motions on your own.



Imagine growing a 2200 pound pumpkin – it’s a stunning counterpoint to the barrenness of the fig tree.

Remember I said I had a message here for two kinds of people this morning? Well, here’s the message for the true believer – the person who wants to know how to live for and with Jesus and who is struggling to understand how to do it and how to pray and wondering why our prayers just don’t seem to work at times. And the message is: **healthy plants produce good fruit** – so, if you want good things to come out of your life, focus on your connection to God and His connection to you.

You see, if we don’t pay attention to the whole story that’s unfolding, we can read what Jesus says here and think we’ve got an unlimited promise – that all I have to do is ask God for whatever I want and if I believe that I’ll receive it, I will.

It’s possible to take this out of context and see it as a blank-check from God. But then, when you try to start writing checks with the promise you run into problems and wonder what’s wrong. We ask for all kinds of things, even good things, and we don’t receive them – what’s going on? Did Jesus lie? Do we just need to have more faith? What’s the problem?

There are many things that need to be considered about unanswered prayers, but one of the biggest may be the fact that we often pray for the equivalent of leaves instead of fruit. We pray for things that will make us, or others comfortable, when God may be working to make us holy instead.

If you’re praying for, or asking for something that will make you look good from the outside, ask yourself – will it also produce fruit? Ask, am I abiding in Christ? Am I rooted and grounded in Him? We’re told to pray “in Jesus’ name,” so am I asking for the kind of things He would put His name on?

God is calling you to live a life of purpose anchored in Him, and He will empower you for THAT purpose - but He does not want us to live life on our own.

He wants us to come to Him, He wants us to ask Him for things. He wants to be approachable and He wants to give us good gifts – but He also wants to bear fruit through us. He wants to put things in us and in our lives that will be a blessing to others. He wants us to be a bumper crop of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self-control.

You say, OK I understand about asking for misguided things in my prayers, but but what about prayers for *good* things that go unanswered? Why don’t all the Christians just get together one time and ask for a cure to childhood cancer? Why wouldn’t God answer that prayer? Well, I don’t know and yet I do. Jesus had His own prayer go unanswered in the

Garden of Gethsemane – when He asked if there was any way to avoid what He was about to go through. He prayed for a way out. And there wasn't any other way.

This helps me remember two things – first, sin causes all the pain and suffering we experience in this world, and second, Jesus came to save us from it. As Christians we have no promise that we will escape temporary suffering, but we are guaranteed through Christ that when this life is over, we will escape it forever in eternity.

So pray for a cure to cancer. Pray for a miraculous cure. But then maybe you should also pray and ask God if He wants you to study medicine and use you to develop the next cure or treatment, or to care for people while they're suffering. Make yourself available to God to produce fruit in your life, just as He produced the fruit of salvation through the life of His Son - if you have Christ *in* you pray that God would move mountains *through* you.

Pray for impossible, extraordinary things. I love what John Piper said one time, he said, "I only pray for impossible things, if it was possible, I would do it."

The Scriptures actually say:

**James 4:2** you do not have because you do not ask

So ask. May it never be said that God was willing but we weren't asking.

God is big, and generous, and willing to work – to produce fruit and not just leaves in our lives.

Well, we've covered a lot already but I want to end with two things – a sober warning and an encouraging reminder.

First, the warning: the church can quickly become like ancient Israel – a leafy, fruitless, tree. In the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, Jesus sends letters to seven churches full of warnings and promises. And He warns some of them that they're already trending in the wrong direction – they're full of leaves, but bearing no fruit. They look good from a distance, but they're hollowing out within.



I remember seeing this in Budapest where St Stephen's Basilica is a major tourist attraction with thousands of people coming each day to admire the architecture and take selfies outside, but few coming on Sunday to worship inside. You have a massive building, a beautiful building, full of leaves, but where is the fruit?

Today a lot of so-called megachurches use branding and design throughout their campus so it seems more like a theme park than a church with cheery signage and clever architecture, even a Starbucks kiosk in the foyer. I'm not saying all of that is sinful or definitely wrong,

but it's easy for us to be wowed by the details and the services they provide us as religious consumers. It's easy to focus more on being trendy, cool, and comfortable than on bearing fruit.

So, when you're choosing a new church, things like appearance, vibe, and fun should not be the biggest things you're looking for. Grade them instead on prayer, fellowship, teaching, and the substance of worship, not just the style. In other words, grade them on their fruit, don't just assume it's there because you see a lot of leaves.

That's the sober warning, but now the encouraging reminder. The nation of Israel withered, but never actually died because God keeps His promises to His people. The nation was restored politically in 1948. Since then, they have been constantly opposed politically and militarily and they have never restored their original form of worship in the Temple. The tree has been miraculously replanted by God and slowly but surely it is growing new leaves.



It does not yet bear fruit, but God promises that one day it will – He is not finished with Israel, He has not given up on Israel, they are still His chosen people in the Promised Land and history has proven time and time again that God is their shepherd – when they go astray He will call them back to Himself and sometimes He does that through attacks by an enemy. But, He is also their shield, their defense, and their strong avenger. He will not allow them to suffer long.

God's ultimate plan and desire is to bring Jewish people into the Church. In fact, some of you are here today – you trace your ancestry back to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but you trace your salvation back to Yeshua – Jesus. That's not strange, that's to be expected. Jesus was a Jew. The Christian church was founded and led by His disciples *and they were all Jewish*. In fact, for the first several decades of the Church's history, Jewish-background Christians were the majority.

So Christian, when you look at today's headlines you need to pray for the people of Israel and for the peace of Jerusalem and for the Palestinians as well – God desires to save people from every tribe, tongue and nation. But of all nations, for some reason, Israel has a special place in God's heart. Never forget that God still loves the Jewish people. He has not forgotten them. He has a plan for their salvation – one day we will see the nation full of leaves again and this time, it will be bearing fruit too.

And all of that is meant to be a testimony to us, to tell us something about the mercy, the patience, the generosity, and the power of God.

So let's close by taking a good look at our own lives – are you bearing fruit? Is Jesus producing the fruit of the Spirit in you? Do you even know what that means?





Just like a tree grows and matures over time, are you doing the same? Is God getting more and more fruit off you every year? Are you increasingly available to Him, increasingly fruitful? Why not take a minute now and yield yourself completely to God – tell Him you want to produce more than religious leaves, you want to produce spiritual fruit – you want to see mountains move – for His glory. Take a moment now and pray.



## Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

### Mark 11:11-26 Faith and Prayer

**Summary:** Jesus encounters a tree and a temple that look like they're full of life but are empty, then encourages His disciples in faith and prayer – real practices that bear real fruit.

*NOTE: Mark 11:26 is disputed – some manuscripts include it, others do not. But, the teaching itself is undisputed, it also appears in Matthew 6:15.*

- When or where have you encountered a tree full of leaves but empty of fruit?
- Review the following passages, what do you learn about fruit in the life of the believer? What fruit is each passage talking about?
  - Galatians 5:22-23
  - John 4:34-38
  - Philippians 1:19-26
  - Romans 15:22-29
  - Hebrews 13:10-16
- What are some of the 'good reasons' that might have been floated when deciding whether or not to allow vendors to set up in Temple courts? Why might this have sounded like a good idea to some people?
  - How do we justify similar decisions in our own lives to do things that squeeze out God's original purposes?
- What does it mean for the Temple to be a "house of prayer for all nations?" What *should* have been happening where the vendors were set up?
  - Is our church a house of prayer? Why/why not? What could be done to make it even more of one?
  - Are you more likely to wander through the vendors's table and enjoy the excitement or seek out opportunities to pray? Why?
- Read the following passages and note what you learn about prayer
  - Matthew 7:11
  - Romans 8:28, 32
  - Philippians 4:19
  - 1 John 5:14