

The Fruitless Fig Tree

Mark 11:12-25

When the Bible was being written, fig trees and grape vines were grown all over Israel. Because of their familiarity, God at times used fig trees and grape vines as symbols for Israel – in order to teach truths about the spiritual condition of the Jewish people. This will be true in today’s passage **and** in Mark 12. And so with this in mind, let’s read Mark 11:12-14, and see what it teaches us about Israel **and** about our Lord Jesus in His role as a King,

“The next day as they were leaving Bethany [which means house of figs], Jesus was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs [a number of commentaries point out that it was not yet time for the large, fully developed figs, but it was the time for the early figs, which never got very large, but were still tasty and good]. ¹⁴ Then he said to the [fruitless] tree, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard him say it.”

For Jesus to put a curse on a fig tree is shocking! It almost seems un-Christlike. But we need to remember that Christ is the rightful king of Israel and that this fruitless fig tree was emblematic of the fruitless nation of Israel at that time. Israel was not bearing fruit because it had slipped into a mind set that continues to trip people up today. It is a way of thinking that is first seen in Genesis 3, which is why we used that portion of Scripture as our Old Testament reading.

Genesis 3 is the first time a fig tree appears in the Bible. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they tried to fix their sin problem in their own strength and ingenuity by covering their guilt and nakedness with fig

leaves. How well did their fig leaf coverings work? They didn't work at all. When God entered into the garden, they tried to hide themselves. **But what did God do about their nakedness?** He covered them with animal skins. This required the shedding of blood and the death of the animals. Genesis 3 is the first time God provided substitution for the sin of man. Animal sacrifices then became God's temporary provision for man's sin, until Christ came to be our perfect sacrifice, our perfect substitute for sin.

The reason most of the Jewish people did not repent of their sin and believe in Christ was because they were trusting in their own ingenuity and efforts to cover their guilt. We have already read back in Mark 7, that ceremonial washings and the eating of ceremonially clean food was overly emphasized by the Jewish people. I believe those regulations became their self-efforts to be clean in God's sight. But those efforts were no more effective than the fig leaf garments of Adam and Eve. Good works as a means of earning salvation will not get any of us into heaven.

As pastor Jeff reminded us last Sunday, Jesus had already told His disciples three times in Mark's Gospel, that He was going to Jerusalem to die and rise again. Jesus did that in order to provide forgiveness for our sins and salvation for all who trust in Him. Jesus came to do for us – what we cannot do for ourselves. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Good works follow salvation, but they cannot merit salvation. And if I am doing good works in order to get **me** into heaven, then I am still a self-centered person. Let's continue reading verses 15-18,

“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began

driving out those who were buying and selling there. ¹⁶ He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?’ [that is a quote from Isaiah 56:7] But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’ [a quote from Jeremiah 7:11] ¹⁸ The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him [He could hurt their wallets], because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.”

This was the first time the disciples saw the anger and wrath of Christ against the sinfulness of man. There were hints of this back in Mark 6:11, after Jesus had sent His disciples to nearby villages to teach and cast out demons. He told them if any village did not welcome them or listen to their teaching, they were to shake the dust off their feet when they left that place. What did that mean? The Apostle Paul gives us the answer by using similar imagery before a group of unbelieving Jews in **Acts 18:6**,

“But when the Jews [of Corinth] opposed Paul and became abusive [because he was sharing the good news of the gospel], he shook his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your heads!’”

The New Testament was written under a cloud of a soon coming judgment to be carried out by the ascended King Jesus. When Jesus witnessed what was going on in the temple at Jerusalem – it demonstrated how far the religious leaders of Israel had departed from God. If you are not aware of this, the temple was making many lovers of money wealthy. The reason for that is because Jews and God-fearing Gentiles from all over the Roman world came to Jerusalem to worship God and make sacrifices at the temple. And they came with money in their pockets, which soon

became money in the pockets of those who worked at the temple. For example, foreign currency was not accepted at “God’s house of prayer” – and the money changers charged hefty fees for giving foreigners the approved currency. The animals used in sacrifices also had to pass the approval of the priests – which was not easy. And so people ended up paying top dollar for animals conveniently sold at the temple. The temple had become a money tree, a cash-cow – and that angered Christ.

Jesus quoted from two Old Testament passages after He had overturned tables and drove the buyers and sellers out of the temple area. And friends, whenever the Old Testament is quoted in the New Testament, we need to look at the context of that Old Testament quote. Jesus quoted **Isaiah 56:7**. Let’s look at verses 6 and 7,

“And foreigners [Gentiles] who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him . . . ⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain [speaking of Mount Zion, upon which the temple was built] and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” [the temple of God today is the Church. Is our church a house of prayer for all people, regardless of their income or color of skin?]

Let’s also look at **Isaiah 56:10-11**,

“Israel’s watchmen [her spiritual leaders] are blind, they all lack knowledge . . . ¹¹ They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain.”

In Isaiah’s day, the ten northern tribes of Israel were going to be crushed and carried away by the Assyrians, in large part, because of their

unfaithful spiritual leaders. About a hundred years later Jeremiah had a message from God to the southern tribes of Judah. It is recorded in

Jeremiah 7:9-11,

““Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury . . . ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house [God’s temple], which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’ – safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching!’ declares the LORD” [God goes on to speak of the judgement coming upon Judah at the hands of the Babylonians].

When Jesus stood in the temple of His day and confronted the religious leaders about their thievery – did they repent? No. Instead they looked for a way to kill Jesus. And so what should the unrepentant Jews of Jesus’ day expect would happen to them? We find out in Mark 11:19-24,

“When evening came, they went out of the city [it was not a good place to be]. ²⁰ In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots [it was dead]. ²¹ Peter remembered and said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!’ ²² ‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered. ²³ ‘I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

The withered fig tree was a sign of the judgment that was coming upon apostate, Old Covenant Israel. It had not produced the fruit God desired. Even though God had been a faithful husband to them, they continually ran after idols and played the harlot against God. This may shock you, but one of the idols the Jews had fashioned in their hearts, was the stone temple itself. Friends, that temple was never meant to be permanent. God

originally gave it to them as a tent. It was a temporary provision, designed to point to Christ. And when the Lord Jesus became our perfect sacrifice for sin, the stone temple at Jerusalem became obsolete. There will never again be any need for animal sacrifices. For me, that is good news. But it wasn't for most of the Jewish people. It made them angry.

Do you remember the charge against Christ that resulted in His death? His crime was to say that He was greater than the stone temple and with His coming, its days were numbered. Many Christians do not understand that the destruction of the stone temple in A.D. 70, was carried out by the ascended King Jesus, using the armies of Rome [just as God the Father had destroyed the temple of Jeremiah's day by the hands of the Babylonians].

Who was the first Christian martyr recorded in Acts? A deacon in the church at Jerusalem named Stephen. Listen to the charges against him in **Acts 6:12-14**,

“They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin [the Jewish supreme court].¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, ‘This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place [the temple] and against the law [the ceremonial law, that required animal sacrifices].¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.’”

They were false witnesses in that they claimed Stephen said these things with hate in his heart toward the temple. If the Jewish people had put their trust in Christ, they could have still used that temple as a place of worship and prayer – which is what the early church at Jerusalem did. But unbelieving Jews rejected Jesus and argued that the stone temple was the

only place for the forgiveness of sins. This made the temple an idol that needed to be swept away. And when the stone temple was destroyed, it was the official end of Old Covenant Israel and the Old Covenant age [see Hebrews 8:7-13].

I believe the misuse of the temple as a money tree and as a basis for wrongly exercising power over people, gives us the proper backdrop for understanding what Jesus told His disciples in verse 23,

“ . . . if anyone says to this mountain [referring to Mount Zion, upon which the temple was built], ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea’ [be destroyed], and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.”

In the years following Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, many of the unbelieving Jews became bitter enemies of Christ’s followers, because in their minds Jesus was a false prophet who got exactly what He deserved – death by means of crucifixion. They were not in a good place. This is why the Apostle Paul said what he did in **I Thessalonians 2:14-16**,

“For you, brothers [referring to the Gentile believers at Thessalonica], became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men ¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.”

In Paul’s mind, Christ’s judgment upon that generation of unbelieving Jews, was as good as done. They not only failed to bear good fruit, they were guilty of producing rotten fruit. I believe that if ISIS does not repent

of what they are doing to Christians and to people in general, they too will be severely judged. Did Paul hate the Jewish people of his day? No. Paul constantly risked his life to share the gospel with them. Nor are we to hate the members of ISIS today. But Paul did pray against the false, idolatrous belief system that had captured so many of the Jews.

I think it is very appropriate for Christians to pray against evil systems of our day. For example, I pray that God will take the monstrous pornography industry and cast it into the sea. But if a pornographer asked if I would come and share with him how he could gain forgiveness, I would be there in a minute. I believe this is the attitude Jesus is speaking about in verse 25, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Christians are not to hate people who are made in God’s image. We can hate what they do, but we are not to hate them. Let me illustrate. I had a friend who was walking at night and was attacked and his wallet taken. His attacker was caught, put in jail and was awaiting trial. My friend went to the jail and because he was a Christian he forgave the man and told him how to find forgiveness in Christ. That was a proper Christian attitude displayed by my friend. But we must understand that it is not the job of police officers to go around forgiving robbers. The job of police officers is to apprehend wrong doers and see that they get a fair trial. And if the court needed my friend to be a witness in the trial of the robber, then he was to be an honest witness. The court’s job is to punish wrong

doers and thereby act as a restraining force against wrong behavior. In Jesus' kingly role, He does the same. This is the primary task of kings and presidents.

And so when Christians, in New Testament times, prayed against an evil system of power and corruption that had gripped unbelieving Israel, it was not to be an act of hate against the Jewish people, but a prayer of mercy for the righteous who were suffering under their evil behavior. Friends, under no circumstances are we to hate Jewish people today because of what **some** Jewish people did 2,000 years ago.

Let's make some applications from this passage, which teaches that God expects His redeemed people to be fruitful. How can we test ourselves to see if we are fruitful in God's sight? In Galatians 5:19-21, the Apostle Paul lists sinful behaviors which rob us of fruit – behaviors such as sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage and drunkenness. Paul then goes on to describe good fruit in **Galatians 5:22-23**, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness and self-control.”

When our attitudes and conduct display the good fruit of the Holy Spirit, it produces yet another kind of fruit – a desire to be used of God to help others come to know Christ. Good fruit is when we live the gospel and share the gospel.

When I look around at our culture today, I see terrible confusion about what Godly, healthy marriages and homes looks like. I see confusion

about what Godly laws look like; and confusion about how to truly help the poor. The Bible speaks to all of these matters, if we will pay attention. I fear that far too many people view the gospel as a fire insurance policy, that has no relevancy for everyday life. That is a corrupt, fruitless version of the gospel.

If the Church of Jesus Christ is committed to loving God with a white hot love, and producing Godly fruit, it will lift every area of our culture and make it better. And friends, if King Jesus has to horribly judge America, when 30% of our adult population claim that Jesus Christ is the Lord and King of their lives, then something is dreadfully wrong. We are not being salty.

When I find myself whining and griping to God, even though He has redeemed me and made me a part of His eternal family – I recall to mind how God loathed the generation of Jews He had redeemed out of slavery in Egypt and then spent 40 years griping to God in the wilderness. It then becomes easy for me to thank God for not lopping off my head. Because of God's mercy to me in Christ, I want to think and act better. I want to be a fruitful Christian. And so let's all allow the Holy Spirit to have more of His way in our lives, in our homes, in the life of this church and in this community. God's glory deserves all of that and more. Let's pray