

The fig tree and the temple.

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[0 : 00] It's been a few months since I was last here, and I think since then you have started a series in Mark. So Robin asked me to preach on a passage that is quite difficult and puzzling, because as we start looking at it, we might wonder, what is all of this about?

What is the fig tree about? Why is Jesus cursing the fig tree? Is Jesus hangry? That's the first question that I was thinking, right? Sometimes we see Jesus sleeps. Sometimes we see Jesus eats.

Sometimes, like this passage, it says Jesus was hungry. We all know what it's like to be hungry, and it's easy, I think, for us to think, well, maybe Jesus was hungry, and he just really wanted that fruit, and therefore he cursed that fig tree.

It's like a Snickers advertisement. You're not yourself when you're hungry. Of course, I say that tongue-in-cheek. It's a little bit of a funny episode, I think.

And it's easy to think in our sarcastic, cynical world that that is what is happening. But I think Robin has probably showed you that the Gospel of Mark is carefully structured, it's carefully written, and Mark is usually trying to get something across.

[1 : 19] And we have to assume now, approaching this passage, that Mark is trying to do the same thing again. And one thing that indicates that is the way Mark organizes his material here.

So if we look at the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew also writes about the fig tree and Jesus cursing it, but Matthew writes one account. Mark, however, he puts another episode in this fig tree story.

So we have from verses 12 to 14, Jesus cursing the fig tree, then Jesus going to the temple, and then verses 20 to 25, they pass the fig tree again.

And so automatically we have to assume that Mark is trying to bring across a point. Fig tree, temple, fig tree, okay? In fancy language you call that an inclusio.

In not-so-fancy language we call it a sandwich, because that's what it is, right? A fig tree, temple, sandwich. So let's talk about the fig tree first, let's talk about the temple, and then let's see how to make sense of all of that.

[2 : 25] If you're like me, then you don't know anything about fig trees in Israel and when they are supposed to be in season and have fruit, and when they're supposed to be not in season and don't bear fruit.

But the text gives us a hint that it wasn't the season for figs. So my mind automatically was wondering, why is Jesus looking for fruit on the tree if he knows the tree is out of season?

And in order to understand that, we have to do a little discourse in botanics. I've done some reading about fig trees, so you don't have to do that. You can thank me later for that.

And although it says in the text that it's not the season for fig trees, Jesus had good reason to believe that there was fruit on the tree. Why? Because there were leaves on the tree.

The leaves were visible. And I found out that even if it's not the season for figs, the trees will carry small figs from the sprouts of the previous year at that time.

[3 : 33] Which means, although there wouldn't have been any ripe, perfect, good figs on that tree, Jesus should have found something, a sign that there was some fruit.

He should have found some small figs that were growing on the tree. But instead, there is nothing. The tree is barren. There is no fruit on that tree.

It looks good from the outside, but there is nothing to be found on it. There are outward signs for fruit, but there is no fruit. And you might be surprised to hear that in the Old Testament, Israel is often compared with a fig tree.

In the Old Testament, writers, the prophets and the Psalms, use the symbol of a fig tree to talk about the nation Israel, about the people of God, the chosen people of God.

For example, in Jeremiah 8, verse 13, it says this. It says, there will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither.

[4 : 35] What I have given them will be taken from them. So, in Jeremiah, we have a verse basically describing exactly what is happening right now with Jesus and the fig tree.

There will be no figs, and therefore I will take from them what I have given to them. Jesus is cursing the fig tree because there are outward signs for fruit, but there is no fruit.

And this chapter in Jeremiah, Jeremiah chapter 8, this whole chapter is describing something. It's making a point. It's criticizing the prophets, the priests, the Pharisees, well, the scribes of Israel. And it's talking about how they are greedy, how they twist the law, and how they are not concerned with peace and justice. Now, that's hundreds of years before Jesus became a human being and walked on this earth.

But we see a parallel. We see that in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus also repeatedly criticizes the Pharisees and the scribes, the spiritual leaders of the Jews, because of exactly the same reasons.

[5 : 44] There is an outward appearance of spiritual fruit, but on the inside. There is coldness towards God, towards other people, and there is pride.

There is self-righteousness. Okay, so actually not that much has changed from Jeremiah's day, where he prophesied against the nation of Israel, and Jesus' day, where he sees that the Pharisees and the spiritual leaders are still doing the same thing.

And we need to understand that and keep that in mind as we follow Jesus along as he goes into the temple, because the whole point that Mark is trying to make is to say, Jesus cursing the fig tree is not because he's hangry.

It's because he's trying to make a point. It's a symbol. It's a sign, a picture for something else. So we read that Jesus and the disciples go to the temple. And last week, I think Robin preached on Jesus going to the temple already.

But this time, his visit is a bit different. Instead of going in, looking around a little bit, leaving again, we see Jesus in an entirely different manner.

[6 : 56] Jesus goes into the temple courts, and as he goes in, you can almost picture his face, the frustration, the sadness, the anger he feels as he looks around, and he sees the money changes.

And there were money changes in the temple court. Why? Because many people would visit the temple, and they would only accept Jewish currency.

So if you have the money changes, you go to them, you change your money so you can pay the temple tax, and for other things in the temple, like animals that you want to sacrifice.

It would have been almost time for the Passover, so a lot of people would have been there. And the money changes, they actually often would charge a fee from travelers.

The travelers wouldn't suspect anything, and the money changes would cheat them. They would charge them more than they should have. Right? They're greedy. The same is true for the people selling animals for sacrifices.

[7 : 56] They take more money than they should have. In verse 16, Jesus says that he doesn't allow people to carry merchandise through the temple court anymore.

There are people running around everywhere. You have to try to imagine the smell of the animals, the money changes, people running through the temple court. So we're in the outside court of the temple.

It's called the court of Gentiles. Everyone was allowed to be there, not only Jews, but people from all places. And often people would run through there because it was a shortcut from the Mount of Olives to the city.

And we know, we can imagine a little bit what that is like. So when you go to a big cathedral, maybe in Edinburgh, St. Giles or St. Mary's Cathedral, or you go to a big city in Europe, usually they have big churches, big cathedrals.

You don't go in running around shouting and trying to buy stuff. Usually you go in dressed appropriately. You take off your hat if you're wearing one.

[9 : 03] You don't take many pictures. You're respectful. Why? Because it's a sacred space, right? It's a house of God. And that's exactly what the temple is.

Its main purpose is to worship the living God and to pray to God in the temple. And now, Jesus himself is God, right?

Jesus is part of the Trinity. Now Jesus has visited the temple. He's in his own house. And he sees all the people running around, doing business, cheating people, doing everything, but what it actually is intended to be.

A house of prayer. A house where you come and encounter the living God. And you know what? That makes Jesus angry.

I don't know if you ever thought about that, but Jesus had emotions, like anger, like hate even, but righteous anger and righteous hate, which is going against sin.

[10:11] So Jesus goes there and he stands in this court, in this temple court, and he starts teaching and preaching and he says this, Is it not written, my house will be called a house of prayers for all nations?

But you have made it a den of robbers. And you know what? For the people who were there in that moment, for the Jews who were there, this moment would have been shocking. Why?

Because Jesus is quoting from two passages in the Old Testament. One from Jeremiah 7, one from Isaiah 56. And both passages are about God talking about the temple and what it's intended to be. God telling us what he wants the temple to look like. And that is, you know, the temple is for worship. It's to pray to God. So in Isaiah 56, God is talking about bringing foreigners, the Gentiles, non-Israelites, to the holy mountain, to Jerusalem, to the temple, to give them joy in the house of prayer.

That's what it's supposed to be like. That is what God says through Isaiah. You see, God is not against people having a good time at the temple, but he actually wants people to go there and encounter him and not just ignore him.

[11:30] He wants them to find joy in him. But instead, people come to the temple to, instead of praying, they have to pay taxes. They can't even see the beauty of the temple and the beauty of God because they're trying not to get cheated by the money changers and so on.

You know, there are people everywhere running around, merchandise and it's all a big distraction. People come to the house of God but they completely ignore God. That's what's going on here. And then, the other thing, the den of robbers. Where is that coming from? That's coming from Jeremiah chapter 7. So in Jeremiah 7, God asks Jeremiah to go to the temple, to stand in the gates of the temple where Jesus is standing right now and to preach to the people.

not a nice little sermon like on a Sunday morning that you forget the next day which hopefully you won't forget my sermon tomorrow but no, Jeremiah preaches against them and he says what God commands him to say.

So, in Jeremiah 7, verse 3, this is what Jeremiah says, Reform your ways and your actions and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

[12:47] If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place in the land I gave your ancestors forever and ever.

But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house which bears my name and say, we are safe, safe to do all these detestable things?

Has this house which bears my name become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching, declares the Lord. That's a mic drop moment.

That's why it's so shocking to the Jews that are there. That's why Jesus is making a point here when he says, this is my house and you have made it into a den of robbers.

He's not just asking like Jeremiah, have you made it into a den of robbers? No, Jesus says, you have made it into a den of robbers. And he goes and he flips the tables of the money changers to make a point to say, the money is worth nothing.

[14:06] You don't get what this is about. Yeah. You're oppressing those in need. You don't seek justice. You do serve other gods in your heart.

So, Jesus, standing where Jeremiah stood, saying all these things, the Jews, they must have thought, well, Jeremiah, he was warning of judgment and of exile.

And, because, what does the Jeremiah passage speak about? You don't care for the vulnerable. You serve other gods. Then you come to the temple and you sacrifice and worship. What is that? Let's think back to the fig tree. You see the leaves. You see an outward appearance of faith. People are doing the things. But inside, there is no fruit.

The actual thing of having faith in God and acting the way you speak is not happening. and that's called, it's called hypocrisy.

[15:09] And we'll talk about hypocrisy in a moment. But, in the Jeremiah passage, Jeremiah says, this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. If Jesus would have said that, he would have said, this is my temple.

It's my house. It's my temple. But now, it's more like a den of robbers. hypocrisy. So, hypocrisy. What do we mean by that? I don't know.

Some of you might have heard this before. The word hypocrisy comes from the Greek word hypocrites. And all that that means is an actor. That's the word for an actor.

You know, the Greek folks, they would have had comedies and dramas and so on, would have put on makeup or masks to make themselves look like a different person, just like film stars do it nowadays, right?

And then they would act. And the New Testament is taking that and saying, that is what you do. Sinclair Ferguson says this, in acting, there can be a great discrepancy between the part which is played and the reality of the life which lies behind it.

[16:18] The same can be true of faith. We can profess much and possess little. Instead, there is always the temptation in Christian fellowships to pretend to be something other than what we are.

And I just want to ask you this this morning. Is that what is happening sometimes? Reflect on your own heart right now. Why are you here? Maybe because your parents told you to.

For the children, that's certainly true. But also maybe because you want to be here. And that's a great thing. Maybe because you were bored at home or you come to meet other folks.

That's great. But are we also here to worship the living God? Are we here because we want to be transformed by the gospel? Because we want to see fruit in our own lives?

Second question. Do you behave differently when you come to church than you would outside of church in your home? That's probably a little bit true for everyone here. We all put on masks when you come to church or when we meet people outside of our homes?

[17:26] Do you feel a disconnect between your outward appearance and your internal beliefs and feelings? Just a few questions to reflect on to unmask hypocrisy.

The second thing I want to talk about right now is anger. We see Jesus being angry but the Bible is not condemning that. No, the Bible is actually saying it's a good thing that Jesus is angry.

Why? Because Jesus has righteous anger. So let's pause just for a moment, just a little sidebar. Let's talk about anger for a moment.

Righteous anger. Jesus was the perfect human being, right? He showed us how anger can be sinless if rightly motivated, if it's rightly directed, and if we express it in the right way.

So, there are situations in which we must be angry. And that's a good thing. What do I mean? If we're angry at sin, if you hear about human trafficking, if you hear about a child getting bullied at school, if you hear about how many cases of abuse there were in the church, does that make you angry?

[18:40] That's a good thing if it does. I mean, how can you not be angry at that? So, how do we know we are right to be angry at something? Let me give you three questions to ask yourself to test if your anger in any situation is good and righteous.

So, first of all, you're right to be angry if you're offended by sin. It's a good thing to be angry at that. Just talked about this. If it's something that God disagrees with and that God would be angry at, then yes, your anger is justified.

If not, then you don't do well to be angry. Secondly, you're right to be angry if you're focused on God. What I mean is this. In the midst of anger, we should focus on God's rights, not on our own worthiness or unworthiness.

We should focus on God's kingdom, on his power to rule, even in this situation, to trust that he will make a good thing come out of it. We should focus on God's concerns, that he would have us flee bitterness and an unforgiving spirit in order to pursue peace with the one who angered us.

And thirdly, you're right to be angry if the fruit of your anger is godly. So, righteous anger is accompanied by other godly qualities and righteous anger expresses itself in godly ways. [19 : 58] And we see that in Jesus, don't we? He's telling the people the truth. He's telling the people what the Bible says. And he's doing that to warn them and to say, look, this is not right and you don't know what you're doing just now.

Now, when you're angry, it's always better to take a deep breath, to write things down, to sleep a night over it and to come back to it. And I think that might be what Jesus did when he went to the temple and came back the next day.

So, you're right to be angry if the fruit of your anger is godly. We were talking about fruit earlier. leaves on the fig tree, outward appearance, no fruit on the tree.

We have the people in the temple, outward appearance, but no actual fruit. Jesus is coming to the temple and he's purifying it of everything that is hindering true and good worship.

He cleanses the temple from hypocrisy, from greed, so that the way to God is open again. God comes down to meet us because we have forgotten to meet him. So, it all makes a little bit more sense now, I hope.

[21 : 13] Jesus is trying to make a point. Don't be hypocrites. Pursue the actual fruit of faith. And some people didn't understand that. Verse 18, it says, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, they heard this and they began looking for a way to kill him for they feared him because the whole crowd was amazed at Jesus' teaching.

One commentator puts it like this. He says, the chief priests and the scribes are responsible for handling temple affairs. They seek to destroy the purifier rather than to be purified.

That is what Jesus is wanting to do in our lives. He wants to purify you and me. Are we going to be like the Pharisees and we run away from God and say, I don't need to be purified by you?

Or are we going to be like Jesus' disciples, like people who followed him and let him purify us? So let me summarize for a moment what we have said so far. We have said that the fig tree is a symbol for Israel and especially the temple culture in the way it looks like.

You know, it looks like it's good and it's bringing fruit but actually it's not. It's barren. It's spiritually dead. Just like the fig tree, the temple and the spiritual leaders of the temple do not bring fruit.

[22 : 30] They do not look out for those in need. They do not worship God in truth and spirit. They do not love God in others well. So as we close, let's have a quick look at the last few verses because they can be a bit confusing.

You see, Mark tells us how Jesus and the disciples pass the fig tree the next day again and it's completely with it which in itself is a miracle because that doesn't usually happen apart from when Jesus tells it to be with it.

So, that's a miracle and once again we see that Jesus has power and authority over nature and it's here that everything comes together. As they pass, Peter points out that the tree is indeed withered and he says that to Jesus and he tells them that.

And for many, including myself, Jesus' response is confusing when I read this the first time. Jesus says, have faith in God. Truly I tell you if anyone says to this mountain, go throw yourself into the sea and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

Therefore I tell you whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

[23 : 46] It's like, didn't we just talk about fig trees and temples, hypocrisy, proper worship? What is Jesus on about right now? Prayer and forgiveness and all that? And yes, we did.

But now Jesus is giving us the one thing that connects all the other loose ends, so to say. One thing that combines all of those topics and that is faith.

Have faith in God. Pretty straightforward command. Easy enough for every child to understand. If you have faith and you don't doubt, you can move off the seat.

Now, I think he means that figuratively, not in a literal sense. I don't think there'll be any good coming out from someone trying to move off the seat into the ocean somewhere, other than it's really, really inaccessible at that point.

But it's actually a picture of how much difference faith, genuine faith, can make. That there will be fruit coming out of it. But why is Jesus talking about prayer and forgiveness?

[24 : 49] You see, the Jews, they would have gone to the temple to pray and to sacrifice so that God would forgive them. Jesus says, it has more to do with your genuine faith rather than the mechanics of buying an animal, of going to the temple and spending your money there.

If you ask with a genuine heart, with genuine faith for forgiveness, you will get it. Because you know what? God has come down to meet you. In Jesus, God has come down to this earth to show you that forgiveness is found in him, in Jesus.

He is one week later, one week after this incident, Jesus is hanging at the cross. By faith, we can access that grace. True worship, true prayer, true forgiveness happen not in the temple by doing a box-ticking exercise.

No, they are accessed by true faith in Jesus Christ alone. Faith will move mountains. the object of our faith, not the strength of our faith.

But if we place our faith in Jesus Christ, the Almighty God, then we will be saved. Then we will be able to pray and ask for forgiveness. True faith will be seen by its fruit.

[26 : 02] In the letter of James, we read that faith is always accompanied by fruit and good works. Or as some have said before, we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves never comes alone.

There will always be fruit. There will always be something accompanying that faith. Jesus is prophesying by cursing the fig tree. He knows it's the last week of his earthly ministry.

And he makes the point that we as his disciples so often get it wrong. At the end of the day, it's not about money. It's not about sacrifice. It's not about praying enough. It's about faith, trust in God, a love for God, out of which prayer, forgiveness, and upright living will then follow.

How is this possible? It's possible by Jesus dying a week later at that cross as the ultimate once-for-all sacrifice. And now?

Now the Holy Spirit lives in you if you believe in Jesus. How? You believe in God, you become a new person. That's what Jesus died for. The Bible even calls you a temple of the Holy Spirit.

[27 : 14] Jesus seeks to purify that temple so that you can worship him in a proper manner. And so people can see the fruit that accompanies faith.

Paul writes in Galatians 5, The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

So, let us remember faith in God leads to the removal of everything that obstructs the bearing of good fruit for God, including true worship. Faith that removes mountains is a faith that removes all that resists God.

And faith in a good God who is righteous and merciful and quick to forgive will transform you and make you more and more like this God, like Jesus Christ. So, let us pray.

Father, I thank you again, once more for your word and for the lesson that is in there for all of us and we pray that you would give us the strength and remind us of your goodness, that it's all in Jesus Christ, in his death, that we can become new people, temples for the Holy Spirit, that through him we have the strength to live out our faith, the strength to pray to you, the strength to ask for forgiveness and to forgive others.

[28 : 39] We thank you so much for everything Jesus has done for us and we ask that you would help us in these coming days and weeks to focus on just that, genuine faith and to live out the fruit of that faith.

I pray that you would help us wherever we go, our workplaces, school, university, wherever it might be, at home, to remember that. And I ask for the forgiveness of all our sins in Jesus Christ.

Amen.