

Mark 11:12-19

“Cursing and cleansing”

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I. **Introduction**

We come now to verses 12-26 of Mark chapter 11 and two incidents that took place on the 2nd day (Monday) of the passion week:

1. ***The cursing of the fig tree***: This is divided into two segments: Verses 12-14 the cursing of the fig tree and verses 20-26 the lessons of the withered fig tree as it relates to prayer and fruitlessness.
2. ***The cleansing of the temple***: In between these two sections is verses 15-19 and Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. This serves as an illustration of the cause of fruitlessness.

This passage presents many challenges as to both the proper interpretation as well as personal application. The reason for this is the forgetfulness of the context. As I have said all along in our study; Mark’s readers were the Romans. His perspective is the contrast between the “*son of God*” that the Romans were very familiar with and Jesus as the true **Son of God**. Nothing could have demonstrated that better than the way the Roman Caesar would have entered a city and the way Jesus just done in the so called “Triumphal Entry”. Had Caesar entered Jerusalem that day everybody would have been lining the streets, he would have been riding a golden chariot pulled by a perfect stallion. The people that would have been praising him that day would have been the very people he had imposed his will upon when His armies invaded their world with forced oppression. Not so with our Lord He has come unto His own and His own has known Him not even though the event was foretold 483 years to the day earlier. He is riding a colt that has

never been broken to the shouts of Hosanna from those outside the region. Those that should have been most excited to see him at best asked “*who is this*” before they demand that those singing His praise be silent. Jesus’ entrance was nothing short of a “*parade of the poverty of spirit*” from a Roman perspective! It would have been impossible for the Roman mind to comprehend the people publically rejecting their Caesar as Jerusalem had just done Jesus. What Mark records is that as the nation rejects their long awaited promised King, the King will finally reject the nation. Jesus would say this very passion week in Matthew 21:43 “*I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.*”

II. Vs. 12-14 Fruitless fig trees

Vs. 12-14 This is a very difficult section as it is the only account given of Jesus exercising His power that has a destructive outcome. Though you could argue the destruction of the figs into the Sea of Galilee but it must be remembered that such an act led to the deliverance of the demon possessed man. This incident causes two challenges as it relates to Jesus:

- **His knowledge**: Did Jesus know or didn’t He know that the fig tree had no figs upon it? If He knew it had no figs than why did He go hoping to find something on it? And if He didn’t know that it hadn’t any figs how can He be the all knowing, God the Son? The answer to that is to comprehend that Jesus was both full man and fully God. It was not His Deity that hungered but His humanity who had humbled Himself and became a man that did. This reveals to us that *this story is presented to us from the vantage of His humanity and not His deity.* He has come to His own as the long awaited Messiah who they saw as a man not, God the Son.
- **His action**: The 2nd difficulty requires us investigate Middle Eastern botany as we are told that “*seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it, but He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.*” So then why did Jesus curse a poor fig tree for being fruitless when “*..it was not the season for figs?*” We have never witnessed or heard of Jesus doing a single thing that would benefit Himself, let alone punish a tree for not providing for His necessities, when it wasn’t even it’s season to do so. Further

more sense Jesus had the power to curse and wither the fig tree could He not have just as easily caused the fig tree to instantly produce figs? There are two things that shed light upon Jesus' action:

1. **The timing of the event:** It transpires two days into His final week of His earthly life! This was the week where Jesus had predicted in the parable just before His Triumphal Entry that the nation would say "*We will not have **THIS MAN** reign over us.*" The "***Man Christ Jesus***" who was the one that was told was coming 483 years earlier.
2. **The nature of Middle Eastern fig trees:** Jesus Himself gives us a little Middle Eastern botany lesson in Mark 13:28 when He said, "*learn this parable from the **FIG TREE**: When it's branches has already become tender, and put forth leaves, you know that summer is near.*" Typically, the fig tree produced leaves in March or April and then started to bear fruit in June. Often a 2nd crop would come in August and possibly a third crop in December. As such the presence of leaves would mean the presence of fruit was coming, or possibly that fruit was "left over" from the previous season. We know that the date of this was early in Spring as it was the 7th of April but it "*was not the season for figs.*" There is one other thing of note concerning fig trees is that they require "***cross pollination***" to bear fruit. And based upon the Greek in Matthew's account this fig tree was all by it's self and had no possibility to "***cross pollinate***" in order to bare fruit.

Putting these two things together it is clear that Jesus had an expectation that this fig tree should do as it was called to do in Genesis 1:11 "*bear fruit after its kind*". Further more the condition in which he saw the fig tree was twofold and exactly illustrated the condition of Israel at the final week of earthly life:

- a. **Promise without performance:** The leaves of the fig tree had the promise of fruit and like the nation of Israel it had been created to bear fruit after it's kind. But there would be no fruit and in Israel's case their whole history had been pointing to the coming of Jesus the Messiah, as recorded to the day in their own scriptures. Their complete existence was waiting for this very moment and they became like so many in life as they fulfilled the tragic three stages of life: Those that **WILL DO SOMETHING**, those that **COULD DO SOMETHING**, and those that **MIGHT HAVE DONE SOMETHING!** This tree held the promise to do what it had been created to do, bear fruit but it "stood alone" while still publically demonstrating that it was going to do something.
- b. **Profession without practice:** This tree, with it's leaves, professed to offer something that it didn't have and could not produce. Like Israel it had the "Leaves" of religious ceremonies and traditions but produced no fruit. The tree and Israel had spent their inter existence producing luxuriant foliage, so that it looked healthy but it was never productive in it's true calling. The cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple are the same message: **Fruitless is**

unacceptable as God has given us everything necessary to do what He has created us to do, “bear fruit”. Jesus found the fig tree and the nation had the same condition **the profession of foliage without fruit.**

The fig tree was a symbol of the nation and its curse was a judgment at its roots. The central part of this is the principal that “*faith is key to fruitfulness*”! At the start of Jesus’ earthly ministry, John the Baptist had warned the nation that the ax was already at the foot of the tree and now life had departed because the nation had refused to believe God. In the corresponding interpretation to what Peter observed the next morning with the withered fig tree Jesus teaches them **NOT** on the “*secret of destroying fruitless trees and people*” but rather the “**secret of making the removal of such completely unnecessary**”. The secret is faith that God can remove the “mountains of unbelief”. Jesus charged them to pray that they and the church not fall into the same state. Prayer and Faith are God’s secret for a life of fruitfulness.

III. Vs. 15-19 Corrupt commercialism and religious rituals

Vs. 15-19 This is the 2nd time Jesus cleansed the temple, having done so at the start of His ministry 3 ½ years earlier, yet in that time they had not changed their practice so Jesus again goes into the temple. This time we see that he repeats the first action of “*driving out those who bought and sold in the temple, and over turned the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.*” But we also notice in verse 16 that Jesus “*would not allow **ANYONE** to carry wares through the temple.*” Jesus completely stopped all traffic in the temple area including the priests. The temple was laid out into **four precincts** that filled up the 30-acre temple mount area:

- a. The outer space was called **the court of the Gentiles**. It was here that the tables would have been set up and money changers would be located.
- b. **The court of the women** as they were not allowed to go further than this court even if they wished to offer a sacrifice.

c. The court was called ***the court of the Israelites***; it was here that the men would gather to hand the offerings to the priests.

d. The inner most court was called ***the Court of the priests***: It is here where the sacrifices took place and only the priests were allowed to enter.

The incident took place in the court of the Gentiles where over time this area had become completely commercialized. ***This was the very area that had been designed to be a place where “light could come to the Gentiles” through prayer and preparation.*** So much commercial traffic was being done here that it was impossible for prayer and devotion to take place. Not only was in being used as a place of commerce it was being used as a road way so that people could pass easily between the courts for convenience. There was a greater possibility of being robbed in the temple from the commerce then there was of the road up from Jericho to Jerusalem. Jesus was angry for two reasons:

- ***The exploitation of the people***: The religious community were treating these people not as worshippers, not even as people they were treating them as a commodity, exploiting them for their own gain. God has always been against the exploitation of people especially under the religious banner.
- ***The desecration of God’s purpose***: The nation had deposed of the presence of God through the commercialization of God’s Holy place. The temple was designed as a meeting place for God and man but they had turned it into Walmart.

Jesus took two significant actions that were symbolic to what had just transpired at the curing of the fig tree:

1. ***He cleansed it***: Jesus drove out those that bought and sold in the temple, He overturned the tables of the money changers and knocked over the seats of those who sold doves. Jesus stopped the commercialization including that of the selling of the sacrificial offerings. The merchants were offering a convenience for the worshippers but it became extortion as they were making an excessive amounts and money changers were employed by the High Priests family as a business. So Jesus came in swept out the whole mess for the 2nd time in three years. He said that all their activity was not profitable except to be a habitation for robbers.
2. ***He cleared it***: Second, Jesus stopped all traffic through it. The Greek is very specific here saying that He stopped “***anyone***” carrying “***wares***” and the word is “***Vessel***” which refers to “***instruments essential for worship***”. Jesus not only shut down commerce in the temple He shut all religious rituals as well. In the books of Leviticus and Numbers we read of God instituting rituals sacrifices in the temple

and there was a continual procession of priests passing through the temple every day. But on this day Jesus stopped it, refusing to allow the empty religious activity to continue as it had all been pointing him and they had rejected Him and His sacrifice to He stopped the religious activity.

Looking at these two events together and the picture is that *Jesus saw the nation as both spiritually fruitless and bankrupt.* The temple was the heart of the nation and now it produced nothing but empty leaves becoming nothing more than *corrupt commercialism* and *religious rituals*. When the religious leaders had learned of Jesus' activities they were filled with a murderous rage and they met together to see how they may destroy Him. There was no longer any discussion on what they may do to reduce His popularity the only question was how they could kill Him in the name of God. They had reached like the fig tree the point of no return when Jesus cleansed and cleared the temple four days later they would see Him hang on a cross.