

## Mark 11:12-26 A Cursed Fig Tree

Mark 11:12-26 describes the cursing of a fig tree by Jesus. Many are deeply disturbed by the thought that Jesus was so upset because a tree did not have the fruit He wanted that He cursed it. If this was an example of a temper tantrum, as some would want us to believe, it would be most upsetting. The truth is, this had nothing to do with Jesus not getting His breakfast and everything to do about a tree that was pretending to be something it was not. It provided Jesus with an opportunity to speak about those who pretend to follow God but do not. In the end it was a powerful and vivid parable of what was ahead for Israel because they were pretending to worship God when they were not. It was a picture of what happened to Israel 40 years later in AD 70 when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and in essence Israel.

A little background on fig trees is helpful. Fig trees were, on a number of occasions, a symbol of Israel in the Old Testament. The land of promise was seen, among other things, as a land of figs. When the spies went in to scout out the land after leaving Egypt they returned with, among other things, figs. The picture of peace given on occasion in the OT is that of each man sitting under his own fig tree. Read I Kings 4:25. (See also Micah 4:4 and Zechariah 3:10) Judgment was occasionally given as striking the fig tree dead. Read Jeremiah 8:13.

Not only was the fig tree a symbol in general of Israel and God's blessing upon it, but that fig tree should, by all outward signs, have been bearing fruit. Mark 11:13 tells us it was not the time for figs, but we need to put that in relationship to figs in general. Mark noted, in that same verse, that this tree was in full leaf. Fig trees undergo a process that ultimately results in figs. In early spring fig trees begin to bud with the leaves to follow. When a fig tree buds and leaves appear, there is also a tiny fig that appears long with it, tiny figs called Paggim. Slowly those tiny figs mature but they are not the figs we think of when we talk about them. Those early small figs are bitter with next to no juice in them, but they are edible. Alongside those early figs the buds appear for a later fig. When there are no Paggims there will be no figs for a later harvest. The point is that when Jesus saw a fig tree in full bloom it meant it would have Paggims. It did not, which meant that it would not have regular figs also. (See the Jewish Virtual Library for details on figs in relationship to Israel along with their growth patterns.)

This was a fig tree, the symbol of a nation that was supposed to be a blessing to all the peoples of the world, and it was barren, it had nothing to offer. Jesus was not throwing a temper tantrum at not getting a fig bar but was illustrating a truth that Israel needed to know and that we need to know. Pretending to be what we are not or failing to bear the fruit God intends us to bear, is an invitation to judgment. It was true for Israel and it will be true for any given church and any individual. Profession without practice is condemned in the Bible. The tree was not cursed because it did not have fruit but for pretending to have such. As individuals, when we become useless to the Lord because we no longer see the need to bear the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, we invite His cutting us off.

Read John 15:1-8. It is an awesome thought that God judges profession without fruit or pretending to be what we are not.

Read Mark 11:12, Jesus was hungry and that reminds us of the humanity of Jesus, a full humanity that will become more evident in the days that followed and climaxed on the Cross. Jesus was fully God, but He was also fully a man like us, and He got hungry.

Mark wrote next that Jesus entered the temple area and was disgusted with what he saw. What He saw was all too familiar in the temple area, especially at the time of the Passover celebration. I don't think Mark inserted the events in the temple before telling us in verse 20 that the tree died simply to keep a chronological order to his account since that was not a major concern of the gospel writers. I think Mark included the events of that day in the temple as a testimony to the failure of the religious leaders to be what they were intended to be or claimed to be. They were fig trees with no figs.

Read Mark 11:15. The Passover celebration required faithful Jews to offer two sacrifices, an animal and a cash offering. Men traveled long distances to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem and often had neither. The cash offering was required in Jewish shekels and the animal had to be without blemish. If you were from outside of Israel or even Jerusalem in all likelihood you had foreign currency that was not acceptable. So, the temple leaders set up an exchange opportunity, with a lousy exchange rate so they made out very well. Of course, you had to have an animal and they were very willing to sell you one, at a greatly inflated rate. Those coming any significant distance could not be expected to bring an animal with them so they had no choice.

Bottom line, those religious leaders, whose purpose was to offer the sacrifices of the people so they could be right with God, were in fact making money off it. They were performing a religion exercise from which they were gaining personally. Their ministry was intended to enrich others and not serve for personal gain. They claimed to be servants of God while, in reality, they were not. They were like a fig tree that promised fruit but had none to offer.

Perhaps even more critical than the money making on temple grounds was the fact that it all took place in the Court of the Gentiles. That was an area set aside for Gentiles to come for prayers and worship. God said Israel was to be a blessing to all the nations but in taking over the place for Gentiles to worship in, they were denying that option.

So, Jesus drove those moneychangers out and condemned them for turning His house, which was to be a house of prayer, into a house of thieves. In declaring that, Jesus was quoting the Old Testament. Read Jeremiah 7:11 and Isaiah 56:7.

Two things concerned Jesus. One was the exploitation that was being carried on. God never accepts the exploitation of one person by another and is even more upset when it is done in the name of God. God is deeply concerned about justice. When one claims to be His follower but is

neither just or a defender of those abused by injustice, God sees that as claiming something that has no fruit.

The second implication is that they had turned the house of prayer into a place of business. The actual place where this was carried on was in that part of the temple known as the Court of the Gentiles. It was a special courtyard set-aside for non-Jews to gather for worship and prayer. God had designed His place of worship to allow for Gentiles to worship Him. But the temple leaders had become so concerned about their little side business that they had not just turned it into a business place but had made it so busy, so noisy, so worldly that no one could have hoped to have worshipped there. In a few days Jesus would die on a Cross for those Gentiles along with the Jewish people. God so loved the whole world, but the religious leaders were denying access to Him by taking over their place of worship.

Read Mark 11:15-16. The fact that He would not allow them to carry things through the temple courts was an added note on how Jesus felt about the sacredness of the Temple as a place of worship and not as a short-cut to the city itself.

After a brief note that the religious leaders sought to have Jesus put to death, Mark wrote that Jesus left the city. Read Mark 11:20-21.

Note that the tree not only withered but the roots also withered. That is a picture of how complete the judgment of Jesus was on that which pretended to be what it was not. When a tree dies, the roots are the last part to be affected by that. Often the stump of a cut down tree later sprouts a twig or the start of a new tree. The fig tree that Jesus pronounced judgment on was totally dead, even its roots.

God's love for mankind in general and His people in particular is beyond anything we can imagine, but so too is His judgment on sin and the sin of pretending to be His follower but showing no real signs of it will be judged. Perhaps even more disturbing to Jesus is when Christian lives are so barren that when non-Christians look at them and see no fruit, they are turned away from Him. The challenge is to evaluate not how faithful we are on Sunday morning but how that faith translates into how we act at school or work on Monday. Do we show the Fruit of the Spirit day by day or are we trees with great leaves on Sunday but no fruit the rest of the time?