

All Leaves and No Fruit – Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

Mark 11:12-26

Maybe you have a friend who has the appearance of being good at something, but it's all show. Maybe a buddy with a fancy bass boat worth more than all their cars. It's got the latest in fish finders, hydraulic anchors, GPS and underwater cameras. He's got tens of thousands of dollars' worth of rods and reels and tackle, but he can't catch a fish.

You've got an aunt who's always buying fabric for quilts they never make. They've got a sewing machine with all the bells and whistles, a quilting frame, the works, but you've never seen a quilt. They like to think their hobby is quilting, but really, their hobby is shopping to quilt.

Your friend fancies them self as a photographer. They've got the high-tech DSLR camera. They've got the lenses that cost more than the camera. They've got all the gadgets and gizmos, but you take better pictures on your iPhone.

This problem is limited to hobbies or activities either. Someone puts on the airs of being super nice and friendly, but really they just manipulate people. We might call this talking a good game. Based on today's story, we might call it "all leaves and no fruit." It's a very easy problem to diagnose in others, but very difficult to see in ourselves.

We're in a series called "Stranger Things." We're looking at the weirdest stories in the Bible, and one of them is found in Mark 11. Its main point is about the dangers of being all leaves and no fruit, but we might miss it, because of the weirdness of the story. It requires some background understanding that we might not have.

This story happens in the final week of Jesus' life, just days before his arrest, sham show trial, and execution by the Jewish religious leaders on a Roman cross. Jesus walks into Jerusalem with his eyes wide open. He knows what's coming. He has drawn attention to his looming death and resurrection time and time again. Just in the previous chapter Jesus tells his disciples this on their way into Jerusalem.

"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

Something big is about to happen and Jesus knows it.

The Setting - Passover

It is also the holiest week on the Jewish calendar. It is Passover week. Millions of Jews from across the *oikoumenē*, the known world have come home. In ordinary weeks some 50,000 to 100,000 people called Jerusalem home.¹ But on this week, it would swell to as many as 2,000,000.

Passover was a festival of Jewish independence, celebrating their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Tensions with the hated Romans hit their peak as this feast of freedom only served to remind them they were under Rome's thumb. Imagine celebrating the 4th of July while being occupied by the Chinese. You get the picture. The Roman governor's terrorist alert system would be set to red. The Roman fortifications in Jerusalem were fully garrisoned. The auxiliaries called up. Roman boots and swords would be visible in every street and alley.

It was also a holy day of worship. On the evening of Passover, every household offered a sacrifice and shared in a memorial feast. The sacrifices were carried out at the temple. There were tens of thousands of bleating sheep and goats and the mourning of doves. Imagine the world's largest zoo that only had these three kinds of animals. Now imagine the blood from all of those sacrifices.

The temple became an assembly line of slaughter. As blood drained from each creature's neck, priests would catch some in a round bottomed goblets of silver and gold. It was never to be set down. The first priest hands the cup to another and then in a bucket brigade of priests the cup moves down the line until the last priest in line pours out the blood on the altar. This is happening 40 times a minute.

The Setting – The Triumphal Entry

The triumphal entry was just the day before. Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey, a move that's filled with messianic promise. Throngs of people welcome Jesus as the Messiah. They lay out their cloaks before him and hail him with praises. In five days, the crowds will be shouting something entirely different, but today, they are filled with Hosannas. Perhaps they hope he will drive out the other man who rode into the city about the same time from a different direction. Pilate came prancing into the city triumphantly on horseback accompanied by a legion of Roman troops. But Jesus wasn't coming as that sort of Savior. He didn't come to save them from Rome, but to save them from their sins.

The Fig Tree and the Cleansing of the Temple

So, Jesus comes to town, but nothing happens. Jesus doesn't teach. He doesn't perform any miracles. He doesn't drive out the money changers. He just looks around and leaves. Mark mentions that it is late, but I also think Jesus waited because he wanted to make a point with the fig tree. The same fig tree they pass by tomorrow, they passed by today. So, they leave the temple, and go back to Bethany, probably to the home of the siblings, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The next day, as they are heading back to Jerusalem we read part 1 of our strange story. Mark 11:12-14:

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, 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. 14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

This is just the first part of the story. Before we get to the rest of the story, Mark sandwiches in another story. After cursing the tree, Jesus goes on into Jerusalem, where he proceeds to the temple, and unlike the day before, he does more than look around. He angrily drives out the buyers and the sellers.

(Advance Slide) Animal sacrifice was big business. You could bring your own sacrificial animal, and some did, but it had to pass inspection. Anyway, who wanted to drag a sheep halfway across the empire when you could simply buy a preapproved sheep, goat, or dove right at the temple. Of course, you had to pay highly inflated prices. Also, your pagan Roman money was no good in the house of God, No siree. First, you had to exchange your Roman denarii for temple shekels, again at inflated rates. And don't forget to pay the temple tax. Nickel and diming you is not a modern invention.

It was a racket and Jesus didn't like it. He is determined to let the wheelers and dealers know God's displeasure. He kicks over tables sending silver coins rolling across the pavement. Jesus releases caged animals in a flurry of chaos. He chastised them for turning his father's house into a den of robbers.

Jesus' display righteous fury results in no immediate change. The coins are soon collected and the animals gathered back in and business resumes as normal. But Jesus has made his point. God is not happy with what is going on here. The religious leaders are furious and they want Jesus dead.

This cleansing of the temple as it has come to be known is the meat of the sandwich. The next morning, on their way back into the city, Jesus and the disciples pass by the same fig tree. We get part 2 of the story starting in verse 20.

*20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.
21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"*

Is Jesus Having a Bad Day?

It doesn't sound like Jesus is having a good day. He gets ticked at a figless fig tree, and curses it even though it's not in season. Then he loses his temper at the temple. Did he wake up on the wrong side of the bed? This story comes across as a tasteless Snickers commercial. Jesus isn't Jesus when he's hungry. If only Peter could have handed him a snickers bar, he could have gotten back to helpful miracles like giving sight to the blind and turning water into wine.

This is another story that baffles believers and delights critics. One calls Jesus' outburst, "a gross injustice on a tree that was guilty of no wrong." Another questions why didn't Jesus just cause the tree to produce a miraculous crop of fruit?

So, what's the deal with this story? Is Jesus just hangry? Does God hate figs? Or is there something more going on?

The Fig Tree in the Biblical Story

The fig tree plays a huge role in the Biblical story beginning all the way in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve are forced to hide their nakedness behind aprons of fig leaves. Figs have been a staple of the Ancient Near East for thousands of years from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. The oldest archaeological digs have found fossilized figs. Figs were among the bounty the 12 spies brought back from the Promised Land. Fig trees were prized for their relieving shade, their wood and the fact they could provide multiple crops of nourishing and delicious food every year.

Figs became a symbol of God's blessing. During Solomon's reign, the fig tree symbolized prosperity and security. 1 Kings 4:25 says, *"During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba (from north to south), lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree."*

So the fig tree holds great value as a symbol for Israel and in the Old Testament it serves as a metaphor for her relationship with God. The prophets liken Israel to a fig tree that bears early fruit. What could be better than a tree that not only bears good fruit, but it ripens early? It's like the first things that ripen in your garden. That first corn on the cob, that first cucumber, the first strawberries, the first watermelon, taste so delicious.

Isaiah 28:4 says, *"That fading flower, his glorious beauty, set on the head of a fertile valley, will be like figs ripe before harvest— as soon as people see them and take them in hand, they swallow them."*

In **Jeremiah 24**, God shows the prophet two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple. One basket is full of very good figs, like those that ripen early. The other basket was full of figs so bad they could not be eaten. So, in this prophecy, the best figs, the most delicious figs, are the early figs.

God tells the prophet that the good, early figs represent the remnant from Judah that will be saved. He will plant them and not tear them down. He will give them a new heart. Ultimately, this points to the gospel and the church.

The basket of bad figs represents the leaders of Jerusalem who will be judged because of their unfaithfulness.

Check this out in Hosea 9:10, *"When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree."*

So again, the best most desirable figs are the early figs, and God says, finding Israel was like finding early figs. So good. So delicious. But as you read through Hosea 9, the figs turn rotten.

Israel gives herself over to idols, so down in verse 16 God pronounces this judgment, “*Ephraim (One of the 12 tribes) is blighted, their root is withered, they yield no fruit.*” They will be wilted, fruitless fig trees. Vs. 17 says, “*My God will reject them because they have not obeyed him; they will be wanderers among the nations.*”

So now, the absence of figs or the figless fig trees becomes a symbol of Israel under God’s judgment. Jeremiah 8:13 says, “*I will take away their harvest, declares the LORD. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither.*” So the fruitless tree with withered leaves is a sign of God’s judgment on Israel.

So, we have this clearly established pattern in the Old Testament, faithful Israel is like the very best figs, early figs, those that ripen before the harvest. Unfaithful Israel is likened to a fruitless, withered fig tree.

Jesus is Cursing More than a Tree. He’s cursing a symbol.

Now, when we go back to Mark 11, what Jesus does here makes much more sense. He’s not just killing an innocent fig tree. He is symbolically acting out God’s judgment on the religious leaders and the religious system of the temple. He does it first metaphorically with the fig tree, but then quite literally by driving out the buyers and sellers in the temple courts.

The clearing of the temple is the meat of the sandwich, and the cursing of the fig tree on both sides tells us why. It is an acted out parable, which is a common technique in Biblical prophecy. Jeremiah preaches a sermon while wearing an ox yoke to symbolize how they will be carried off in captivity. God has Hosea marry an unfaithful prostitute to symbolize how God feels about Israel’s unfaithfulness. Elijah pours water all over an altar before God sends fire, to show just how powerful God is. And Jesus curses a fig tree to symbolize God’s judgment of Israel.

Yes, it wasn’t the season for fig harvest, but that’s not the point. The fig tree was in full leaf. It was putting out all the signs that it should have figs. The fig tree in full leaf should have had some fruit. It had the appearance of having delicious, early fruit. But this fig tree had nothing but leaves.

What Should Have Been

This should have been Israel’s time. Her promised Messiah had finally come. She looked like she was ready. She had a beautiful temple. It looked like it was full of spiritual life and activity. There were throngs of people and thousands of sacrifices. There were priests and religious leaders who were dedicated to faithfulness and devoted to preparing the way for the Messiah. But when the Messiah came, Israel did not receive him. In fact, they were about to kill him.

The cursing of the fig tree symbolizes God’s judgment on the religious leaders and the whole religious system in Jerusalem. Jesus is saying you’re all leaves and no fruit. You look like you should have fruit. You act like you have fruit, but you’ve got nothing. You pretend to be holy.

You pretend to love God, but it's all a show. There's no substance. It's cotton candy spirituality. It looks good. It tastes sweet at first, but it melts into nothing but a sticky mess. Anyone that comes to you hungry for spiritual truth, for spiritual life, will go away still hungry. The place where people were to go to meet with God, became a place where it was hard to find God.

Here's the question we need to wrestle with this morning. Is that ever true of us? It is ever true of the church? Instead of pointing people to Jesus, instead of bringing them closer to God, do we ever get in the way? Do we hinder them? Do we push them further away?

The reason Jesus loses it in the temple is because instead of bringing people closer to God, they kept them away. He quotes from Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7 when he says, *"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers."*

Instead of a house of prayer, it had become a house of profit. It was like trying to worship at Wal-Mart. Instead of being for all nations, it was for the Jews only. In fact, the outer court was called the court of Gentiles and there was a wall, and those from other nations were not allowed past. The temple had become the opposite of what God wanted.

How did they get there? How do we get there? Let me quote from David McLemore,

It didn't happen all at once. Nothing like this ever does. It happens one compromise at a time. We don't have to set up elaborate trading floors with international exchange rates. We just have to fail to welcome people, fail to make it easy to find Jesus. We just have to let our preferences set the agenda, let our feelings rule our interactions, let God's word about loving one another for Jesus' sake become mild suggestions rather than holy commands.

Individually we must ask, when I come to church am I coming to get closer to God? Am I coming to know him more, to be with him, and become more like Jesus? There's a lot of other reasons you can come to church? Your spouse wants you to. Your parents tell you to. You want to see your friends. It's what a good person does. It's just what you do. Sometime you learn some interesting things. Those aren't all bad things, but the real question is do you want him. Anything else will leave you still hungry.

Collectively, we must ask are we bringing others closer to God? Is Son-Rise a place where people are drawn closer to God? We must be, or we shouldn't be gathering. This must be a time and place where barriers between God and people are removed. "If people leave the church because the Bible makes it hard for them to worship God, that's between them and God. But if they leave the church because we make it hard for them to worship God, that's between God and us."

What's keeping you from God right now this morning?

We recently came out of the Olympics with their usual slate of dramatic storylines. The US Men's Basketball team won its 4th straight gold medal. That become almost expected ever since the pros started playing in the Olympics starting in 1992.

It was certainly expected with the 2004 dream team. It was a team featuring superstars such as LeBron James, Allen Iverson, Tim Duncan, Dwyane Wade and Carmelo Anthony. They were led by Hall of Fame coach Larry Brown. They should have been untouchable. Instead, they lost games to both Puerto Rico and Lithuania in group play. Then they were soundly defeated by Argentina in the semi-finals. Many regard the 2004 men's team as the most overhyped, overrated team in modern sports history.

ⁱ The ancient sources vary widely, as do modern estimates.