

Sermon outline and notes:

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Mark 11:12-20 “Jesus, Examining Our Lives”

Intro. Last Sunday I introduced you to the last miracle performed by Jesus in Mark’s gospel. On the Monday morning before His crucifixion, Jesus was hungry and He saw a fig tree that was full of leaves. But when he looked for any fruit, He found none whatsoever. So He cursed the fig tree, and by the next day it was completely withered from the roots up.

Jesus used the miracle to make a statement concerning the fruitlessness of Israel, as we shall also see in chapter 12. Israel was like this fig tree, full of the “leaves” of religious works & rituals, but fruitless to God.

Even so, we may have many “leaves” that people admire, but too often there is no fruit that people can enjoy. Christ is still seeking fruit from His people, and for us to be fruitless is sin. Just a few nights later, Jesus said in John 15:16, “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain....”

Now in this text of Scripture, Jesus examines both the fig tree, and what was going on in the temple. In both cases, he responds with acts of judgment: Jesus curses the fig tree and He cleanses the temple. Our Lord’s condemning of the tree and cleansing of the temple were both symbolic acts that illustrated the sad spiritual condition of the nation of Israel. In spite of its many privileges and opportunities, Israel was outwardly fruitless (the tree) and inwardly corrupt (the temple). The same can be said of our nation. We are becoming outwardly fruitless and inwardly corrupt.

So I invite you to join me in examining this text of Scripture today. And as we do so, I want us to allow Jesus & the Word of God to examine our lives & our church as well. Now when to go to be examined by a doctor, he or she will ask a series of questions as part of the exam. So my sermon outline today will ask a series of questions. The first question of our exam is this:

I. IS THERE ANY FRUIT IN OUR LIVES?

Again, v.13 says, “And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.” Jesus had a right to expect fruit from this tree. With the leaves it gave promise of fruit, & there could have been some small, green figs on the tree. Yet there were none whatsoever. Now look down to the parable of Jesus in 12:2, “Now at vintage–time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers.” Like the owner of the vineyard, God expected to receive fruit from Israel. Yet when God sent prophets to remind them of this, they persecuted & even killed the prophets.

In the Old Testament the fig tree is a symbol of Israel. For example, Hos. 9:10 says, “I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstfruits on the fig tree in its first season. But they went to Baal Peor, ...They became an abomination like the thing they loved” (cf. also Jer. 8:13; Nah. 3:12). In later years they outwardly seemed more devoted to God, but they still were not truly fruitful. In Isaiah 29:13 the Lord said, “Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me.”

Likewise, when Jesus came to Israel, they had the outward “leaves” of religion. And yet, Jesus found no real fruit in most of the people. They were still just going through the form of religion. By the time of Jesus Rabbinism and Judaism was a spiritually dead religion.

Though this mainly had a message for the nation of Israel, it applies to each individual today. Christ comes to us, as He came to that fig tree, seeking from us this fruit which He delights in receiving. Having sowed so much, He does look for the harvest. He comes to us with the heart-moving appeal, “I have given all to you; what have you given Me?”

So to reflect on this, I ask two related follow-up questions:

A. Do You Have Just “Leaves”? - We must not settle for just “leaves.” Leaves benefit the tree, and assist in the production of the fruit. And so the symbol suggests things that are good in themselves, but fall short in being true fruit. And if you want to know what such things are, remember the condition of the spiritual leaders of Israel at that time. They prided themselves upon their external, hereditary connection with Abraham. They thought that because they had been born Jews, and circumcised, they were God’s chosen people. They trusted in mere ritualism, including the daily sacrifice in the Temple. They possessed the Law of Moses, & the rest of the Word of God. They may have had many leaves that people admired, but there was no fruit that people could enjoy.

That is exactly what hosts of unbelievers, masquerading as Christians, are doing today. In any Christian community, there is a fringe of people who have a nominal & external connection with religion, who have been baptized, & are on a church roll. They think that religion lies mainly in coming on Sunday, and going through the outward ceremonies of worship, including taking communion. They even have some interest or at least toleration for the sermon, especially if it contains a lot of humor. What describes such religion more accurately than “nothing but leaves”! Your dressing up on Sunday and carrying your Bible looks good, but alone it is nothing but leaves. Beware lest our religion is just producing leaves instead of fruit! The church or the individual whose religion has leaves only is useless to the world. What does the world care about the ceremonials and the externals of worship? Nothing! Only fruit nourishes & reproduces!

Now to determine if your religion is nothing but leaves, let’s consider the next related question:

B. Are You Bearing Fruit to God? – What kind of fruit should be in your life as a Christian? First, there should be the fruit of repentance. In Matthew 3:8 John the Baptist preached, “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.” To be saved, you must repent of your sins, and so the fruit of repentance is a changed life. Once we are saved, we should bear the fruit of righteousness & holiness (Rom. 6:22; 2 Cor. 9:10; Php. 1:11; Heb. 12:11; Jas. 3:18). We should bear the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, & peace (Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 5:9). We should bear the fruit of good works (Col. 1:10). We should bear the fruit of the true worship of God, including that of thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15). Finally, we should bear the fruit of souls won to Christ (Rom. 7:4; Php. 1:22; Col. 1:6). So as Christians we should be FIGS: Fruitful in God’s Service!

So is there indeed any fruit in your life? Spiritual fruit is one of the most important evidences that you have been born again. Without such fruits as these, we must question if we are truly saved. I am afraid that there are at least some professing Christians who are only Christians outwardly, but not inwardly. Church membership & even church attendance alone is nothing but leaves.

Now let me show you why that matter of fruitfulness is so important. We also see from this story:

C. If You Are Not Fruitful, Judgment Will Come – Since this tree had no fruit, Jesus does a very unusual thing. He cursed the fig tree. Notice what He said to the fruitless fig tree in v.14, “Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.” To be fruitless is sin, & sin invites chastisement or judgment. John the Baptist preached in Matthew 3:10, “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” God judged Israel in 70 A.D. Their nation was destroyed, & the remaining Jews were scattered to the nations. If God spared not His chosen people, don’t think for a moment that God will spare America, or a church, or an individual that fails to bear fruit unto God.

In Luke 13:6-7 we have another parable about a fig tree, “A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, ‘Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?’” That is what we would expect would happen to a fruit tree that doesn’t bear fruit year after year. But the owner in this parable represents God, so the keeper of the vineyard went on to say, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.”

I wonder if there is someone here today that is like the fig tree in that parable? Perhaps God looks at your life and finds no fruit, and no evidence of real salvation. And God, in His mercy, says, “I will give him one more year.” If you’re here today & you are not yet saved, God is giving you another opportunity to be saved, & begin to bear fruit unto Him. But don’t presume that you will be given even more time. Be saved today!

If you realize that your spiritual life is nothing more than leaves without fruit, that your religion is all on the surface, you can take the steps needed to put you in touch with Him who gives life, and from whom comes our fruitfulness. Repent of your sins. Put your faith in Jesus, & maintain a daily connection to Him. He has said to each of us, “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me” (Jn. 15:4).

So as Jesus examines our lives, our first question was, “Is there any fruit in our lives.” Now, as we move in our text to v.15, we ask the second question:

II. IS THERE ANY FILTH IN OUR LIVES?

This question comes up as we see Jesus going into the Temple. If we are going to please God, we must be both clean & fruitful. Now let’s see first of all:

A. What Jesus Found in the Temple – Jesus has entered the Court of the Gentiles. What a sorry spectacle greets His eyes, ears, and even nostrils! He notices that this court, hence the temple, was being desecrated. It now resembled a marketplace! What were they doing wrong? First of all, they were:

1. Buying & Selling Sacrificial Animals – Notice in v.15 that Jesus began to “drive out those who bought and sold in the temple...”, including “those who sold doves.” Though some oxen were probably being sold, the main sacrificial animal for sale at this time would have been lambs. It was only a few days before Passover, and each Jewish household was to offer a lamb for sacrifice. When people came from many miles away, it was much more convenient to buy a lamb there in Jerusalem. Certainly they could have been buying and selling sheep in the country side

around Jerusalem, but evidently most were bought there at the temple. Each lamb had to be inspected & approved by the priest. If you did not buy your sheep from them, they could be less inclined to approve the sheep for sacrifice.

Those who were poor could buy doves for some of the sacrifices at the temple. And so whether you were rich or poor, the High Priest, his family, & their merchants had a booming business selling sheep & doves, at inflated prices!

Furthermore, they were:

2. Exchanging Currency – Notice in the middle of v.15 that Jesus “overturned the tables of the money changers.” Among the buyers were pilgrims from countries far away. They carried with them currencies from other countries. But in the temple area foreign money was not accepted in payment for the sacrificial animals. It had to be in genuine, Jewish currency. So the money-changers were in the temple, sitting behind their coin-covered tables. Also, the temple tax of half a shekel had to be paid in Jewish coin. This business, too, was very profitable. No doubt the money changers added a surcharge and made a nice profit.

Now the business men and the priests who allowed it would have argued that they were performing a good service for the Jews who were coming from other parts of the world. But was the temple the place for it? And was their motive to serve the fellow man, or to make a nice profit? Jesus had cleansed the temple during His first Passover visit (John 2:13-22), but three years later, here they are back at it again! It didn’t take long before the religious leaders permitted the money changers and the merchants to return.

There was something else going on at the temple that Jesus found fault with. They were:

3. Using the Temple for Common Use - V.16 says, “And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple.” The entire temple complex was about 1000 feet square, the length of about 3 football fields. The temple was surrounded by walls, but there were gates at several locations along each wall. By means of the gates it had become rather easy and convenient to use the temple area as a shortcut; for example, between the city and the Mount of Olives. They didn’t bother going around the temple. They just cut right through it. The sacred place was being used for a purely secular purpose. What Jesus saw was that for the sake of convenience, worldly-minded people were carrying all kinds of “vessels” through the temple area, thereby degrading it. They lacked reverence for the house of God, just like those selling sheep, and exchanging money.

How do you feel about what was going on. Would you have objected to it?

B. What Jesus Did in the Temple – We have already read what Jesus did in vv.15-16. Basically, He put a stop to what has going on. It is not difficult to picture the righteous indignation that must have flashed from the eyes of Jesus when He drove out all who were engaged in this nefarious business, and overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those selling doves. He drove out those who had turned God’s house into a market place. He turned away those who were taking a short cut through the temple complex.

Why did Jesus take this action? What was wrong with what was going on?

1. It Was Contrary to the Purpose of the Temple - In v.17 Jesus said to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’?” The Jews looked upon the temple primarily as a place of sacrifice, but Jesus saw it as a place of prayer. Jesus quoted words are found in Isa. 56:7b. It is clear from this that the temple was intended to be the place where God met with His people. This area had been specifically set aside for the purpose of prayer and devotion. It was not at all the proper place to conduct a business enterprise, especially a

fraudulent one. But as it was, the people who came to the temple to pray, and worship God, had to work their way past all the buying and selling.

Also, this “religious market” was set up in the Court of the Gentiles, the one place where the Jews should have been busy doing serious missionary work.

2. They Were Cheating the People - They had not only turned the temple of God into a market place, but in the last of v.17 Jesus said, “you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’” G. Campbell Morgan points out that “a den of thieves” is the place to which thieves run when they want to hide. The dishonest merchants were hiding under the cover of religion, and who would question their honesty right there at the temple? The Court of the Gentiles should have been a place for praying, but it was instead a place for preying and paying. Mark especially mentioned the people who sold doves. The dove was one of the few sacrifices that the poor people could afford (Lev. 14:22). Even the poor were victimized by the merchants in the temple, and this in itself must have grieved the Lord Jesus, for He was always sensitive to the poor (see Mark 12:41-44).

Notice in v.15 that Jesus not only drove out the sellers, but those who were buying as well. Sellers were guilty of swindling the pilgrims. But why should the buyers be included in the number of those against whom the Lord vented His keen displeasure? It was because they accepted conditions as they were. It was surely far more convenient to buy your animal in the court than to bring it along with you (Lev. 17:1-6; Jer. 17:26) and run the risk that it would fail to pass the official inspection. If there had been no buyers, there would have been no sellers. You can be sure of that!

Then we read in v.19 that “the scribes and chief priests heard it...” They became upset & wanted to kill Jesus for putting a stop to their lucrative business. You see, the priests were no doubt making money off what was going on. The temple merchants had paid the priests generously for the privilege of selling in the temple courts. Some of this money finally reached the coffers of sly, wealthy Annas and of clever Caiaphas. So indeed, there was filth in the temple.

C. The Application - Well how does this apply today? Before we quickly condemn the Jewish religious leaders for their sins, we should examine our own ministries in light of this Scripture. To make application, we must first ask:

1. Is the Church a Holy Place? - In Eph. 2:21 we see that the Church of God is a holy temple to the Lord. The church is not a building, but the people of God. And yet wherever the people of God meet is a temple of God. So we learn from this passage how reverently we ought to use places which are set apart for public worship. A Christian place of worship is not as sacred as the Jewish temple. It is not built after a divine model, and intended to serve as an example of heavenly things. But it does not follow that a Christian place of worship is to be used with no more reverence than a private dwelling or a business. God takes notice of people’s behavior in places of worship, and all irreverence is an offense in his sight.

Also, do you realize that your body is the temple of God? The remaining questions apply to the body of a believer as well. So let’s examine ourselves with some additional questions, based on this text of Scripture:

2. Are We Fulfilling Our Purpose? Do the outsiders in our community think of our church buildings as houses of prayer? By declaring that the temple must be a house of prayer for all the nations, Jesus gave His endorsement to the wonderful cause of Christian Missions. And the nations have come to America. Are all nations welcome here?

3. Is There Greed in the Church Today? Have we become more interested in material things than in spiritual? This story is one reason why many Baptist churches have not

turned the church into a market place. Yet I'm seeing more and more churches selling tickets for concerts & seminars & so forth.

Do you realize that Jesus & religion has become big business? There are some people who make hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in the religion business. The Christian music industry has become too much about making money. Even preachers are getting more & more interested in how they can make extra money selling books, & so forth. I do not think the Lord is pleased with the way the church is becoming more and more commercialized.

4. Does the Church Need Cleansing Today? As Jesus looks upon the church today, what practices would He wish to cleanse from His church? Are there things in the house of God that ought not to be there? Is there any filth there that needs to go? When revival comes, God cleanses His church.

Martin Luther saw the terrible things that were happening in the Church in his day. Priests were selling indulgences. God used him to reform His church. What would He put a stop to today?

Conclusion: So if Jesus were to examine your life, would He find spiritual fruit? Would He find unconfessed sin? Jesus died on the cross that you might be forgiven, and fruitful. If you are a Christian He has given you the Holy Spirit. You have all the resources you need to live a fruitful & holy life. If you haven't been, trust in Jesus to help you live that kind of a life!

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); notes from Jerry Vines' sermon tape of 3/4/84; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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