

Jesus Cleanses the Temple, Part 3: The Withered Fig Tree

The fig-tree account sandwiches the temple cleansing in Mark, inviting us to read them in light of each other

Mark 11:12-24 || Matthew 21:18-22; Luke 13:6-9

1. What do you find troubling about the cursing of the fig tree?
 - a. Living things, even plants, should never be harmed for purposes of illustration.¹
 - b. It's mean-spirited to curse a fig tree which is not in season.
 - c. The whole account seems out of character for Jesus, who appears to lose his temper
 - d. It's unclear *why* Jesus was looking for figs out of season.
 - e. If it represents judgment on Israel and/or its religious leaders, where's the grace?²
 - f. None of the above—supply your own
2. Commentators point out that this is an acted-out prophetic message. There is a rich history of such prophetic actions, such as that in Isaiah 20:1-6, where Isaiah is told by God to be naked and shoeless for three years, at the end of which God has him explain that this was done “as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush.” (See also Jer 13:1-11; 19:1-13; Ezek 4:1-15.)

Understood this way, the withered fig tree updates the parable of the fig tree in Lk 13:6-9 (see also Mk 7:6). What does it add, and why does Jesus *act* the parable rather than simply *saying* that the time is up, as he does at length in Mk 13/Mt 24?

3. For Mark, the cursing of the fig tree has a two-fold message: First, it warns of doom for Jerusalem due to its corrupt leaders. Second, it serves as a model of answered prayer and the power of faith. In our discussions we have many times seen that faith is both active—stepping out in well-founded trust, and directed—particularly toward those things God has asked of us (Abraham's leaving his home being the foundational example; Rom 4). This is not to say the answer will always be yes. But as Lane says, “It is possible that it should be understood as an encouragement rather than an exhortation” (Lane, NICNT, 409), of God's faithful support of those he's called.

God has called you to particular a ministry and mission, to use your unique history, gifts, and context to spread his love, healing, and hope. If you could ask God for one thing related to your calling, and know the answer would be yes, what would it be?

4. The message of this passage is, in Lane's words, “Just as the leaves of the tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God” (400). The pandemic has caused many Christians to pause from in-person corporate worship and many other activities and

¹ If you choose this: are you also troubled by the burning bush? And if John the Baptist had warned of God's wrath by setting fire to a Ficus tree, would that also bother you?

² Remember our discussion from week 1: the crimes of which the leaders were guilty were not victimless, but preyed on the marginalized Gentiles, the poor, and those on whom the scribes piled their religious burdens. Note also, Mk 13 and Mt 24 include detailed instructions for how to avoid the coming destruction, for those paying attention.

ministries. It has also prompted many American church goers to reevaluate what they want to invest in and what they would prefer to set aside.³

Put in a positive light, the pandemic invites us to ask which practices in our lives are figs and which are just leaves? If you could easily drop one activity, habit or pursuit what would it be? What would you replace it with?

5. Sin, corruption, and oppression are so widespread that it's hard for us to imagine that the Day of the Lord, which Jesus warned of in 33 and which arrived for Jerusalem in 70, ever visits modern nations and corporations. Just prior to the parable of the fig tree (Lk 13:6-9), Jesus, commented on those killed by the falling tower of Siloam. Jesus taught that we shouldn't assume that every bad end is God's judgment on sin. But Jesus stops short of saying this never happens, instead concluding that we should *all* repent or perish.⁴ Add to this Jesus' prediction of the fall of Jerusalem in 70, and we are forced to allow that the Day of the Lord could come for any of us mired in sin, for any church hollowed out by corruption, or for any country, be it genocidal China or systemically racist and materialist America. Until that day arrives, we look to God sends for warnings and off-ramps like he provided in 33.

Absent a word from God, we, like Lazarus with Dives, have only the prophets to tell us which sin might make Jesus overturn our pews, such as: peace-and-comfort idolatry; church by and for the white middle class; the 50k children in Rochester who suffer from food insecurity; hoarding the gospel to avoid uncomfortable conversations; prioritizing our families over the family of God; minimizing our time in prayer and the Word and so stopping our ears to God's Spirit; etc. Rather than wringing our hands in fear and guilt let's spend time in prayer asking the God of grace to guide us.

6. *Bonus question:* Is the meme below faithful to what you've learned about this event?

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Fun fact: Blomberg (*Interpreting the Parables*, 269) comments on Luke's barren fig tree, in which the vineyard tender is told to fertilize the tree: "The digging and spreading of manure may be an example of 'insult humor,' especially if the crowds realized that Jesus had the Jewish leaders specially in view..."

Further fun fact: "Bertrand Russell and other 20th century skeptics have offered [the cursing of the fig tree] as a primary reason why they cannot accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God. How, they ask, could one who in a moment of personal frustration curses an innocent fig tree be the perfect Son of God?" ("The Cursing of the Fig Tree," *Christian Century*, Nov 8, 1967, p. 1429.)

If anyone ever asks you, "What Would Jesus Do?"



Remind them that flipping over tables and chasing people with a whip is within the realm of possibilities.

³ Including church itself; cf. WSJ, "Churches Changed During the Pandemic and Many Aren't Going Back," Nov 12, 2021.

⁴ Jesus adds, "just as they did"—i.e., in this life, whether by the sword or being crushed some other way, but note Jesus is not alluding to hell (N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 163).

Leader's Intro:

The withered fig tree sandwiches the cleansing of the temple, so it is appropriate to read the two in light of the other. An abbreviated version of this passage appears in Matthew, and an earlier parable which contains a slight variant of the message, but with the twist that a little more time was being given to bring about fruitfulness.

Jesus arrives for Passover on passion week and just to connect the dots, says, Look, here's the fig tree which produced no fruit, and it's too late. And then he tosses the temple. Very clear: the fruit God was looking for was, in this case, an open heart toward the Gentiles. One could add the Mk 7:6, where Jesus quotes Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me," and Jesus' accusation that the scribes and Pharisees were making it *harder* for people to get close to God.

This is a problem passage for many reasons, but they are essentially cosmetic. It at first appears Jesus is losing his temper; but a closer look doesn't provide evidence for this. It appears unfair to curse a tree out of season, but this is the reason why Mark points out that this is *not* the season—to make it clear that Jesus wasn't mad at the tree. Jesus is making a point, one so close to the parable in Luke that the only stumbling block here is surely just the destruction of a tree. But strangely we object to this while not being bothered by the burning bush. If John the Baptist has doused a shrub with kerosene and, lighting it, said, "this is what will happen to Jerusalem if we don't repent," we would probably have not been so bothered. And neither should we here. There is a rich tradition in the OT of prophets acting out their messages. The only thing which makes this unique is the apparently miraculous death of the tree. Should that bother us? Clearly God wants to make the point clear and is willing to sacrifice a fruit tree to do so.

Once we get past that we can ask what it means. Here it is reasonably clear: the offenses condemned in the tossing of the temple have a real consequence, which Jesus unpacks as the destruction of Jerusalem. This is again no more or less than the parable of the fig tree in Luke, only time has run out. The passion-week narratives are packed with the reasons, and in Mk 13 Jesus lays it out with brutal clarity: the temple will be destroyed. Amazingly, Jesus provides clear instructions for how to escape when the time comes. So this is destruction which is preceded by endless warnings and even a step-by-step escape-pod manual. If we are looking for mercy and grace, we should look there. But we should remember that these were not victimless crimes being committed, and where there are victims, we should ask if the clock is running down.

In terms of applications, there are two avenues to explore:

- 1) Are we falling into the same sins?
- 2) Does the Day of the Lord still revisit earth from time to time? I.e., is time running out for us as well?

#1 can be approached both individually and corporately. Individually we may ask what things we are doing for show, and whether we are bearing the fruit of the Spirit. This is a hard one to tackle, but seen in a positive light this is an excuse for us to evaluate what in our lives are figs and what are just leaves.

Finally, Mark concludes this by making it a lesson on faith and prayer. If we weren't convinced of the value of a miraculous tree-withering before, now we should be, because this occasioned Jesus' teaching about prayer. Now of course we need to remember that faith is really trust, based on experience, whether ours or others—it's not blind or unfounded. Faith is also in the context of what we might call ministry. For Abraham, the prototype of faith, faith meant a willingness to trust God's promise and travel to Canaan. It was both simple and hard: a clear

direction but a high price of uprooting himself. Jesus says, in pursuit of what God is asking of you, don't hesitate to ask God for support, and be ready to be pleasantly surprised by the response.

Now to #2 above: Sin, corruption and oppression are so widespread that it's hard for us to imagine that the Day of the Lord, which arrived for Jerusalem in 70 AD, ever visits the modern nations and multinational corporations. After all, they continue, day after day, with no repercussions. Still, the same could have been said in Jesus' day, and it was many years before Rome collapsed under its own weight. It may also be many years before a corrupt America or Russia or China reaps what it has sown. Still, we have seen on a smaller level the Day of the Lord arrive in our times to churches where priests sexually abuse children, or where the leader (cough Mars Hill) has a messiah complex, or those churches on the right or the left who have elevated allegiance to Trump or to the values of the political left. The Day of the Lord is coming for those organizations who abuse others. God sends warnings and off-ramps and calls us all to re-evaluate.

Of the many sins we might look for in our own churches, we could include particularly two: (a) churches by and for the white middle class; (b) ignoring the poor at our doorstep. Rochester, NY has an extremely high level of child poverty. How are we helping? And regarding our monotonicity, is there more we can be doing to reach out to those who aren't like us? If the answer to (b) is to give til it hurts (both time and money?), I am unsure about the answer to (a). All the more reason to ask it, in community.

Themes and question ideas:

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Extra questions and observations:

1. In Mark the cursing of the fig tree sandwiches the cleansing of the temple suggesting Mark intends each to illuminate the other. What does the fig tree tell us about the cleansing, and vice versa?