

Mark 11:12-19

¹² **Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry.**

¹³ **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. ¹⁴ In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard *it*. ¹⁵ So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹⁶ And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. ¹⁷ Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, '*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*'? But you have made it a '*den of thieves*.' " ¹⁸ And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. ¹⁹ When evening had come, He went out of the city.**

Remember last week's text? Jesus entered the city in what appeared to be a triumphal entry. But in reality it was just another expression of flesh by the crowd. They wanted Jesus to be **what they wanted Him to be** and when they found out that He wasn't here to fulfill that role, their exuberance in praising Him turned into rage in hating Him.

Once in Jerusalem Jesus went in and took a look around. Then He turned away and went back to Bethany to stay with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, more than likely. The text this morning will tell us about the next day.

¹² **Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry.**

So Jesus and his disciples are making the trek back to Jerusalem. It is not very far. And Jesus was hungry.

Now this isn't a big point. But then again, it might be. I am guessing that all of us at some point, maybe at many points, are faced with something that we know that **we should do** or we know that **we shouldn't do**. And we powerfully **don't want to do it** or **want to do it**, no matter what God says. And in our heads we use this argument. Surely God knows how hard this is for me. Surely He will not hold it against me in this instance. It is too hard for me. I cannot overcome these creature desires. We use the reasoning, how can it be good if it feels so bad. Or how can it be wrong if it feels so right? And by so doing we rebel against the authority of God to direct our lives.

Now, how does that relate to Jesus being hungry? The point is that God knows. Christ lived in the range of human emotions and desires that we all have. His edicts don't come for **someone** sitting in a board room who has **no idea** what real life is like. Christ was hungry just like we get hungry. And all the normal temptations that go along with that state were shared by Him.

Hebrews tells us this:

Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴ **Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession.** ¹⁵ **For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin.** ¹⁶ **Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

Our earthly authorities do not always get it right in what they expect of us. Sometimes they expect too much and sometimes they expect too little. But God always gets it right. He knows just what to expect. So if He expects it, **we can**, through **calling out to obtain His grace, perform it**. Jesus was hungry. He felt just like us when we are hungry.

¹³ **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.**

Well, none of us here, this morning, farm figs. But from what I read this was an unusual tree. Normally leaves and figs come out at about the same time. So normally if a fig tree had leaves it would also have figs. And not only that, this tree was about a month ahead of schedule. If you had looked across the landscape, this is the **only fig tree** that would have had fully developed leaves. So the leaves were ahead of time but the figs were not. They may have been right on schedule.

So Jesus approached the tree hoping to get something to eat. This tree held great promise but no performance. Christ was disappointed in what He found. So what He did next is unusual.

¹⁴ **In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard *it*.**

Wow. Look at that. I'll bet if you were with Christ at that point you would just shut up right about now. Jesus curses a fig tree that had done nothing wrong but been ahead of schedule with its leaves. Why? Why would He do that?

I think it was a combination of things.

First, consider his condition. He is in the last week of His ministry.

Organizationally- His A team isn't doing all that well.

Politically- The crowds are fickle and would soon turn on Him. The established religious leaders were going to kill Him.

Relationally- One of His insiders was going to betray Him. All of His followers are going to leave him.

Spiritually- He is about to suffer the weight of every sin that every believer has and ever will commit.

Physically- He is going to suffer severe agonizing pain.

Work Schedule- includes a whole lot of things that must be accomplished in the next several days. One of them being clearing out the temple.

So, how do you think you would be approaching life with that weight on your shoulders? It isn't difficult to imagine that Jesus would be a bit short with an object that had no eternal value.

Second- The nation of Israel was often compared to a fig tree. Hos 9:10, Nahum 3:12, Zech 3:10

The Old Testament talks about the promise that the nation of Israel held, but it never lived up to its promise. In this case it refers to the nation as a vineyard but the imagery still holds up.

Isaiah 5:1-7

¹ Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. ² He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected *it* to bring forth *good* grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes. ³ "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard.

⁴ What more could have been done to My vineyard That I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected *it* to bring forth *good* grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes? ⁵ And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; *And* break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, But there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds That they rain no rain on it." ⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts *is* the house of Israel, And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.

With this scripture and more it is very likely that those who heard about the fig tree in the future would immediately think of these passages and would interpret it as being about **more than an unproductive piece of growing lumber**.

Jesus knows what He is going to receive from the nation that God set apart for Himself. He knows what this nation, that held so much promise, is going to do to Him in a few days. Possibly this action by Christ is a foretelling of the state that the nation of Israel will **soon be in** as a result of never living up to the promise that it held.

And the third possible reason that Jesus cursed the fig tree could be that Jesus is going to use this as an example of productive prayer. It isn't like the disciples asked Christ, what was this all about and Jesus avoided the topic. He used it to

tell the disciples about the power of prayer. We will probably look at that next week.

This leads me to believe that Christ had a greater purpose in cursing the fig tree than just making Himself feel better. But I don't think I would have wanted to have been there on that day **acting frivolously**. I doubt Jesus was in a state to be trifled with.

¹⁵ **So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.** ¹⁶ **And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple.**

There are a lot of people who have a lot of self styled ideas about Jesus. This text usually puts a hole in a lot of their theories. Here we find Christ in a contained rage, doing the work of God that the leaders should have been doing all along. There are a few things we need to know.

First, Christ had done this once before. In John 2:14-16 we find the first event. But evidently the leaders drifted back to their default position.

Second, these were the problems.

First problem- Those who bought and sold. The high priest's family had a direct connection with what was going on here. Vendors would pay them a high price to be able to sell in the temple. What they were selling were sacrificial animals. The scam was that **all sacrifices had to inspected**. If you brought an animal with you and it was rejected in the inspection, which seems to be very common, you would be in a bad spot. But if you bought them from one of these temple vendors, they were already inspected. These animals were pre-inspected.

It is sort of like what happens at an airport now. If you buy a bottle of water before you go through security, you will not be able to take it with you. But if you buy it in the stores after security, you are good.

But the bigger problem with what the temple sellers are doing is, the price of the animal they sold was incredibly jacked up. So basically, the High Priest and his cronies were getting rich from the people's desire to serve God. They were exploiting the crowd's spiritual convictions.

Second problem- the money changers. This racket was designed to exploit peoples spiritual convictions by requiring that they use Israeli money, not Roman money, during this period of time. It would be like going to France and exchanging dollars for Euros. Except that the money changers would add in a 10% profit for themselves. So they were paying themselves 10% for every dollar they would count. You can see how that would be an incredibly lucrative business. And the people had no other choice. If they wanted to obey **what they believed to be God's law**, they had to pay up.

Third problem-seats of those who sold doves

These vendors got particular notice, probably because they **exploited the poor**. The dove was the most common sacrifice, because it was the cheapest. God had made His law in a way that catered to those who were poor. He chose an animal that was easy to come by. But these sellers complicated it by requiring the sacrifice to be purchased from them and then bumping up the price. This was particularly vexing. They were exploiting the people who could least afford to be exploited.

Fourth problem- He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple.

I don't know how Jesus accomplished it, but somehow he stopped people from using the court of the Gentiles as a thoroughfare. The court of the gentiles was as close to the Holy of Holies as a gentile could get. Before Christ, that would have been as close as we could get. For the Gentiles, it was a sacred place if they were serious about worshipping God. But the Jewish merchants were using it as a convenient highway between them and their next buck.

By doing this they were displaying what they thought of God and God-seeking gentiles. The attitude displayed would be like a person answering his or her cell phone in a worship service. I feel free to use this example because I am not aware of anyone ever doing that here. We would immediately recognize that as displaying a lack of regard for what the service represents. That attitude would be similar to what is going on here in our text. These people have simply lost touch with who God is. They have lost the proper regard towards Him. And because of that, they are showing contempt toward the gentile seekers.

A shepherd should always have the capacity to make the wolves fear. We see that in Jesus this morning. These profiteers were the worst kinds of wolves. They were placing their booths between the populace and God. They were acting as a toll booth to God.

Something struck me the other day as I was reading Psalms. God becomes fierce when men exploit widows and orphans. There are plenty of other things that inspire His wrath, but widows and orphans are almost a litmus test of the spiritual health of a body of people. I wondered about that. Why?

I think it is because they represent people in need without protection. They are easily ignored and easily exploited. So how God's people deal with **them** shows what kind of spirituality **they really have**. No matter what they say, how they treat widows and the fatherless is what they really are.

Psalms 10:12-14

¹² **Arise, O LORD! O God, lift up Your hand! Do not forget the humble.** ¹³ **Why do the wicked renounce God? He has said in his heart, "You will not require an account."** ¹⁴ **But You have seen, for You observe trouble and grief, To repay it by**

Your hand. The helpless commits himself to You; You are the helper of the fatherless.

Psalm 10:17-18

¹⁷ LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will prepare their heart; You will cause Your ear to hear, ¹⁸ To do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, That the man of the earth may oppress no more.

Psalm 68:4-6

⁴ Sing to God, sing praises to His name; Extol Him who rides on the clouds, By His name YAH, And rejoice before Him. ⁵ A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, *Is* God in His holy habitation. ⁶ God sets the solitary in families; He brings out those who are bound into prosperity; But the rebellious dwell in a dry *land*.

Psalm 94:3-10

³ LORD, how long will the wicked, How long will the wicked triumph? ⁴ They utter speech, *and* speak insolent things; All the workers of iniquity boast in themselves. ⁵ They break in pieces Your people, O LORD, And afflict Your heritage. ⁶ They slay the widow and the stranger, And murder the fatherless. ⁷ Yet they say, "The LORD does not see, Nor does the God of Jacob understand." ⁸ Understand, you senseless among the people; And *you* fools, when will you be wise? ⁹ He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see? ¹⁰ He who instructs the nations, shall He not correct, He who teaches man knowledge?

We see in all this that the wicked exploit the powerless. They take advantage of weakness. And they think that because they temporarily get away with it that they will permanently get away with it. But they are wrong. God is the father to the fatherless. And He notices.

In fact, look what James says.

James 1:27

²⁷ **Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.**

Real religion is seen when people look out for those who have needs, especially when they will get nothing for it in return. That is real religion.

My point this morning is that if you want to get in God's spotlight, exploit those who are seeking Him. Just use people for your selfish gain. Find their weakness and take advantage of it for yourself. Use it as a way to feed your flesh or your bank account. And you will soon find out what God thinks of that.

And if you want to move that up a notch, serve as a barrier between them and God. Set up your toll booth between them and God. You will find yourself in the cross hairs of God.

These vendors were violating 2 things that are important to God, His honor and His people.

These vendors were not making an honest mistake. They were committed to the industry of follower exploitation. What they were saying to God is, if you exist, we really don't think you will do anything about this. And frankly we don't care. We are not afraid of you. Our plan is working and we expect that it will continue to work.

We really don't care if we are making it harder for people to worship you. In fact, we don't care if people worship you at all. But we do care that we have nice homes and good opportunities for our children.

Do you see how, if these people loved God at all, they would have done everything in their power to make it easier for people to get to God. They would not be setting up barriers between them and God. And rest assured, any **exploitation done to a believer** by those **representing religion** creates a barrier for a believer. Paul warns us of that great danger. In fact the communion warnings are given in that light.

So along with the Vendors showing what they thought about God, they showed what they thought of God's people. God's people were just items to exploit. They were people with dollar signs stenciled on their foreheads, just suckers to take advantage of. And the more they love God, the bigger of a sucker they are. There are two applications that are easy to make from this passage.

- 1- We do well to consider any way that we are like these vendors. Is there any way at all that we are exploiting those around us for a fleshly reward because they love God and that makes them easier to get what we want? If we see any of that in us, we would do well to wean ourselves of that great sin quickly.
- 2- We also do well to consider how we treat those around us who have needs that we can meet and will gain nothing by doing so. The widows and fatherless were the great opportunities in Bible times. Who fits in that mold now? What can we do to include people in the fellowship of the body and the worship of God? How can we be a conduit for them to more easily access God?

¹⁷ **Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, '*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*'? But you have made it a '*den of thieves*.' "**

Jesus quotes two passages. Is 56:7 and Jer 7:11.

We need to grasp the essence here. God wants to maintain access to Himself for the person that **He calls to Himself**. He has always had a way for people to reach

out to Him. Prior to Christ, the temple was the center for this opportunity. The court of the gentiles was such a place. It was meant to be sacred. It was meant to be Holy. It was meant to be peaceful. But it has become just a marketplace. And not only a marketplace, it is worse than that. It is a rip-off joint. It is a black market sales area. There was no authority to appeal to. There were no other sources of the product. One was forced to stand in line for this fleecing. And worse than everything, it posed as a ministry to the seekers.

Maybe the worst examples of this today are the so called ministries where God's blessing or healing or whatever **is associated with** the amount of money that finds its way from the sucker's pocket to the big shot's pocket. Those are the clearest examples. The more subtle forms are when we use our influence in the church to feed our flesh, whether that be in terms of status, or service, or ego, or power, particular when we do that to the weakest newest believers.

The church just simply cannot operate like the world in any way. We cannot bring any of that pollution into our relationships. Or we will end up just like the vendors.

By quoting these two verses Christ was defending what He was doing. He is basically saying He cares more about God's honor than all of the people who are in charge of guarding the temple's activities. They should have been **protecting the environment of the temple** and keeping the principles of this world out. But they ended up being the primary exploiters.

So what comes next is no surprise.

¹⁸ **And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching.**

What Jesus said was an indictment on the leadership. It didn't take a genius to figure that out. They knew it and they knew the people would know it. So, rather than repenting, rather than committing themselves to doing a better job of representing God, they chose to kill the source of the truth.

And why? They are now **afraid of Christ**. They are now viewing Him as a greater threat than ever. They think that He is like they are. And that He is likely to lead an uprising that would put all of them out of power. They certainly knew where they stood with Christ. There would be no alliances between Him and them. So when He led a revolt, it was going to cost the religious leaders everything they cared about.

And what caused them to have this fear? The opinion of the crowds. Isn't it interesting that the good press that Christ was getting from the crowds was regarded as worthless by Christ. It would not help Him at all to accomplish His spiritual mission. But that was the same thing that the religious leaders were **MOST** afraid of. The difference is that the religious leaders were operating by the

worlds rules and depended upon the worlds tools. Popular opinion can be a powerful tool for power. But it never does anything to save a person's soul. That requires spiritual weapons, spiritual tools.

So the religious leaders were afraid of that which would not accomplish any harm to them and they were not afraid of the One who would throw them into hell. Not smart.

I think there is another application here. When we are faced with the truth about ourselves, we always have a good option and a bad one to choose from.

In our text this morning, the rebuke was coming from Christ Himself. Of course if it comes from Him we know it is always accurate and intended for good. But often that is not how we receive pictures of ourselves. Sometimes we find **our enemies** telling us the truth. Sometimes it may be **other Christians** who are known to have less than loving agendas. But the question that we must always ask ourselves, the question that the religious leaders refused to ask themselves, is **what is the truth?** Is this person telling me something about a way that I displease God, no matter what their motive is and no matter how badly they may have gone about telling me? If so, for the moment, that should be the only consideration. We shouldn't allow anything to detract us from that point. If that person has told you a truth, no matter who they are and no matter what their motive, they have done you a favor. Use it to drive you to repent of that sin or to improve in that fault. Allow the truth to get you to do the thing that the truth requires.

Our other option is to divert the focus to something else. We can usually tell this is happening because the conversation moves from being rational to being something less than rational. Other issues are brought up. We show a lack of willingness to think about the initial issue. We bring into question the motives, or the wisdom, or the tact, or the style of the one challenging us. We move to topics about how impossibly hard this is for us or how unfair it is to expect such a thing, and on and on. Maybe we go as far as separating ourselves from the one that brought us the truth. But the truth is avoided. And that is the worst thing that could happen. We need to watch ourselves continually. Because our hearts are the trickiest people we know. When we are done with our exploits to avoid truth, we will often be the only one left not knowing the truth about ourselves.

We have said this here before in our church and we will no doubt say it again. We need to learn to welcome the truth about ourselves, no matter how bad the truth is, and no matter what its source. Because the truth about a Christian will lead a Christian to the grace and growth provided by Christ. And the whole process will serve to glorify our Savior. Our growth happens from knowing the truth about ourselves and laying that truth at the feet of our Savior. And think about it. How wonderful it is when the Devil, the accuser of our souls, lays in front of us a truth

intended to harm us, and it turns out being just another opportunity for spiritual growth. Praise God. It is just like Him to do such a thing. One thing is for sure. The religious leaders were masterful in their avoidance of the truth about themselves.

¹⁹ **When evening had come, He went out of the city.**
So ends Wednesday of Christ's last week.