

Imprecatory Prayer

Mark 11:11-26

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Introduction:

As most of you know, I have been preaching through the gospel of Mark.

- We have been tracing the ministry of Jesus as it is presented to us in Mark, and recently we came to chapter 11.
 - There is a great change here.
 - It is our Lord's final week before the crucifixion and there is a change in the way that He presents Himself.
- Up until chapter 11, He has been preaching and teaching and doing many signs and wonders that show that He is the Messiah,
 - But He has deliberately avoided declaring it and has forbidden His disciples to declare it—because even they did not understand the work that He had to do as the Messiah—the work of going to the cross to die for His people's sins.
 - From the time that they confessed Him to be the Messiah in chapter 8 until the end of chapter 10, He told them repeatedly of His sufferings,
 - but they were unable to accept it or understand it.

Nevertheless, now that they have arrived at Jerusalem, Jesus is much more open about making it known that He is the Messiah.

- Last time in Mark 11:1-10 we saw how He rode in on a donkey as Israel's King.
 - It was a very deliberate display that He was the Messiah, and this was not lost on the people as they honoured Him by placing their garments before Him and by declaring: (Mark 11:9-10), **“Hosanna! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’¹⁰ Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”**
- This time we will see in Mark 11:11-26 how He reveals His authority over the house of God at Jerusalem as the one who has authority to bring a curse upon them for their unfruitfulness.
 - What we have here is the account of Jesus, the Son of God, purging His temple sandwiched within the account of Him cursing a barren fig tree that represents His barren house.
- Do you remember how Mark likes to use the sandwich structure where he begins a story, then interrupts himself to present a second but related story, and then completes the first story?
 - It is an effective way he has of putting things together for comparison.
 - In this case, the cursing of the fig tree is the bread and between the slices is the purging of the temple of one of its many abuses.
 - The sandwich tells of His powerful imprecation that will bring about the temple's destruction.

Take a look at our text. Mark 11:11-26. Listen as I read it to you now.

Mark 11:11-26: And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve. 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. ²⁰ Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. ²¹ And Peter, remembering, said to Him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away.” ²² So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. ²³ For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*. ²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever.

- Thanks be to God.

You can see in verse 11 that the Son of God visits the temple.

- He inspects what is going on in His house: **And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve.**
- It reminds us of when God came down from heaven to look at the tower of Babel that the sons of men had built—in their efforts to establish contact with God.
 - Only, the tower of Babel was not initiated by God whereas the temple at Jerusalem was.
 - Nevertheless, as in previous generations, the temple at Jerusalem had been corrupted by so much sin and hypocrisy that it had lost its purpose and was fit only to be rejected and destroyed.
 - Jesus is the one who will bring about that destruction by His own curse.
 - His curse on the temple is revealed by the sandwich—

- Mark intends for us to look at the purging of the temple wrapped in the bread of the cursing of the fig tree.
- By looking at them together, we will understand what Jesus is going to do to His temple.

I. So let's take a look at the fig tree and the temple together.

A. First, observe that both have a lovely appearance of fruitfulness.

1. In verses 12 & 13 we are told of an extraordinary fig tree.

- It was already in full leaf at the time when the leaves on most fig trees were just starting to develop their leaves and their fruit.
 - We are told that Jesus was hungry and seeing this extraordinary fig tree, He went to see if it had any figs to eat.
 - Since the fruit on a fig tree comes out with the leaves—sometimes even before them in its earlier form—the expectation is that fruit would be found on a tree like this that was so full of leaves.
 - It stood out among the other fig trees as a fig tree with an appearance of vitality and fruitfulness.

2. The temple at Jerusalem had a very similar appearance.

- The people of Israel were the ones who had built this temple.
 - They were the people the Lord had taken to be His own people and it was to them that He promised to bring His Son who would bring salvation to the world.
 - The Lord had given them rituals together with promises that showed His acceptance of them through the blood of the covenant, shed for the remission (or the forgiveness) of their sins.
 - They were the people who had eternal life for the world.
- And what a grand appearance they had!
 - The temple that Herod had built (or actually was building) was magnificent.
 - At this time, as at each of the three annual feasts, people came up to the temple from all over the world to worship.
 - The outer court where Jesus did His teaching each day was a half a kilometer in length and about a third in width—the size of 35 football fields.
 - It had a portico around it with a colonnade that had columns so large that it took three adults to reach around each one. Jesus did His teaching in this area.
 - Gentiles were allowed in this part of the temple, but they were forbidden to go to the court of Jews upon pain of death...

- And no one but the priests could go into the sanctuary itself which was the size of three football fields where something like 250,000 sacrifices would be offered.
 - And only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies and that only once per year on the Day of Atonement.
- All that God had appointed for the temple showed that from His people was to come the Saviour of the world who would take away the sins of all those He had chosen and reconcile us to God.
 - This was a place where the world could find forgiveness and life.
 - Jerusalem was like that fig tree with its leaves—it stood out from all the other cities of the world as a place where fruit should be found.
 - The sandwich was full of promise!

B. But what did Jesus find when He inspected this tree and this temple?

1. He found that the tree, with all of its leaves, was without fruit.
 - There was not a fig to be found on it.
 - Verse 13 (starting from the middle of the verse) says: **When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves.**
 - It only had a show of fruitfulness.
2. This is meant to illustrate what Jesus also found at His temple.
 - These were the people from whom He had come.
 - All the rituals that God had given them depicted Him as the Savior of the world, but when He came to them they did not know Him.
 - They did not embrace Him and set Him forth as the Saviour of the world.
 - Instead, they were plotting how they might destroy Him.
3. His temple that was supposed to be filled with the promise of salvation was instead filled with merchants.
 - The chief priests and the Sanhedrin had allowed these merchants who sold temple approved animals for the people to offer as sacrifices conducting business in the very courts of the temple—that large court where everyone congregated.
 - Their service was a necessary service, but the temple court was not the place to conduct it.
 - This was the place where the Gentiles were to go to pray—and the place where Jesus and others would teach—and they had turned it into a place where animals were sold and money was exchanged.
 - Until fairly recently, they had conducted this business at the Mount of Olives.

C. Jesus curses this tree and this temple.

1. To the tree He says (verse 14), **“Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.”**
 - This is a reversal of what He said at creation: “Be fruitful.”

- Fig trees were created to produce fruit for man to eat—it was the honour of this tree to provide its fruit.
 - But this barren tree was not doing that.
2. And what of the temple where the nations were to go to find God?
- Were they being a light to the nations? Ha! Not at all!
 - In verse 17, it says **Then He [Jesus] 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.’ ”**
 - There were even dishonest dealings going on in this place—and it was all done under the pretense of godliness and with the outward appearance of work done for God.
 - Jesus denounces all of this—showing that He is the Lord of the temple.
 - Verse 15-16 describe with what zeal He acted: **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.**
3. But understand that this was not really an effort on the part of Jesus to purify the temple—it was a representative action of a much greater destruction.
- a. There was a lot of corruption here and this little bit of reformation that Jesus carried out only pointed to the complete reformation that was needed.
- This merely symbolised the great work that Jesus had come to do.
 - There was to be a complete destruction of the temple.
 - Not just that Jesus would gloriously replace all the sacrifices here with His own sacrifice that truly takes away our sin—the Jewish leaders might have happily received that if they were godly...
 - But that this temple and its corrupt leaders and those who followed them would be cursed and delivered over to the Romans for utter destruction for rejecting their unique purpose.
 - They were like a fig tree with no figs.
- b. This utter destruction that was coming is illustrated for us by what happened to the fig tree that Jesus cursed.
- Look at verse 20-21: **Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. ²¹ And Peter, remembering, said to Him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away.”**
 - Think of it!
 - When a tree in full leaf is blighted it takes a long time for it to wither away, but this tree that Jesus cursed—all He said was “Let no one eat fruit from you ever again”—and the next day it is withered to the roots.

- This is what would become of the temple and its leaders and those who followed them.
 - Not one stone in that great temple would be left upon another.
 - That is the outcome of the Messiah's imprecations—His curse!
 - Like fig tree like temple.

II. Imprecations are hard for us to accept!

A. We feel sorry for the tree.

1. We don't consider that it completely forsook the purpose for which it was created.
 - We feel that the tree has been mistreated—that it could not help it.
 - Of course trees are not really the issue.
 - All our sentiment is more from feeling sorry for ourselves.
 - It betrays the sense we have that God is not just and has done wrong to us.
2. We ought rather to be angry with sin.
 - We ought to see how we have spoiled God's world by our sin—and that we are completely responsible for it.
 - We should especially be incensed by the sin in the church—by the rejection of Jesus as the only Saviour—with redemption only by the blood of the cross.
 - That is the message of reconciliation with God—it is the message of unfathomable love and mercy—
 - but like the Jews, the church obliterates that glorious message by her corruption.
 - Instead of being a light to the world, she becomes an impediment to the gospel with her traditions that are more about what she does than what God does...
 - and with her innovations that are more about her imagination than about Christ and His saving work.
 - Instead of being a house of prayer—where people establish real connection with God for salvation—it becomes a den of thieves where men seek their own and not the things of the Lord.
3. Brothers and sisters, if you know Jesus as Saviour, you ought to admire His power and justice that shrivels up the apostate church like it shrivels up the fig tree with a mere word.
 - We ought to stand in awe at His holiness that brings a curse in justice to those who oppose the very way He has established for sinners to come to Him.
 - The imprecations of Jesus should make us worship.
 - They should make us delight all the more in the salvation that He has brought to us by Himself becoming a curse for us.

B. The ungodly have always had a terrible time with our Lord's imprecations.

1. They are very merciful to God's enemies but very severe to their own enemies.
 - King Saul was told to completely wipe out the Amalakites and he would not—he spared King Agag.
 - But when he became jealous of David, he sent an army of three thousand to hunt him down and destroy him even though David was loved of God.
 - He showed mercy to God's enemies but pursued a man with a heart for God.
 - The kingdom was taken from Saul for sparing Agag.
 - He could not accept the curse that God had pronounced—he pronounced his own curses on the innocent.
2. Look at our society.
 - You see people cursing each other but then when they hear of God's curse on the wicked they are horrified.
 - They curse someone who cuts them off in traffic or their own parents or spouse when they displease them.
 - It is a good thing that their curses don't bring destruction the way Jesus' curses do, but how wicked it is for them to pronounce them.
 - But when they hear God say: (1 Cor 6:9-10) **Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God,**
 - they are greatly offended.
 - Our motto is, "Sin against God and there is no harm done, but say something that displeases me and I will see that you are destroyed."
 - It is to forget that God is the judge of all the earth.
 - It is to put yourself up as the judge.

TRANS> Brothers and sisters, we must not embrace the ways of the world.

- We must learn to embrace God's imprecations and pray that His enemies will be destroyed.

III. Jesus gives us lessons about imprecatory prayers.

A. First, He tells us that they are very powerful and effective.

1. Look at how He responds to Peter's amazement about the fig tree in verse 22-23:
 - Mark 11:22-24: **So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them."**
 - Jesus is not telling His followers here that we can pray for whatever our selfish heart might crave.

- Sadly, that is the way this verse is sometimes taken.
2. Jesus is surely talking here about those *mountains* that stand in the way of His kingdom.
- He is talking about those giants like Goliath or those cities like the cities of the Canaanites.
 - He is talking about those in the high seats of government that oppose God and His ways and that seem so immovable as they promote abortion and gay pride and racial warfare.
 - Perhaps most of all, he is talking about those in the church who, like the Jews at the temple in Jesus' day, oppose Jesus Himself.
 - That is the most destructive mountain of all.
 - They sit in the seats of God's kingdom, yet they oppose the Saviour He sent to us and say that He is a mere man who can be made a poster boy for whatever cause they want to promote—feminism, gay marriage, the acceptance of all religions, you name it.
 - They take up the name of God and the name of Christ and oppose Christ.
 - How can we go forward with God's kingdom when we have such enemies opposing us and standing in our way—such mountains!
 - Listen to Jesus again: **“Have faith in God. ²³ For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.”**
3. Brothers and sisters, you are to pray against Satan and his kingdom.
- You are to pray that Satan's kingdom will be destroyed and that the kingdom of Christ may be advanced.
 - We need to learn to pray imprecatory prayers in the right way.
 - The great illustration that is given us by James of effective powerful prayer is the example of a prayer of cursing and blessing.
 - James 5:17-18: **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.**
 - The great mountains that stood in the way of the early Christians were first the unbelieving Jews, then the Roman empire, then the heretics in the church like Arius that tried to take over the church.
 - The church prayed and these mountains were cast into the sea.
 - In 70 AD Jerusalem fell.
 - In 476 AD, the Roman empire breathed its last.

- Nothing will be able to stand against church.
 - Do you have faith to pray that God will bring down our enemies?
 - Or are you soft on God's enemies who stand up to oppose Christ and His kingdom?
- But there is something about imprecatory prayer of which you must be very careful.
- Jesus addresses it in verses 25-26.
- B. You must never pray imprecatory prayers against your personal enemies.
1. The whole point is that you are to pray for the advance of Christ's kingdom!
 - Saul should have prayed for the destruction of the Amalakites instead of the destruction of David!
 - David himself is a wonderful example.
 - He did not pray for the destruction of Saul but he sure did pray for the destruction of the Philistines.
 - I mean, you can ask God to protect you from your enemies and you can ask Him to deal with them, but it is better to pray for their reformation and for God to have mercy on them.
 - Imprecatory prayers are not for bitter people with personal agendas to pray.
 - They are for those who love God and who love His kingdom.
 - They are prayers that are prayed because of love for God and His kingdom and His elect people.
 - You don't want anyone to stand in the way of the advance of Christ's kingdom and glory or of people coming to know Him as Saviour.
 2. Jesus tells you to forgive your enemies before you pray.
 - Look at verse 25 & 26: **“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”**
 - When you realise how much God has forgiven you, it makes it easy to forgive the people who have sinned against you.
 - Seriously, if you have trouble forgiving people (and being of a ready forgiving spirit toward those who do not repent), it is because you don't realise how much Christ has forgiven you.
 - You truly deserve to go to hell—and He did that for you.
 - How can you possibly hold sin against your brother when he comes to ask you to forgive him?
 - If you don't, you will be the one who is ruined.
 - Bitterness will destroy you.
 - It will dry up your relationship with God and it will dry up other relationships in your life.

- Your prayers will be more like whining than the noble prayers of men like Elijah or David or Paul.

Conclusion:

The weakness of the church today is evident from our inability to pray imprecatory prayers with our Saviour.

- We need more of these prayers and at the same time we need to forgive more.
- The way forward is to come to Him for the grace that He promises to us in salvation.
- You can't save yourself. Left to yourself, you will have little interest in His kingdom or its advance.
 - You will never see how valuable it is and you won't care to pray earnestly that it will advance and that all who oppose it will be brought down.
- We can be thankful that Jesus will not cease to pray for this and that His prayers will be powerful to bringing down of the strongholds of this world.
 - But surely you want to be with Him in this—join your prayers to His for destruction of His enemies and the gathering of His people.