

IHOP & The Case of the Missing Figs

Palm Sunday Message
Mark 11:9-21 3-29-2015

Summary: After the Triumphal Entry, Jesus wept over Jerusalem because of coming judgment, and then went and observed the Temple. The next day He saw a fig tree in leaf (advertising fruitfulness), but it had no figs, so Jesus cursed it. Then He cleansed the Temple, saying it was to be a house of prayer for all nations. The cleansing of the Temple and the cursing of the fig tree both warned of coming judgment because of lack of fruitfulness (failing to function as a house of prayer). Jesus did that just before the Temple came to an end because the real temple (the church) was just beginning. We are to function as a house of prayer, bearing fruit to God.

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Mark 11:1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 3 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ tell him, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’ ” 4 They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, 5 some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” 6 They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. 7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” 10 “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest!” 11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. 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. 15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: “ ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have

made it ‘a den of robbers.’” 18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. 19 When evening came, they went out of the city. 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!”

Introduction

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the high... whoa – what is... John, is Jesus ... crying?

“He is. In fact, He’s not just crying – listen to Him. He’s wailing!”

Why? All His disciples are here shouting praises and laying down palm branches in front of Him. This is His moment of glory – why is He crying? What ... what is He saying?

“Oh Jerusalem! Jerusalem! If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”¹

We could tell, as we walked along with Jesus approaching Jerusalem, that He was pleased with the praises of the disciples, and all the hosannas. He really was. But it was a bittersweet time, because He was absolutely heartbroken over the city of Jerusalem.

Some of us were wondering out loud what kind of reception He would get when He entered the city. The last time Jesus was in Jerusalem they tried to stone Him to death, and He escaped and never went back to Jerusalem ... until today. We’ll see.

Oh boy, here they all come. Wow! People are just streaming out of their homes to see what’s going on. I guess they heard our shouts and everybody is curious.

“Who is this?”

“It’s Jesus – the prophet from Nazareth up in Galilee.”²

“Oh, I’ve heard of him.”

And with that, they all just turned and went on their way. Not much response. I was hoping they would realize He is the Messiah and join us in our praises. But they’re just indifferent. Well, at least they aren’t picking up stones again – that was a little nerve racking.

Looks like Jesus has regained His composure for the most part. Where to now, Master? Oh, straight to the Temple? You don’t want to get settled or freshen up or anything? OK - off to the temple.

Now don’t get me wrong – I love the temple. In fact, I’m really excited about seeing it again. It’s the house of God! And there’s no structure like it in the world – it’s amazing. It’s just that ... at Passover, the place is an absolute zoo. I mean, you think it’s crowded right here - you watch. The closer we get to the temple, the harder it will be to even move. For those of you Gentiles who don’t know what it’s like – Passover is when everybody in the entire nation of Israel crams into Jerusalem and comes to the temple to offer their lamb on the altar. I could show you later on back around the other side of the temple – there’s literally a river of blood flowing out from all the lambs that are being slaughtered. Hundreds of thousands of them – even with all the priests working around the clock they can barely keep up.

And you want to talk about craziness – wait ‘till you see the court of the Gentiles. As soon as we get up the steps you’ll see what I’m talking about.

You see that? They call that the bazaars of the High Priest. The High Priest and the Sanhedrin are so corrupt, they are now using the whole sacrificial system as a money making scheme. As you know, God requires unblemished lambs. And do you see that table over there? That’s where the priests inspect the lambs that people bring. They charge a quarter of a day’s wage just to do the inspection. And if you didn’t

¹ Luke 19:41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it 42 and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes..

² Matthew 21:10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

buy your lamb from them, it automatically fails. That way everyone has to buy lambs from them, and the prices are marked up about 20 times the normal price.

Anyway, I'm afraid you guys are going to have to hang out here while we go on in to the court of Israel. No Gentiles are allowed beyond this court.

Well, I thought we would go ahead into the inner courts, but maybe not. What's Jesus doing? He's just standing there looking around.³ He sure doesn't look very happy. You know, you might want to, just, be ready - sometimes it's hard to predict what Jesus might do. Oh, we're leaving now? Hmm. Well, I guess it is pretty late. There's no way we would ever get a room in Jerusalem - I think the plan is we'll spend the night over and Bethany and then we'll just come back in the morning.

The Case of the Missing Figs

Wow, Jesus, when You said "bright and early" You weren't kidding. You are? Yeah, me too - I'm starving!⁴ I can't believe we couldn't find breakfast anywhere in Bethany. There's probably not going to be anything available in Jerusalem either. We're just going to have to see if we can find something along the way. (Jesus never talks about being hungry. For Him to mention something - He must really be famished.)⁵

Huh? Really? Where? Oh yeah - I think You're right. That is a fig tree. That's crazy - look at all those leaves - in April!⁶

The False Promise of Leaves

For those of you who aren't from around here - the thing you have to understand about this part of the country - there are fig trees everywhere. But figs won't be in season for another couple months. See, look at all these fig trees - that's how they look all winter - just branches.



But they're not dead. As soon as summer comes, they start producing figs.



And after the figs begin to appear, then they start filling up with green leaves - like that one.



³ Mark 11:11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

⁴ Mark 11:12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.

⁵ The only other time the Bible states that Jesus was hungry was after His 40 day fast.

⁶ Mark 11:13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit.

That is so crazy – I’ve never seen a fig tree full of leaves this time of year. Let’s go down there and see if it actually has what it’s advertising.⁷ I sure hope it does – I could really go for some breakfast. And obviously Jesus feels the same way – look at Him go! I think He’s pretty excited about these figs!

What? You’re kidding me! Not one single fig?⁸ That’s a bummer. You have to understand - seeing a fig tree in leaf like this – that’s like you guys traveling and seeing a McDonald’s sign all lit up, and then the doors are locked. We get all our hopes up for some breakfast, and ... nothing.

You’re not going to believe what happened next. Jesus cursed that tree. He just walked right up to the tree and said, "**May no one ever eat fruit from you again.**" But He wasn’t angry. We could tell right away Jesus was in teaching mode. One thing about Jesus – He’ll never pass up an opportunity to teach us something. But He didn’t say anything. He just cursed that tree and started walking toward Jerusalem.

And when we got back into Jerusalem, things really got wild. We go to the temple and were walking through the court of the Gentiles, bumping through the crowd – all the ridiculous craziness - someone tries to sell Jesus a goat. Jesus doesn’t answer. He’s looking straight down at the ground – it’s like He is searching for something. He picked up a bunch of cords and ropes, and now he’s sitting down and weaving them... oh no. Don’t tell me He’s going to do this again. Back when He first started His public ministry He came into the temple, made a whip – we saw Him make that whip and we assumed He was going to do something with all the animals, but then He put that whip to the backs of the people – both sellers and buyers. You should’ve seen it – it’s the only time I’ve ever seen Him get violent. He was flipping over tables – it was unbelievable.

Whoa – whoa – He’s doing it again! Oh man - it’s chaos! Everybody’s shouting. People are running – look at them! One guy tried to salvage some of his coins but he got nailed by the whip and now he’s just trying to get away.

Now, you have to picture the scene. There’s Jesus standing there, huffing and puffing, and the huge circle had opened up around Him so that everyone was at a safe distance. And Jesus looks at all the people, tosses His whip on the ground, and starts teaching. I won’t repeat His whole sermon right now, but I can give you the gist of it. Basically what He said was, “Is it not written: “‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”⁹

The Temple Is for Prayer

He preached a sermon about prayer. And it was such a profound message because nobody really thinks of the temple that way. We think of the Temple as being a house of sacrifice. The Temple is where you go to offer sacrifices. It’s the place where God ordained for there to be an altar in the priesthood and the holy place, and He gave us all kinds of ceremonies and rituals and procedures that are to take place here. That’s how we think about the Temple.

But the more He preached, the more we all realized the truth of what He was saying. You just think back a thousand years ago when King Solomon dedicated the first Temple. That whole dedication was all about prayer.

1 Kings 8:29 May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, ‘My Name shall be there,’ so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. **30** Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. **Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.**

That is how he started, and the whole rest of the dedication was one example after another of various occasions of prayer.

Verse 31 - if we pray for justice in this temple, hear our prayer.

⁷ Mark 11:13 he went to find out if it had any fruit. Literally “if thus it had fruit” meaning “He went to see if indeed it had what it was advertising.”

⁸ Mark 11:13 ...When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs.

⁹ Mark 11:17 And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: “ ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Verse 33 – if we’re defeated by an enemy because of disobedience, but then we turn back to You and pray for forgiveness in this temple, hear our prayer.

If You send a drought, and we pray in this temple for rain, hear our prayer (v.35).

Again in verses 38, 42, 44, 48, 52 - the entire dedication of the Temple was just one request after another, “God, when we come into this house and pray to You, hear our prayers.” I don’t think we would be too far out on a limb if we said that the most fundamental purpose of the Temple had to do with prayer. The Temple is the dwelling place of God. It is the place you come to approach God’s presence. When you need to beseech God – whether it be for forgiveness or help or restoration or provision or anything else, the place to do that is in the dwelling place of God – the Temple.

And that is true whether you are Jew or Gentile. Solomon had a whole section of his prayer devoted to when foreigners pray in the Temple. That is how it was from day one, so it’s no surprise at all when we read later on, in the book of Isaiah, that the Temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations.

Isaiah 56:3 Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.” ...

4 For this is what the LORD says: ...6 foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him...7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

That last part is what Jesus quoted. If you are a Gentile, don’t assume that you are automatically excluded from the people of God. You aren’t. God says, “My Temple isn’t just a house of prayer – it is a house of prayer for all nations. It is the international house of prayer” – the original IHOP. The Jews believed the Messiah would come and purge Jerusalem and the Temple of Gentiles.¹⁰ But instead of purging the Temple *of* Gentiles; He purged the Temple *for* Gentiles.

And I think the commentator Lenski is right when he says that the word used for prayer here carries a wider sense of approaching in general – all forms of worship.¹¹ The Temple was supposed to be a place where all nations and peoples could come and worship God, unhindered. And anything that happens in the Temple to hinder that is a corruption of the Temple.

It is a house of prayer for all nations, and for what purpose?

Isaiah 56:7 these [Gentiles] I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.

The Temple is supposed to be a place where you come to meet God and in the process you receive joy.

Den of Robbers

That is what it was supposed to be, but they turned it into a **den of robbers**. Jesus quoted that phrase from Jeremiah 7:11. A den of robbers is a place where criminals go to hide so they will be safe. In Jeremiah’s time, people were committing all kinds of sins against God, and then running into the Temple thinking that as long as they did that, they would be safe from God’s judgment. And the point Jeremiah makes is that they will not escape judgment. In quoting that, Jesus is implying the same thing about the people of His day. People who think they can continue in sin without repentance, and still be okay with God because they are faithful churchgoers - those people will not escape judgment. And people who come into what is supposed to be a house of prayer, and they do things that make it difficult to pray or difficult to worship, those people will not escape God’s judgment.

¹⁰ Edwards, 343.

¹¹ Lenski, 489.

Withered Fig Tree

Jump ahead to the next morning.

Mark 11:20 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!”

“Hey, Jesus, look - it worked!”

But it really is an amazing thing if you think about it. If you go up to a perfectly healthy tree full of green leaves and chop it down, and you come back 24 hours later – it’s not going to be all withered and dried up. It will still have all its leaves. It takes months for a tree to dry up after you cut it down. So Jesus really did two miracles here: he killed this tree just by speaking to it, and then he caused it to dry up and wither over a 24 hour period.

What are we to make of this miracle? It really isn’t one of Jesus’ most popular miracles. When a preacher is talking about the awesome power of Christ, you never hear him say, “He fed the multitudes, turned water to wine, walked on water, stilled the storm, healed the sick, raised the dead ... and killed a tree!” If we handed out flyers to advertise for today’s sermon that said, “Come here about a man who killed a tree,” we might get more protesters than worshippers.¹²

False Promise of Fruit

What does this miracle mean? The answer is in the Old Testament background.

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

That is a reference to when God first made His covenant with His people after bringing them out of Egypt. God is saying, “I remember when we first ratified our covenant together there in the desert at Mt. Sinai in the desert. For me it was like finding a bunch of sweet grapes or figs in the middle of the desert.” Imagine walking through the desert and there is nothing to eat, and then all of a sudden there’s a plate with your favorite dessert on it. That is what it was like for God when he gave His law to the people and they responded by saying, “**Everything you have said, we will do**” (Ex.19:8). That kind of attitude and that kind of responsiveness to His Word tastes like sweet, delicious fruit to God.

Have you ever wondered why God uses the analogy of fruit to describe the things we do that are pleasing to Him? Why is it the fruit of the Spirit and not the vegetables of the Spirit? Fruit is sweet. It is

¹² Some of the commentaries just skip this whole section because they don’t agree with what Jesus did. They say this tree didn’t deserve to be cursed for not bearing fruit out of season. One of them actually said Jesus was acting like a spoiled child, and using His miraculous power to vent a temper tantrum over not getting some food. But Jesus was the type of person who would fast 40 days. At the well, He declined food even though hungry because He was so concerned about the spiritual reality going on. Jesus was not a man who was governed by His physical appetites.

Is it a problem that Jesus killed a tree? Pagans worship trees. Some environmentalists spike trees, because they believe trees are more important than people’s livelihood and well-being. Many people seem to believe that trees, cactus, poison ivy, kangaroo rats and prairie dogs are more important than people. But Genesis teaches us that all the lower forms of life were created for our use. Conservatives and liberals debate about whether the tree deserved to be cursed. The tree didn’t deserve anything, good or bad. Jesus didn’t curse it because it deserved to have something bad happen. It is an object lesson. It’s a tree - a bunch of wood. It is ridiculous to talk about what it deserves. Jesus miraculously took bunch of wood with sap in it, and made it into a bunch of wood with no sap in order to make a point. Is it out of the ordinary that God would sacrifice a tree for the purpose of a spiritual illustration? For centuries, He required the death of thousands of animals for no other purpose than illustration. If just one soul has been made to consider its condition before God through that tree, it was worth it for the tree to be withered, because a soul is more important than a tree. If it’s OK to cut down a tree to make a desk or paper or a house, then certainly it is OK to kill a tree to teach people an important, eternal spiritual lesson. If I could make you understand spiritual truth better by killing a tree, I would do it in a heartbeat. Jesus actually honored this tree. Jesus took a worthless, fruitless tree, and made it the most useful tree that ever grew. Because of that one tree, thousands of people have leaned about themselves, examined their hearts, and turned back to God! Jesus’ killing this tree is actually an act of mercy. He is giving the tree not what the tree deserves. He is giving the tree a fate that is deserved by whom? People. Instead of just going into Jerusalem and giving all those people what they deserved (hell), He gives an object lesson involving a tree, and allows them to continue to live – so much mercy.

like dessert. It is delightful and pleasurable and pleasing and refreshing. And that is the image God chooses to describe the things He produces in us that are pleasing to Him.

God Blesses Fruitfulness

And when we produce fruit, even though that fruit ultimately comes from God, God rewards us for bearing it. He blesses our lives. In fact, many times in Scripture fig trees are also symbolic of God's blessing. In Micah 4:4 there is a promise that in the last days God will exalt His people, and there will be no more war, and **every man will sit under ... his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid.** So fig trees were a mark of God's blessing. He blesses those who honor His house of prayer. I read an article this week in Forbes Magazine about the top ten most profitable fast food chains. You know which one was #1 in average profits per store? Chick-fil-A. Chick-fil-A is closed on Sundays to honor the Lord's Day. They are open 15% less time than all the others, and yet, not only are #1 in per-store profits, but they are so far ahead of all the others that the Forbes article said they are in a class by themselves.¹³ They are scratching their heads over there at Forbes. Right now, all the MacDonal'd's employees are working hard, flipping burgers, selling fries, scrambling to be profitable, taking in thousands of dollars; meanwhile the Chick-fil-A workers are just sitting in church worshipping God. All the doors are closed at Chick-fil-A; all the registers are silent. And they somehow end up with more profit per store than any other chain. How does that work? That is the math of God's blessing. (God's blessing isn't always financial, but in that case it sure seems to be.) God blesses those who honor His house of prayer.

But when we dishonor it, and we do not bear fruit to God, He removes His blessing. Did you know this is the second time this has happened to Jesus – when he saw a fig tree that seemed to have fruit, but on closer inspection it didn't? The first time was back when He first gave the 10 Commandments to Israel and they said, "We will obey!"

Hosea 9:10 When I found Israel, ... it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved....¹⁶ their root is withered, they yield no fruit.

When they said, "Everything You have said we will do!" – that was a lot of green leaves. But on closer inspection – no actual fruit. And the result of that is the removal of God's blessing – which is also symbolized in Scripture by the removal of fig trees.

Jeremiah 8:13 "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. What I have given them will be taken from them."

Joel 1:6 the Day of the Lord will be like a horde or locusts who come and ... ruins the fig trees.

When Mark tells us the story about the fig tree, he sandwiches the cleaning of the Temple in the middle of the story. Jesus curses the tree, then cleanses the Temple, then they see the tree is withered. It is all put together because cursing the tree and cleansing the Temple both have the same meaning - Jesus was warning them of the coming judgment because of their lack of fruit, which was seen in their failure to function as a house of prayer. That's why I titled the sermon IHOP & The Case of the Missing Figs.

Nothing but Leaves

When Jesus came into the Temple, it is not like the place is being neglected. The entire nation of Israel was there. The place was hopping. Offerings were being given to God by the tens of thousands. The entire Jewish religious system was operating full tilt. It had all the appearances of a full, fruitful fig tree. But on closer inspection Jesus saw the same thing that He saw when he approached that tree – **nothing**

¹³ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/caroltice/2014/08/14/7-fast-food-restaurantchains-that-rake-in-2m-per-store/>

but leaves. That was the phrase that came out of Jesus' mouth when He inspected the fig tree - **nothing but leaves.**

Nothing but Leaves

What good are the leaves on a fig tree? Their only value is to let you know when there are figs. So the assessment "Nothing but leaves" is an indictment of a worthless tree.

*"Nothing but leaves" and the Spirit grieves over a wasted life,
For sins committed while conscience slept, promises made but never kept
Hatred, battle and strife, nothing but leaves*

*Nothing but leaves, memory weaves no veil to hide the past
As we retrace our weary way counting each lost and misspent day
We find sadly at last, nothing but leaves*

*And shall we meet the Master so, bearing our withered leaves?
The Savior looks for abundant fruit, we stand before Him humble, mute
Waiting the words He breathes: "Nothing but leaves."*

Imagine the infinite sorrow in the heart of Jesus when He examines the life of a faithful churchgoer on Judgment Day, and has to turn to the Father and say, "Nothing but leaves here." This isn't the only time Jesus warned us about that.

Matthew 7:19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire

Luke 13:7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 8 "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

The tree that bears no fruit is dead. Then God cuts it down in judgment so it is twice dead.

Jude 1:12 These men are ... autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted-- twice dead.

The Real Temple

So, 2000 years ago some people were judged by God for failing to bear fruit – what does that have to do with you today? Have you ever wondered why Jesus bothered cleansing the Temple just days before He died? Why was Jesus so concerned about fixing something that was just about to come to an end? When Jesus died a couple days after this, God ripped the veil that separated the Holy of holies, indicating the end of the whole temple system. Not long after that, the Romans came and smashed the Temple to pieces, and it was never rebuilt. The system of temple worship was established by God way back at the time of Moses – 1500 years before Jesus.¹⁴ So why did Jesus show up, after 15 centuries of that system, and finally cleanse the place right before the temple system was about to come to an end? Here's why: The system of offering sacrifices in that building was about to come to an end, but temple worship was not coming to an end. That was just getting started.

¹⁴ It started out as a tent, then they made it a building, and that building was rebuilt a couple times, but the basic arrangement and system with the various courts and the Holy of holies, the altar, etc. – that had been the central hub of the way God taught His people to worship him for 1500 years.

John 2:19 Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” **20** The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” **21** But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

That Old Testament Temple that existed from the time of Moses until the time of Jesus was just a model. That altar, the priesthood, the holy place, the Holy of holies - none of that was the real thing. They were just shadows and pictures and illustrations of the real thing. The real Temple is the body of Christ. And in this age, the body of Christ is represented by the church. Jesus’ physical body is in heaven, so in this age, it is the church that fulfills the function of Christ’s body on earth. And that is why the church is called the Temple of the Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament.

Ephesians 2:21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

We are the temple, and we are also the priesthood.

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.

Why did Jesus take the time to teach us that the Temple is to be a house of prayer right before the Temple was to be destroyed? Why did Jesus go to the trouble of cleansing it and showing us the importance of the purity of the Temple right before it was to be destroyed? He did that because even though that building was doomed, the real Temple was just about to begin. And Jesus wanted us to understand the sacredness of that Temple, the holiness of that Temple, and the purpose of that Temple. The church – all of us when we are gathered together for worship - we are the house of prayer for the joy of all nations. That is why we included that in our mission statement at Agape – our mission is to function as His Temple. We are the headquarters for the presence of God in this world, and the gathering of the saints together for worship is the place to go if you want to approach God. We are now that fig tree and it is our responsibility to produce fruit for God.

Matthew 21:43 Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

Are We Fruitful?

So, how are we doing as a fig tree? One thing I think we can safely say about ourselves here at Agape, we are definitely a very leafy bunch. This place is busy – things going on here every day of the week. We certainly have the appearance of being fruit bearers. But the question is not how many leaves we have. The question is, is there fruit on all these leafy branches? The people of Jesus’ day thought it was enough for the Temple to be a house of leaves. We don’t want to make the same mistake today.

Romans 7:4 So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ ... in order that we might bear fruit to God.

What is Fruit?

Ephesians 5:9 the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.

Galatians 5:22 the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control.

Colossians 1:10 we pray this in order that you ... may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work

Fruit is righteousness and good works. And one of those good works is prayer and praise.

Hebrews 13:15 ... let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-- the fruit of lips that confess his name.

We are to bear fruit by functioning as a house of prayer for the joy of all nations.

Fruit vs. Leaves

So how are we doing? One thing I found myself asking this week is this: Are there some tables Jesus needs to overturn in me? Am I doing anything that disrupts or hinders true worship?

One of the biggest ways that happens is when we forget that the church is for Him, not for us. If you walk into a restaurant or a store, all employees are there to serve you. And sometimes we can take that same consumer mentality and drag it right into the church - coming here with an attitude of thinking, "All these people are here to serve me. This place exists to make me comfortable."

If the waitress at the restaurant does a bad job serving you, you complain to the manager, you might ask for your money back, or you decide to take your business elsewhere. And people bring that same mentality into the church. The nursery worker isn't doing a good job, or a worship leader or the preacher or whatever - and they think, "I need to complain about this. And if it isn't fixed to my satisfaction, I'm taking my business elsewhere."

So much of that can be avoided if we remembered, this isn't a McDonald's. It's not a grocery store, it's not a theater or a hotel or a stadium. It's the Holy of holies. It is the dwelling place of God. It is a house of prayer. It's a place where we come, not to be waited on, but to make sure we each are doing our part to make this a place where acceptable, pleasing sacrifices are offered to God. And many of those sacrifices come in the form of us loving and serving others - not being waited on by others.

Trellis and Vine

What you do when something or someone in the church disappoints you? Do you respond in ways that promote worship?

We have a book in the bookstore titled *The Trellis and the Vine*. A trellis is just a piece of lattice or framework that the vine grows up on. In that analogy, the vine represents the spiritual life of the church - the part of us that bears spiritual fruit - the figs. The trellis represents the systems and structures that the vine grows on. The systems and structures don't bear any fruit. They only exist as a place for the vine to grow. So, for example, our prayer group system is Trellis. The fact that it happens in groups of about 10, that they last one hour, that the format is to go around the circle and ask, "How can we pray for your walk with the Lord?" - all that is trellis. Having the band play and putting words up on the screen and singing songs - that's all trellis. And the trellis bears no fruit. The existence of the system does not produce any spiritual fruit. All it does is provide a framework for people to produce spiritual fruit. The spiritual fruit is produced by the vine - and the vine is Christ, who said, "If you remain in Me and my words remain in you, you will bear much fruit" (Jn.15:1-7). When the Holy Spirit uses your spiritual gifts, and your prayers, and your love and faith to produce unity and joy and love and worship and reverence and kindness and servant hood - that is fruit bearing.

And what happens so often in the church is that people get upset with the trellis, and so they respond by destroying the vine. They don't like the system; they say, "Prayer groups shouldn't go from 9:45 to 10:45. It should be from 10 to 11." Or, "It shouldn't happen on Sunday mornings for an hour. It should be in people's homes on a weeknight for 2 ½ hours."

And their motives might be excellent. They want a better system - a sturdier trellis, so that the vine will grow better. They say, "The system that you have set up is hindering the growth of the vine. It's hindering fruit bearing." And if that's their concern, that's a great motive. That is a great reason for desiring a change. We want to come up with the best trellis system we possibly can so that the vine can grow.

The problem comes when the change doesn't happen the way they want or as quickly as they want, and so they respond by destroying the vine! They do things like grumble and complain, they gossip about whoever's in charge of that ministry, they voice their complaints to other people and get those people all upset, they let it bleed into their relationships so now they have animosity towards the people over that

ministry or the people who don't agree with them about what kind of changes are needed, they have bitterness and anger in their hearts, and eventually they just walk out on the family. Every one of those reactions destroys fruit bearing in the church. Those are not reactions that result in joy and unity and love and peace and righteousness and worship and reverence and praise. In fact, it hinders those things. And it is ironic because what started out as a desire for more spiritual fruit, ended up with a reaction that destroys fruit.

What happens when those people complain so much that they finally get what they want? They end up with a great trellis – lots and lots of leaves, but no fruit.

If you see problems in this church – this house of prayer, maybe the solution is to pray harder. To pray more fervently. To pray with greater faith. If you have some ideas about how we could develop better systems and structures and organization, great! That's fantastic. If you are concerned that something in this church is hindering fruit-bearing, that's a good concern to have. But when that happens, you know what the best thing you can do is? When you're worried about something that is hindering fruit bearing in this church, you know what the best possible thing you can do is? Bear some fruit! If there's something wrong with the music, and you're concerned because you think it might hinder spiritual fruit bearing, go home and open your Bible to Galatians 5:22 and read about the fruit of the Spirit and bear some of that fruit – like the fourth one in the list - patience. Be patient with people, and God will see that patience and say, "Ah! Fruit!" If you find the leadership development system to be aggravating, or you don't think we have the right number of elders or the best system of church government, look at Galatians 5:22, pick out one of those fruits, and produce that fruit. Do something to promote peace, or be gentle, or show some self-control and God will look down and see that and it will be like finding His favorite dessert in the wilderness, and He will take pleasure in this temple.

Prayer Groups

The only thing we know of in all of Scripture that drove Jesus to violence was when he came to His Father's house, and it wasn't functioning as a house of prayer. Are we functioning as a house of prayer? I need to tell you that the elders are somewhat concerned because the last couple years there has been a steady decline in the percentage of people in this church who are part of a prayer group. It used to be we all were in prayer groups. The whole church – 90+ percent. Now it's nowhere close to that. What happened?

Do we think we don't need God as much now as we did back then when we had no building and no money and no musicians and no elders? Now that God has so richly blessed us, are we starting to put our trust in those things rather than in God?

And I don't want to paint with too broad a brush here. The prayer groups in this church are still alive and vibrant and God is still blessing them in great ways – answering countless prayers every week. Lives are being changed through those groups, and through other prayers outside those groups. So prayer is happening, and God is blessing it – my concern is to just make sure we don't begin to drift in the wrong direction. Because all it would take is for us to slip in tiny, almost imperceptible increments away from devotion to prayer, and in one generation it could all be lost. In 20 years this church could be as dead as a doornail. What is going to happen when all the children around here grow up and become the leaders of this church? Will it be a house of prayer? What are your kids learning from you about how important corporate prayer is?

Conclusion: God's Pleasure in Fruit Bearers

I would like to exhort every one of you – let's redouble our commitment to being a house of prayer. Those of you who are in a prayer group, let's increase the fervency of our prayers for each other. For those who just attend once in a while, how about making a commitment to move it a few notches higher on your priority list? And if you are not part of a prayer group, I just want to urge you to give some careful thought to the fact that Jesus is adamant about His church being a house of prayer. Do you really

have other things going on in your life on Sunday morning more important than corporate prayer? Maybe you don't like the system, maybe the format is not your favorite, but please remember – those systems and structures aren't the church. You are. The responsibility this church has to function as a house of prayer rests on your shoulders. So please, give some careful prayer and consideration to joining us in our effort to pray together.

We don't want Jesus to come here and have to overturn tables.

That is the negative motivation, but let me just appeal to you on the basis of the positive motivation. What emotion went through Jesus when He was so hungry and He saw the fig tree with all the leaves? It was the same emotion when God saw Israel in the desert – delight. Jesus was hungry, and He was excited about the prospect of going over and finding fruit. Did you know that is God's disposition toward you? Did you know when God sees the leaves surrounding your life, He is thrilled by that initially, and when upon further inspection He discovers fruit on the branches of your life, His response is delight? He calls it fruit, not vegetables, because it is sweet to His taste. I hope you understand how much delight God takes in the fruit that's being born in your life by the Holy Spirit. You need to understand that, because that is one of the chief motives for praise.

Psalm 149:3 Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. 4 For the LORD takes delight in his people

The fact that He takes delight in us is the reason why we so joyfully praise Him. Let's become so addicted to His delight in us that we remain in Him and let His Word remain in us so that we bear much fruit.

Benediction: Ephesians 6:18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. Describe some fruit that the Holy Spirit has produced in your life (to the delight of the Father).
2. What do you think is the next step for you as you seek to become more devoted to corporate prayer?
3. Is there any area in your life where you are running the risk of focusing on leaves at the expense of the fruit?
4. Describe some fruit the Spirit has produced in the lives of others in the group that you especially appreciate.