

## **Figs and Faith: Kingdom Fruit through Prayer**

*Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom*

Mark 11:12-25

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We're going to be looking at Chapter 11, verses 12-25. And the reason for that—if you've noticed we're not doing verses 1-11—that's because Randy preached on Jesus's entry into Jerusalem for Palm Sunday this past April. But this morning's passage, as we look at what comes next after that, is a story of Jesus flipping out over a fig tree and flipping over tables in a temple. So what is going on with that?

But what we see is by putting these episodes together—Jesus first going into the temple, then interacting with a fig tree, then going into the temple, and then coming back to the fig tree—Mark is doing something very important. He's bringing them side by side for us to look at and glean and learn from the connections between the two. So let's read God's word and ask his blessings to see those connections. Mark 11:12-25.

<sup>12</sup> On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. <sup>13</sup> And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. <sup>14</sup> And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

<sup>15</sup> And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. <sup>16</sup> And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. <sup>17</sup> And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

<sup>18</sup> And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. <sup>19</sup> And when evening came they went out of the city.

<sup>20</sup> As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. <sup>21</sup> And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." <sup>22</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God.

<sup>23</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. <sup>24</sup> Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. <sup>25</sup> And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Let's pray. Father, would you add blessing to the reading and the preaching of your word that we would see you more clearly, that we would also be confronted with what is in our way of being connected with you and experiencing just the fullness of the relationship that we have in our union with you. Help us to see, help us to

have faith in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Have you ever heard the following words? "I know I should forgive him, but I just can't do it." Perhaps maybe you've said those words yourself. Or words like these: "I just can't forgive myself for what I did and the pain I caused." Whether an offense has just happened or it's been twenty years, forgiveness is a powerful force. We intuitively know that it can be a path of healing. But we also know it to be a painful proposition in our community that we far too often seek to avoid.

Today's passage looks at how Jesus disrupts our systems of religiosity. We seek communion with God and closeness with others, but sometimes we experience road blocks or barriers that we might actually perpetuate in our community, but also those barrier barriers might be cultivated in our own hearts. But Mark's Gospel consistently invites us to see Jesus more clearly. To see him as the Christ, the Messiah of God who brings renewal to the land, purifies his people, and ushers in true worship. And it's because of this—that Jesus is seeking to purify his people for the true worship of God—that he is very intentional, he's very extensive and comprehensive in removing obstacles that get in the way.

So this morning we're going to divide the text into two main sections. One, **The Barriers That Block Access**, and two, **The Bridges That Access Connection**.

So first looking at **The Barriers That Block Access**. Jesus removes these barriers, that indeed, block access to true worship. Do you remember what happened at the end of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem? Back in verse 9 the crowds were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" Verse 11 we see Jesus entering the temple, taking a look around, and then leaving with his disciples.

Verse 12, where our text picks up this morning, shows us a chronological connection, which is rare for Mark. There are very few times where Mark actually kind of smooths together episodes. And we see that from the following day, the next day, as Jesus and the disciples return back to Jerusalem from spending the night in Bethany, which is a town not too far from Jerusalem. So if you think about, you know, Palm Sunday to Easter—Holy Week—this is Monday. This really happened. This is Monday of Holy Week.

So what's going on with the fig tree? To our modern ears we have kind of trouble with this. We see Jesus kind of over-reacting a little bit, almost like a spoiled child throwing a tantrum. But even though Mark is very intentional and purposeful by drawing our attention, that it wasn't even the season for figs, what might be going on here beside our first initial reaction. And the text itself gives us those clues.

What appears odd is actually very important and very intentional. Mark is serving up a Fig Newton, if you will. He's taking cake on the one side and cake on the other side, and he's wrapping it around this tasty fruitful middle. And when you look at what's on either side of that, the middle makes sense. And what happens in the middle in this passage is Jesus going into the temple—what's commonly called cleansing the temple. So by discussing the fig tree, the temple, and then the fig tree again, we are meant to understand that this is a symbolic act that sheds light on actually the judgment that Jesus is declaring in the temple.

For Israel figs were very common in their diet, and in the Old Testament they often were used as images to describe peace and prosperity and God's blessing. The very pleasure of its sweetness and its taste is a picture of enjoyment and the presence of flourishing in the community out of the abundance of the fruit. Likewise, the prophets use the image of the fig to describe Israel herself.

And so in our story the leaves of a fig tree appeared on this tree, which was common for the season. It was spring time. It was the Passover. And Jesus is walking and sees a fig tree. And so it would make sense—even though he would know that the real figs don't really sprout until later in the summer—it was common that there would be these small nodules that sprout right at the time the leaves sprout or just after. And so it's not that far out of the blue that Jesus would see something in the distance and just want to see: Is there fruit on that fig tree? It says he was hungry. And so looking for those nodules, even though they might have been a little tart and a little bitter, they still were enjoyable to eat.

So when Jesus sees leaves, he expected fruit. But instead he finds nothing. And when a tree has the appearance of life but lacks fruit, it suggests that something is amiss. As one writer puts it, growth without fruit was a sign of decay. Between his visit to the temple on the previous day and on this day Jesus is seizing an opportunity to provide a parable, teaching that the appearance of religion does not automatically mean that there will be fruit borne out in your life due to the communion of God. It is not a guarantee. If you go about the practices of religion, it's not an automatic outcome that you would bear fruit.

And so having context for Jesus enacting this parable, we now draw our attention to what's happening in the temple. Jesus is declaring a change in the way the people of Israel will interact with God. There is a fundamental shift that's happening in the worship of God, in the very presence of how God dwells among his people. Starting in verse 15 we see the disruption that Jesus causes in the temple. He drove out those who sold and those who bought. He overturned tables and chairs. He even would not allow anyone to carry something through the temple. This all took place in the outer court of the temple, which was commonly called the Court of the Gentiles.

Huge crowds of people would be coming from all over the surrounding areas and the surrounding regions, even other nations who were God-fearers or even other Israelites who might be living elsewhere. They would be coming back to Israel to worship God in the temple and celebrate the festival of Passover later in the week. So from the Mount of Olives to the temple it was common to have these tables. I mean, it's a market place. It's a place of commerce that's taking place. You see, it would be easier for you to come with money and buy your goods there, than it would be for you to bring animals and bring spices and bring oil with you to make your sacrifices in the temple. So you had tables set up. Currency was exchanged. There was also the payment of the temple tax, which was a half shekel. All of these things are prescribed in the word of God.

But Jesus couples his actions with his words, and his words explain his actions. So what does he say? He says in verse 17: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'?" He's quoting Isaiah 56:7. So for Wayne, when he said pay attention while reading Isaiah 56, that's the reason. [Jesus] is quoting the Old Testament. He turns it into a question.

He speaks about the Lord...or Isaiah in Chapter 56 is speaking about the Lord's coming salvation for all of God's people, which will be marked by the inclusion of the nations. 'Nations', the Greek term for nations, actually gives us the word Gentiles as well. Gentiles were non-Jews, people that were from other nations other than Israel. God's salvation is no longer determined by outward qualifications such as being Jewish and obeying the Law. God's salvation instead is determined by receiving his grace and inwardly embracing the covenant from the heart.

Jesus further indicts them by then quoting Jeremiah 7:11. And in that passage he's condemning what is happening in the temple. There is a reversal that's happening. People think they're there to buy goods, to make sacrifices. And Jesus is attributing their activity to what was happening in the prophet Jeremiah when the people of God were doing all kinds of wicked things and retreating back to the temple as a place of safety, as a place where murderers and thieves would retreat back to and hide out.

Jesus is not condemning the commerce outright. He's not even necessarily focusing on the possible exploitations that are taking place here, which there are some—even referencing pigeons accounts for something in Leviticus. That if you don't have enough income, enough money, if you're in a poor state financially, you can make sacrifice by buying birds instead of a lamb. So there are possible exploitations that are happening, but Jesus is not discriminating between anybody. He's condemning the whole system. That's what's so controversial here. It's far deeper. It's not just a protest that you're doing it wrong or you're doing it in the wrong place. It's saying it's not right anymore.

The ancient historian Josephus spoke in his works of signs, that they would be in Greek, they would be in Latin. And they were placed on the barrier wall between the outer court, the Court of Gentile, and the inner courts which were for Jewish worshippers. And in 1871 archaeologists found one of these signs. And in Greek it says this in seven lines:

No foreigner  
is to go beyond the balustrade  
and the place of the temple zone.  
Whoever is caught doing so  
will have himself to blame  
for his death  
which will follow.

That's a message that is loud and clear. You are ~~not~~ welcome, but only so far.

This certainly was a disruption to the status quo, and it was a protest of sort, but more specifically it was an act of judgement upon Israel. You see, a common expectation of that day was that the Messiah would cleanse the temple of all foreigners, cleanse the temple **of** foreigners. But Jesus is fulfilling the prophets by cleansing the temple **for** foreigners. Do you hear the switch? Do you see what's happening with the power of the gospel? The non-Israelite no longer has to become a Jew to experience God's grace and mercy. By experiencing his grace and his mercy through Jesus Christ, foreigners and strangers are welcomed as citizens and family. They are welcome in God's kingdom. His Holy Spirit bearing fruit in their lives is the basis of an inward love and devotion to God.

And in that, that work of the Spirit, that work that's happening inwardly, enables us and empowers us to obey. We want to obey. We want to follow his commands. This entering into

renewal, it wells up and it overflows into true worship. You see, Jesus wants the tree to be healthy from the inside out. Jesus wants to remove the barriers that block access to that health, to remove the barriers that block true worship of the Living God.

And not only does Jesus remove barriers, but then we move on to the second point that he **Builds Bridges to Access Connection** with God. What bridge does he provide for connection with him? Well, this is this odd response. He says faith. Faith in God. Peter is amazed that the tree has withered, but Jesus responds, "Have faith in God." It doesn't really make sense why that would follow, unless we're looking back at the temple. What's going on? And if the bridge is faith, then the means to exercise his faith—what is it in? He then goes on to talk about prayer.

So what does Jesus mean by this faith in God through prayer. Well, first he starts by providing kind of a general proverbial comment of faith that can move mountains. Even in that time there was a sense of that idea of believing the impossible, that faith can move mountains. They're not taking it literally, but they're recognizing that it's something that is impossible. But then again, there's also another layer to this that Mark is drawing our attention to. Jesus is probably not just talking about mountains, like any old mountain. Think where they're standing, between Bethany and Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives in between. This is Holy Week. He is potentially looking and pointing to a mountain, pointing to the temple, again drawing our focus that things are changing. There is a new era in how we are to relate to God.

And so in this unpacking of prayer, verses 23-25, I just want to make some comments about it. The faith in God that Jesus talks about here imagines the impossible, such as moving a mountain and tossing it into the sea. It's imagining the impossible because you have access to God. Through him all things are possible. The faith in God Jesus talks about can ask for anything, because all things are fulfilled in Jesus Christ and will come to pass in his timing. There are important and wide-ranging implications for this as we embrace Jesus's words here.

But we must allow scripture to interpret scripture and recognize there are limitations to our prayers. Not because God is limited, but because we are prone to misunderstand, to misapply, to misuse the faith that Jesus is speaking of. What we ask in prayer must be done from a posture of openness to God's will, and not ours. Praying is an openness to what God will be doing in his kingdom. This is why the Lord taught us to pray saying: Your kingdom come, your will be done. In our union with God through Christ we seek to have our will conform to his, and as we do this, in this connection, this access we have through faith. Cultivated in prayer is a conformity more and more and more to God's will. We will begin to long more and more to see it lived out in our lives and to witness it in the lives of others. We will... Our hopes will be shaped by that time when we will see that all things that already are being done in heaven will become more and more what will be done on earth.

It is why Jesus asked the night before his crucifixion for the Father to remove the cup. It wasn't that the Father was incapable of answering Jesus's prayer, it was that in prayer Jesus was motivated by the love of God and he was equipped to exercise faith—perfect faith to walk in perfect obedience, which was the only way possible to fulfill the Father's will and serve as the ransom, the payment, the cancellation of the debt of sin.

So not only must we ask in ways that are from a posture of openness, we also must ask with

God-honoring motivations for God- glorifying outcomes. We must ask in our prayers things that are God-honoring in our motivations and God-glorifying in the outcomes we seek. And this is from James 4:2-3. James writes, “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

Paul Miller, in his very important book, *A Praying Life*, says this: “Many Christians give in to a quiet cynicism that leaves us unknowingly paralyzed. We see the world as monolithic, frozen. To ask God for change confronts us with our doubt about whether prayer makes any difference. Is change even possible? Doesn't God control everything? If so, what's the point? Because it's uncomfortable to feel our unbelief, to come face to face with our cynicism, we dull our souls with the narcotic of activity.” What's he saying there? It makes us uncomfortable to have faith like this. I can't ask for anything, because we don't want to be disappointed when it doesn't happen. And so we harden and we dull our hearts. We get busy, even busy with good things, even religious things.

Miller goes on to say more. He says, “Many Christians haven't stopped believing in God. We have just become functional deists, living with a god at a distance. We view the world as a box with clearly defined edges. But as we learn to pray well, we'll discover that this is my Father's world. Because my Father controls everything, I can ask and he will listen and act. Since I am his child, change is possible and hope is born.”

Jesus goes on to connect this prayer, this prayer of faith, with another activity. The faith in God Jesus talks about cultivates prayer that not only asks freely, but forgives frequently. Verse 25. He says whenever you stand praying, forgive. This is a condition. It's a condition that we must meet, but it is not a condition that merits anything. It's a condition that is based on something that is already accomplished on the cross. It's finished. As far as the east is from the west, the most scarlet stain is washed clean in the blood of Jesus. And so this condition is not a transaction that makes God forgive us. It's not as if we're not forgiven until we forgive others.

Being a Christian does not make you immune to the cost and pain of forgiving a person who has done something against you. Being a Christian does not make the act of forgiving someone easy. And sometimes being a Christian can actually inhibit us from having this kind of faith in God that forgives.

In an article titled, “Forgive and Forget” by Dan Allender, he discovers various myths Christians believe about forgiveness. He calls them myths because, well, they're not true. That's the first reason, I guess. But in thinking we're doing the work of forgiving, we're actually robbing us of God's healing work of grace in our lives. And so he covers a couple things.

He talks about the myth of forgetting the harm, of forgetting the harm. Putting it out of sight, out of mind. If I don't think about it, then it's done with. Let's forget it. The myth of releasing anger. That it's this build-up of intense emotion until this moment of release when there's no longer anger or resentment or bitterness or hurt directed at the other person. There's this kind of sense that all is well and all is released. I've processed it. There's another myth of not desiring revenge. We think Christians—on good authority, because of Jesus—we are to turn the other cheek, we are to not repay evil with evil. And so we rightly say these wonderful and beautiful truths, but we're not yet ready to believe them and claim them. And so we kind of subvert the process.

And the last myth he discusses in the article is the myth of peace at any price. This kind of couples with the forgetting. If we're supposed to forgive, then I just have to forgive and I'll make it happen at whatever cost, even if that means saying I forgive the person who's wounded me and just pretending and going about life as if everything's restored, and circumventing the full process. Recognizing that forgiveness is an act, but it's also then carried on in the work of restoration. And those things can happen at the same time, but very often those are very different events on a timeline. To forgive is a choice; it's an act. But that doesn't necessarily mean that someone has your trust and things go about like they did before, as if nothing happened. These false paths to forgiving others actually put us on a path of trusting in external forms of spiritual piety, which may look good on the surface, but the decay rots us from the inside out.

Allender provides a working definition of forgiveness in the article. He says to forgive another means to cancel a debt in order to provide two things. In order to provide the opportunity for repentance and number two, restoration of the broken relationship. It's the means to cancel a debt in order to provide the opportunity for repentance and the restoration of the broken relationship. And friends, this kind of forgiveness cannot be done in our own power, in our own ability. This is clearly outside of us. And only through the forgiveness we experience with God can we even begin to journey down that path of forgiving others.

So just a couple applications to consider this passage in your life. One place to pursue and explore how this could be cultivated in your own heart is looking at how you trust in the activity of spiritual practices, instead of engaging in those spiritual practices to cultivate your trust. That sounds like a tongue twister, but it's a very subtle, but important distinction. The difference between trusting in those practices as if that magically solves it, or engaging in those practices so that our heart is cultivated to trust Jesus. And this is a perfect opportunity for us to reflect upon how we divide our time. What do we give our time to? How are we busy? Are we busy with good things, frivolous things?

And that flows into the next important question as you reflect on even the busyness of your heart. That next question of what fruit is in your life? Where do you see it? Where is it manifested? Where do you experience that in community?

Another implication of this passage is that we forget the gospel of grace, and instead we forge life through the crucible of our own labor—where we should be shaped by the life of the one who endured the crucible of the cross. We can think about the gospel of grace for salvation. That's great. But then we turn that on its head and we work for our own sense of satisfaction, to assuage our own sense of shame, to put barriers in front of someone else to say: If you come through all these walls and you show yourself worthy, then I'll forgive you. The gospel of grace that forgives your sin is completely reversed from how we so naturally work forgiveness in our own lives and the lives of others.

And then of course the application from this is prayer. Prayer is singing. Prayer is reading the prayers of scripture. Prayer is asking questions. Prayer is being together in the body of Christ in community. See, when the Temple is no longer the place where the living God dwells in all of his glory, but now that Jesus has come in and ushered in the kingdom, and he is the Messiah reigning on the throne, the temple of God is in his people. And if you're not with his people, you. . . You're a Christian, but you have to go the next step and say: Am I experiencing the

fullness of God's dwelling among me. I want to be with his people, so I can be with God. And it's not about the capacity for faith or how much faith you have or mustering up 'I just have to believe really hard.' No, it is looking to the one you have faith in. It is the object of our faith that Jesus is drawing our attention to.

It has now been a little over one year since the shooting that happened at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Shirrene Goss is the sister of Tywanza Sanders, who was one of the nine killed. And she said this about that night that forever changed her life. "It's the middle of the week. It's hard to get even regular members to come, so when you get someone new you're excited. You think somehow this person found their way to us, and we are going to do our best to spread Christ's love. This is our guest, and we're going to love on them while they're here. And that's the way it's supposed to be." Nadine Collier said this at the hearing for the man who killed her mother, Ethel Lance. "I forgive you. You took something very precious from me. I will never be able to talk to her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."

What?!? Who can say that? Who can forgive like that? Someone who has cultivated faith in God through Jesus Christ. Someone who has delved the depths of how much they have been forgiven. And Jesus as the Messiah, as the King, as he is ushering in the kingdom of God with his very presence in the temple, his very life lived on this earth, his very death, died on a cross, and his very resurrection from the grave. We have redemption. We have the forgiveness of sin. The restoration of all things has come in the person of Jesus. And by ushering in the kingdom of God he is removing all things that take away, that hinder, that distract us from true worship. He is about the business of turning back the curse of the fall and bringing about full flourishing and peace between God and man and between you and me.

And the Lord is seeking fruit. He is declaring judgment on all things external that give the appearance of righteousness but lack its transformation within. And whether we pursue outward self-righteousness that excludes others or we cultivate an internal self-protection that isolates ourselves—which both are rooted in our need for God's righteousness and God's protection. The only way that that can be satisfied—both our pride and our despair—is in the hope that we have in Jesus Christ and allowing him to remove the barriers in your life that block you from his salvation. Allow his life death and resurrection to be the bridge that brings connection with God through repentance and faith-filled prayer.

And may you and may I and may Columbia Presbyterian Church, may the church in America, may the church that extends all over the world—may it be a church that experiences faith in God, that cultivates a life of faith in God and also experiences the fruit of his grace. May his church, may you, be a fig tree that never withers. By his grace he brings it about.

Let's pray. Father, we do pray for your grace and for your mercy upon us. We ask that you would continue your work of grace in our lives. That we would be more and more like your Son, looking to the cross, looking to an empty grave, looking to an empty sky—because we're hoping and praying and longing for your return, because we know you are reigning on the throne. And all things are accomplished through you and all things are made possible through you because you are able. Help us to have faith to live our lives recognizing that you are able. Please, Lord Jesus, come and bear fruit in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.