

DAY 2: UNDERSTANDING FUNCTION

Mark 11:12-19

We're in day 2 of Christ's final week as he walked to the cross. And last week Tyler walked us through that triumphal entry that was so vastly different than all those people had ever experienced...and they were used to some pretty grandiose kingly entrances! And one thing we don't read, is that after he came into the city he entered into the Temple Courts and looked around there he would have seen the tables, the baskets, the sections set up for banking, selling, and giving. He would have seen animals upon animals mixing in with thousands of people and it would have been full of noise and organized chaos. Timothy Keller writes that the loudness and confusion would have been overwhelming. Think of our own financial trading floors and how loud THAT is (think of Wall street)...now add livestock to the mix! One author writes that there were over 255,000 people there during Passover. Now add the animals!

And then he and his disciples leave and head to Bethany for the night. He'll be back. *They'll* be back. And that brings us to our text today. Day 2.

The issue we may face as we read these verses is to want to separate them. To take verses 12-14, the cursing of the fig tree, and separate it with the temple actions of verses 15-19...but we shouldn't and can't because we'd lose the meaning of both. What we have here is what's called an "inclusio." It's a way in which we frame, or bracket, things together when we study the Bible. Inclusio's help us to see how things are joined together. Now while we stopped our reading at verse 19, if we would have read through to 21 we would have seen the mentioning of the fig tree again – the very fig tree that Christ cursed to wither up. This is the "inclusion" or bracket. And what it also does is gives us perspective instead of assumptions. Without it we may think that Jesus is throwing tantrum like a little child who's hungry only to find there is no food. It's called being "Hangry" (hungry-angry).

So what is the deal? What is Jesus doing to the tree and the temple tables and chairs and people? And how is it all connected?

First off, let's understand the fig tree.

It's morning and Jesus and his disciples are heading in from Bethany and Jesus is hungry... but when he sees this fig tree and approaches it all he finds is a lush-leafy tree. Expecting food...he finds nothing. Now Mark points out that it wasn't the season for figs but he does state that it's full of leaves...but that doesn't mean there wouldn't have been food on the tree. During this time of the year, from March to April while figs wouldn't be available until at least June...there still would have been edible buds – which were common to eat. There still would have been food

growing that could be eaten by weary travelers. So Jesus approaches this amazingly beautiful and lush fig tree, full of vibrancy and life that is just absolutely massive in size but upon closer inspection...it was all just a sham. A façade. There is nothing that this tree is doing except taking up space and being leafy. And really, what good is the tree that doesn't bear fruit? What good is a tree that doesn't bring forth seeds? What good is a tree that doesn't feed and you find that it simply grows and grows? No arborist, no tree farmer, no farmer in general would ever want a tree or plant that didn't actually produce a crop.

But this isn't a story about a fruitless fig tree – nor is this tree in any trouble. Jesus uses this moment as a parable...as symbolism – as a sermon in action (as one author calls it). Remember, Christ was in the temple the other day and he left after seeing it...and he would have come past this same tree on his way out...and so he saw a connection from the tree to the temple...so let's make the connection too.

As you step into the temple courts the first thing you would come to is the outer courts of the Gentiles – and this was a massive space. As you moved in you would have the sacred inner space where no Gentile would be allowed to enter, but in that large outer space one was free to move around and take care of business. So in this outer courts of the Gentiles you'd have tables set up for merchants who sold wine, olive oil, salt, and copious amounts of other goods for the weary traveler. There would also be money changers who would take whatever currency you had and exchange it for the required currency within the temple and required for temple tax (**Ez 30:12-16**) as well as the purchasing of other goods. Within this section of the temple you also had merchants who sold sacrificial animals that were approved by the priests that met the sacrificial standards of quality. Animals without defect. This is the busiest place in all the temple – and also the largest because it had the most activity and people.

So all of this is going on in this outer Gentile court...or so it seemed. Upon closer inspection it had become corrupt – it had become a place of greed and abuse. You had the people of God taking advantage of the very place that should have become a witness *to* God. And Jesus is infuriated by this. He saw it the night before...and he sees it again today. He enters the temple, and without saying a word, he starts driving out all those who were buying and selling. He overturns tables and benches and stops anyone who was carrying anything through the temple courts. This has to stop!

Now all these things that were being sold were legal and necessary on many levels. There was a system of purification that was in place, there was a system that helped and allowed people to enter into the presence of God... but that system, and this temple, had become a “den of robbers.” (a liken to the words from **Jer 7:11**) This temple had become a place where you could steal and rob and take advantage of others who maybe didn't know...and then after you did that

you could run into the place where Gentiles couldn't go...and get away from them and find rest. Be at your "den" as Jesus called it.

This temple, the very place where one was to be cleansed of their sin, had become a house *of sin*. The very place that was to be a place of prayer...had become a place of the very opposite of prayer. I don't even know what the opposite of prayer is...but that was taking place. The outer courts, WHICH WERE STILL PART OF THE TEMPLE – THIS PLACE OF GOD, had become a place of anti-God. Anti-love. And this wasn't merely a place of prayer...this was a place of prayer for ALL NATIONS. A place where the Gentiles could come and *find* God. A place where people from all around the known world could find rest, be purified, and see the heart of God. But instead...it was a place of corruption by the very *people* of God.

By overturning tables and stopping business Christ puts the whole thing to a halt. But this wasn't just a moment for Christ to make this violent scene...we read in verse 17 that he then teaches them. That while the chief priests and teachers of the law saw and heard all of this and began their plots...all the other people there were amazed...at his teaching. At his opening up the words of **Isaiah 56:7** which declare that faithful foreigners would come and enjoy the house of prayer of the Lord – and that God himself would accept upon his alter their offerings and sacrifices... for "*my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.*"

But that's not what it had become. It's what God declared it would be...but what *should be* isn't always *what is* (think of the fig tree). So Christ reminds them of the true nature and *purpose* of the temple...and of the people of God.

The way something is set up, the work it's supposed to *do* and *be*...doesn't always bear fruit and BE what it's supposed to be. What good is a tree that doesn't reproduce? Doesn't bear fruit or seed? It's a pointless tree that serves no purpose (and I'm a tree-hugger who loves trees!) – but again, the tree is analogy.

What's the purpose of a large temple that doesn't draw you closer to God, doesn't teach you to pray or give you spiritual growth or send you out? What function does a church play in a community it isn't a part of, that doesn't welcome in others, that doesn't offer rest for your weary souls but is in fact a place where insiders are kept but never sent, money is collected but never given away, and people are simply taken advantage of?

We should feel convicted by this text! I am convicted by this text! Or at the very least we should be nodding our head in understanding and agreement that the function of the church and her people are not what so often we hope to find and should be what exactly Christ shows us.

What good are we, as an INDIVIDUAL, when we're all bushy and green and lush and looking well on the outside but actually not producing any fruit? Not going out and witnessing, not feeding and nourishing, not sharing the Gospel and bringing hope to people? We look good...we've got our "Sunday Best" on but we're not actually doing anything, feeding anyone, sharing anything, or going any place. What good are we, as Christians, if we look the part...but don't play the role?

For the church, as the fig tree, what good are we at being great and big...but not sending out witnesses, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, making disciples, planting more churches, sending out missionaries...and then starting the cycle again? What good are we, as the CHURCH, if we're big and strong and look well from a distance and appear well from the inside...FOR THE INSIDERS... but do nothing for those who don't believe? Who come in and see it as a "membership" group of insiders FOR insiders? What good is a church that has massive growth on the outside...but spiritually no growth?

How do we encourage the unbeliever to cross over and see the God of grace, humility, love, sacrifice, and joy? The God who sent his Son to die for us – all of us "Gentiles?" if we actually don't preach it, live it, and embody it, and live into it? Who doesn't teach, love, heal, gather, and take in? Who doesn't preach God, preach Christ, preach the Holy Spirit? Who allows bad or corrupt things to happen *in* the church and just puts up with it and disregards it?

The church...then becomes what the temple was...and the very thing Christ cleared to cleanse. Because it's not the way it's supposed to work. The actions Jesus took, may seem defiant to some, power-raging hungry to others – but the truth of it is that God has expectations of his people, of his bride – he always has. And if they don't do something about it...he will. And does.

The fig tree...the temple clearing – all reveal a story about a nation, a people, who had become corrupt...who rejected people outside of her care...and who abused the very system God had created to draw people in to him. The fig tree withering was a symbolic and prophetic action that showed God's judgment upon the temple and her work in the city of God. A symbolic action done to show that what may look good...what may look healthy...is not in fact so if it doesn't do the very thing it's supposed to do and be. The temple, the worship place of God was NOT to be a den of thieves, was NOT to be a place of robbing and then resting, and was NOT to be a place of profit. It was to be a place of prayer, worship, teaching, learning, and purification. It was supposed to be a place for the people of God to grow, teach, learn, share, find rest, come to prayer, become pure, and be drawn into the very presence and grace of God. A place that was different than the outside world and not a place that was equally, if not more, corrupt.

I love this little snippet we get from verse 17. He's in the presence of all people...and what does he do? He doesn't separate the Gentiles from the Jews and teach only God's chosen people...he

teaches them all. He pulls in close to him brother and sister from different races, beliefs, and places. He pulls in the hurting and suffering so they could feel and experience what the true temple should feel like and look like and function as. In Matthew of his text he tells us that Jesus healed people on that very spot as well (**Matt 21:12-22**). Remember...in **Matthew 12 (6-8)** Christ declares that HE is the temple...and here Christ is BEING the temple. This is the authority HE has as it is HIS house...and HIS function. Christ's actions declare that there is no longer Black or White, or Rich or Poor, or slave nor free man (**Gal 3:28**) – for all were called children of God. All had access to the Father by way of the Son. The access the temple was to give is now on full display in Christ.

And while our hope stands firm in that Christ replaces that broken system, that he gathers in all of the sick, that he gathers in you and I...the fact still remains that that system of teaching, helping, loving, drawing in, and sending out – all those things that the temple was supposed to do and be as well...is still in place today.

Our belief, our hope, our faith, ourselves and our church *must* produce fruit, *must* help others, and we *must* be salt of the earth (**Matt 5:13**). If we are to be a “city on a hill” we must not fall to the same preys of the things outside and truly be a light for people. Our convictions, proclamations of Christ as the Messiah, as believers in a God of saving grace and love must give and show *that love* and do so regardless of time of season, regardless of people that we come upon, and regardless of the day of the week it is. Our church cannot be a den of thieves as we do all our shenanigans Monday through Saturday and then come in for an hour or two on Sunday and find “rest” and seek forgiveness – only to start it up again as soon as pull out of the parking lot...and we cannot tell ourselves that that’s “OK”...because it’s not.

Our text today is a hard text to chew and swallow because it’s one of conviction and truth. One of reflection on how we, as the body, and we, as the individuals, are living Godly lives. And yet with that conviction comes the humility of knowing that even while it’s still broken today (because Lord knows church still hurts people – because it’s still full of sinners and you don’t make something “perfect” by filling it with more broken sinful people), and even while *we* still hurt...the whole point Christ came was because of us. He came, as the temple, to replace the temple and declare that no longer do we need to go *in* to go to God. No longer do we need to buy things and do things to be cleansed and forgiven – healed and made new. Because all those things were now fulfilled in Christ. So whether Jew or Gentile it didn’t matter, broken and afflicted on the outside – broken and afflicted on the inside...it didn’t matter. Born into the body of Christ, new to the body of Christ, or seeking something that you’re not sure of but wonder if it’s the body of Christ and wonder if what you’ve been missing is a relationship with Christ...it doesn’t matter: all are welcome...and it becomes OUR JOB, as the body, as believers...to function the way God set us up...and to welcome them in. To love, teach, nourish, and help grow. To show and give love and mercy. To bear fruit and be the very people Christ died for.

To *be* Christ.