

## **Announcements:**

1. Today
  - A. VBS meeting today for those interested right after the service in Fellowship Hall with Evan
  - B. Women's Coffee Talk @ 3pm in Fellowship Hall
  - C. Men's Field Ministry @ 2pm driving to men's retreat location (if you want to announce this)
2. May 6th AWANA end of year BBQ
3. May 9th Mother's Day lunch after service
4. Men's Retreat- May 14-16, sign up in back
5. Family Campout- June 4-6 @ Remote Outpost, sign up in back

## **“Don't be ‘that’ fig tree” Mark 11:12-19**

My sermon this morning has taken a whole different direction than I expected. It is causing me to think and stretch me. I hope it does the same for you. I hope when you walk out of here you take an inventory of your heart. I hope you choose not to be ‘that’ fig tree, but have a heart and mind connected to the vine of Christ, nourished by Christ, and bearing the fruit of God’s Spirit.

I am going to give this simple illustration and then we will jump right into our passage.

I remember as a kid going over to someone’s house for lunch and being extremely hungry. As we walked in the door, across the way I could see on the table a basket full of fruit. There were apples, pears, grapes, and banana’s. They looked so good! It wasn’t lunch time yet and those pieces of fruit were taunting me.

I remember figuring a way to sneak over to the table and grab one of the pieces of fruit. Excited to have my hunger quenched, I quickly grabbed a few of the grapes and the apple and bit into it, only to find that it was one of those plastic fruit artistic place settings. You can imagine the horror, shame, and embarrassment I felt...and not just that but the horrible taste it left in my mouth and now trying to figure out how to put it back and hide the bite out of apple.

How deceiving it looked. I do remember thinking something was a little off about the look of the fruit, but it looked so real and I was just hungry.

Imagine with me for a minute if the apples, pears, grapes, and banana's tasted like apples, pears, grapes, and banana's. For a hungry boy I could have taken more than one bite and spit it out. I might have taken a couple bites real quickly and swallowed, naive to what I was really eating until it was too late, thinking I was getting the real thing until I was already committed and possibly poisoned.

Empty religion that looks righteous is very similar. In our passage this morning, Jesus curses a fig tree because it looked good, but had no fruit. Israel, more specifically, its leadership and the temple worship looked alive and well, but was empty and poisonous.

Let's read our passage: Mark 11:12-19.

There is a lot going on in this passage that is found throughout scripture and in the history of the day when it was written.

Israel was to be the nation that produced the fruit of God. As they worshiped the one true God they would produce the fruit. Nations around them would see the power of God in them. Nations around them would be confronted with God and all His goodness. Nations around them would bow down in worship to their God, the One true God. And it happened. There were times when the nation of Israel chose to worship God. And when they did, they were prosperous, protected, and had great influence upon the nations around them.

However, when Israel chose to be influenced by the other nations, follow other gods, and pervert the commands of God's Word, the nation fell. The nation of Israel was conquered. The nation of Israel reaped what they sowed. When they worshiped something other than the One true God, they were conquered and their place of worship was desecrated.

Galatians 6:7-8 gives us this very principle. It says, "Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature."

## **BE THE INFLUENCE**

The church of Jesus Christ, those that are followers of Christ are to be those that influence the world. We are to be the light to the world. God wants to use us to bring all peoples to Him. Israel was to do this through their worship of the One true God.

In Mark 11:17, Jesus quoted two verses from the Old Testament. He quotes from Isaiah 56:7 which says, “I will bring them to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” Jesus quotes this last line in Mark when He is at the temple driving out the people and knocking over tables.

The second verse Jesus quotes is found in Jeremiah 7:11, which says, “Don’t you yourselves admit that this Temple, which bears my name, has become a den of thieves? Surely I see all the evil going on there. I, the Lord, have spoken!

Instead of being a ‘house of prayer for all nations’, the temple had become a ‘den of thieves’. What does this mean and how did it come about?

A ‘den of thieves’ was a place that thieves would come back to for safety after robbing others. Often it was a cave, or a cleft in a hillside. They would feel safe because they were able to hide. The religious leaders of the day used the temple and their power as leaders to hide their lusts. They were crafty and they were liars. They were power hungry. They had an agenda that was not about helping people worship, but their own personal gain. Jesus saw through their facade. In Matthew 23, there is an encounter when Jesus condemns the religious leaders for their hypocrisy.

The temple was to be a place of communion with God. It was to be a place set apart from all the things of the world where the people could come to leave the hindrances of the world and worship God. It was to be easy to worship God. There was to be no hindrances. They had put all kinds of hindrances in the way of worshiping God. And out of that worship that happened at the temple, the fruit of God’s love for all nations would be felt and they too would choose to worship the One true God. But, they chose to worship other gods and follow their lust for status and power and wealth, instead of denying those illegitimate desires, which made them powerless and sent a confusing message to the world around them.

You and I are to influence those around us. You and I are to be the hands of feet of Jesus that helps to bring the restoring power of God to this world. Unfortunately, we have allowed the world to influence us and handed the power over to the culture around us. To bring this home, I don't think we have blindly handed over influence to the culture around us and the government, I think it was out of comfort and laziness. It takes work to be the influence. It takes work to confront the selfishness and pride within our hearts. It takes work to deal with sin. Sometimes it is draining and sometimes it feels like a lost battle. It takes work and can be messy and awkward to ask questions of leadership when it seems like the leadership is straying from God.

To be the influence, it takes loving the things God loves. It takes following Jesus. It takes denying yourself and taking up your cross and following Jesus. It takes meditating upon God's Word and applying it to your thoughts. It takes drawing near to God, even when drawing near to other things seems more enticing at the moment. It takes prayer. It takes trust that God will work in the situation, in you, and in others around you. It takes faith that God is worth more than all the other things that get your attention. It takes worship. As we worship, as God fills us with His Spirit, we begin to overflow with who He is and what He does. As this happens, it begins to spill out onto those around us. We begin to put ourselves into a place to influence. It begins right here, with me. Pride hinders godly influence, and promotes the influence of myself. A humble heart chasing after God hinders the influence of myself, and promotes God's influence.

In verses 12-14 of Mark, Jesus curses the fig tree. Is He getting progressive on us? Did He get h-anry due to His hunger? Was He unfair to the fig tree? Did He finally lose it due to the political climate and frustration with the religious people of the day and abuse His power?

These verse have been a problem for some inside the faith, and for those outside the faith. Jesus uses a lot of stories, word pictures, and even miracles to illustrate points. It's always important to let scripture help you to understand scripture.

Israel's relationship with God many times throughout the Old Testament in Hosea, Micah, and Jeremiah was spoken of in the form of fruit and many times in the form of a fig tree. Fig trees were common throughout the land and it would be something most everyone would understand. Israel had

prostituted itself with other gods. The temple was a place for manipulating God and others. They would come to worship God, not out of reverence and love, but out of appeasement. Then they would worship the other gods of the day. God was very clear from early on with the commandments, 'you shall have no other gods before Me.' God is jealous, and He wants our worship to be for Him alone. He is seeking true worshippers.

Without getting too much into the life of fig tree, it could be harvested twice a year, May and June, and August and September. But, this time of the year was probably March, maybe April. So it was early in the season. Usually a fig tree begins to grow the fruit before it grows leaves. And as the fruit matures it grows leaves. So when Jesus saw the tree with leaves on it, there should have already been fruit growing. But what does He find? A tree that looks enticing and hopeful, but gets to it and finds it was empty and not satisfying.

Jesus was making a statement, not about the political atmosphere, but of the religious atmosphere. Their worship of God was a joke. The temple atmosphere was about rituals, traditions, and personal gain. It was a manipulation of God. Jesus was not just condemning that kind of worship, but was revealing that kind of worship deserves judgment.

When Jesus and the disciples arrived at the temple in Jerusalem, what Jesus saw mad Him angry. It was not a 'house of prayer', it was a house of manipulation and gain.

Just as a side note: this wasn't the first time Jesus walked into the temple and responded. This is most likely the second time He cleared out the temple. In John 2:13-22, Jesus comes to the temple right before a previous Passover and they are doing the same thing: selling sheep, cattle, and doves and exchanging foreign money for the money used in the temple. Jesus is infuriated and does the same thing: turns over tables, scatters the money changers' coins and drives out the animals. He tells them, "Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" Then it says the disciples remembered the prophecy in the scriptures, "Passion for God's house will consume me." Jesus was upset because they were abusing the temple, but He was infuriated that they were using it for gain, not a place of worship to God. Three years later it was happening again.

It wasn't called a 'marketplace' because the temple youth group was having a fundraiser to go to camp. It was because there was selling and buying going on. It wasn't ministry, it was extortion. Many would come with animals to sacrifice and when they would bring them in to the 'court of the Gentiles' the animals would be inspected. And if the inspector decided it wasn't a good enough animal, they would take your animal and then sell you one for an exorbitant price, often putting a real strain upon the poor.

There was a temple tax that each person over 20 years of age was to give according to the Old Testament for use of upkeep and maintenance on the temple. But, the temple tax was to be temple currency. Many of the people came from foreign lands that used other types of currency so you had money changers that would often times charge a large inflation for the exchange.

There was buying and selling, money changing tables, and a place for the livestock in the temple court that was made for the non-Jewish people to have a place to worship the One true God. The Gentiles were not allowed to go any deeper into the temple if they were not circumcised. So, they were able to worship in the outer court. But, it was so busy and loud they could not worship. The temple leaders had created multiple hindrances to their worship.

They had effectively made it so that Isaiah 56:7-8 could not happen, which says, "I will bring them to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for *all nations*." The Gentile people would have a place with God too, but they were made unable to worship.

Temple worship had become more about looking righteous than acting righteous. In their zeal for trying to be good by creating all the extra rules that were man-made (which some were beneficial and helpful), they became more about looking good than truly being godly. It became more about earning God's approval than worshipping God.

What is the practical side to this?

1. May we only stick to the gospel as the defining line of salvation. Our works will never earn approval with God. Only the work of Jesus on the cross will earn our approval with God.
2. Leadership must stay connected in prayer and obedience to the Word of God. If leadership does not, then it will abuse power and seek gain. When leadership is corrupt, the laws will be corrupt, and the people will be led astray.
  1. That is why it is so imperative to pray for our leaders in the church and the leadership outside the church.
  2. That is why it is so imperative to pray for the leadership of our country.
3. Is our worship true? Is our worship God-honoring or is it me-pleasing?
  1. It is important for us to remember that it starts with me...meaning it starts in our own heart. Jesus didn't come to change the political scene, He didn't judge the political scene. Where was His anger applied?...where the worship was false. Where the worship was supposed to be pure.
4. The last thing for me is a question that haunts me. What obstacles or disturbances have we put in place so others can't come to worship? What hindrances am I putting between others and God?