

Jesus cursing the fig tree has got to be the strangest miracle in the Bible. Why does he do it? Why does he curse that tree so that it dies? We normally expect him to do something positive, right? We expect him to heal. We expect him to cast out demons. We expect him to do all of these things. So why then does he curse this tree? And then he goes into the temple, and he becomes angry and starts flipping over tables, spilling out money, setting animals free, driving the moneychangers out of the temple. John even tells us that he used a whip to do it. It's certainly not what we would expect Jesus to do, is it? We would expect him to do things like healing, telling the good news, blessing children, being the good Shepherd, all of those kinds of things. That's the kind of picture that we have of Jesus. But Jesus angry and violent? Well, that just doesn't seem to fit. It's unexpected. Why does he act in this way? The fact that he is acting so strangely, Christians, should lead us to pay closer attention to what he's doing, because he's obviously trying to teach us something through all of this strange behavior.

So if we want to understand it, then, the first thing that we need to see is that both of these things--the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple--happened together. Mark even sets it up so Jesus sees the fig tree first, and he goes to the temple, and then goes back to the fig tree, forming a kind of sandwich in our story. These things are all meant to be together. If we want to understand one, we have to look at the other one, and then we will be able to tell what these things mean.

So let's look at the first one, then. Jesus, we are told, was staying in Bethany, because he had come to Jerusalem for Passover. This is Holy Week, as a matter of fact, and it's Monday of Holy Week. Just the day before, he had come into Jerusalem in his triumphal entry, and people had welcomed him with loud shouts of hosanna, and everything was very exciting. But because it was Passover, there was more people than usual in town, and so he didn't have any place to stay in Jerusalem. And so he went out to Bethany instead, about two miles away.

But as he was coming back in to go to Jerusalem, we are told that he begins to be hungry. And so he starts looking for something to eat. And he sees in the distance a fig tree in leaf, and he begins to get pretty excited, because now he thinks that he's going to find something to eat. And to understand what happens here, Christians, we need to know two things about fig trees. First of all, a fig tree, when it wakes up in the spring and starts to bud, almost immediately starts to produce fruit at the same time. If you see leaves on a fig tree, you can expect that there's fruit on it. The two almost always go together. Yeah, it takes a little while for the fruit to ripen, but you can expect to find something if you see leaves.

And more than that, these first fruits were considered to be the very best fruits, even though it produced fruits until winter came and fell dormant again. We know this from a passage like Isaiah chapter 28, which says: "The fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer: when someone sees it, he swallows it as soon as it is in his hand." So Jesus, seeing these leaves on this fig tree, not only is expecting food, he's expecting something good too. It's a very exciting thing to see this tree with leaves.

But the other thing that we need to know about fig trees is that, as Mark tells us, it's not yet the season for figs. In other words, this particular tree is budding and fruiting earlier than normal. And that makes it doubly exciting, because not only are you going to get the food that you're

looking for, you're getting it earlier than you thought that you would. And so Jesus with high expectations goes to this fig tree, expecting to find something good to eat.

But he is disappointed. This tree is nothing but leaves. There are no figs on it at all. It had promised much, but it failed to deliver on those promises. And so Jesus curses the fig tree, because it was all leaves and no fruit.

But then Jesus goes into Jerusalem, Mark says. And he goes to the temple, and he sees many there who are buying and selling. Of course, we want to ask: what are they doing there? Why are they there? Remember what I said. This is leading up to Passover, which means that there are more people in town than usual. And more people in town than usual means that there's going to be a lot more sacrifices. And a lot more sacrifices means that you need a lot more animals to be able to sacrifice. Pigeons, for example, could be used as a sin offering, especially by the poor who couldn't afford anything else. So they're selling these animals to the people who are coming in so they didn't have to bring them along with them. And the moneychangers are there for people to pay a special tax that God had commanded in Exodus chapter 30. God had commanded that every adult male pay a tax of half a shekel as an offering to the temple, as an offering to the Lord. The problem was, though, that people didn't use shekels anymore. They were using Greek and Roman coins instead. And so to fix this problem, the moneychangers would exchange currency, help them get exactly what they needed--at a price, of course.

So all of this, of course, was perfectly legitimate. This was legitimate business that they were doing. The problem was not what they were doing, Christians. The problem was where they were doing it. We're told that they were doing all of these things within the temple. It'd be like if somebody came in here into the sanctuary and set up shop and started to do business and buy and sell things. We wouldn't say that they were doing anything wrong in itself, but this is not the place to be doing it. That's not what this place is for. This belongs to God! And it was the same way with the temple.

And it was also a problem because of where in the temple they were doing it. Because that whole temple area was divided into three parts, which they called "courts." You had the Court of the Men, the Court of the Women, and the Court of the Gentiles. And you had to go into whichever court belonged to you. The men went to the men, the women went to the women, the Gentiles went to the Gentiles. You couldn't go into any other court. But this last one, the Court of the Gentiles, was exactly where they had set up shop. They had set up all of their business, filling up the whole place, and in the process they pushed out anyone who might want to use it for its intended purpose. Imagine being someone in those days, being a Gentile in those days, going to the temple to pray, only to find that you can't, because everywhere you go there's a stall or a booth, and people are shouting at the top of their lungs because it's a marketplace. You just wouldn't be able to pray! It'd be like if we were to go into town and kneel down on the sidewalk and try to pray while everyone else is going to work. It just wouldn't work. And so that was the problem. The God-fearing Gentiles were treated as unimportant. They were treated as not worth giving a place to, even in the very place that had been built for them.

But the very worst thing about this of all, Christians, was that they thought that they were serving God in the process. Aren't all of these animals that we are selling sacrifices to God? Isn't all of this money that we are exchanging so that people can pay that tax that they owed to God? All of

this has to be God pleasing, right? All of this has to be good! So there's nothing wrong with what we are doing. And in the process, they showed the truth of their hearts. They were all leaves and no fruit.

That's why Jesus becomes angry. He starts to make a scene, to start protesting what is happening, flipping over tables, driving out the moneychangers. And as he is doing it, he quotes from the prophet Isaiah in verse 17 of our reading: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?" God's house was meant for all people. The Gentiles would come into the temple and worship him as the Lord, because God was calling all to himself. For them to treat the Gentiles like this and to treat the temple like this was to go against who God was! It was completely contrary to God himself.

And then Jesus also quotes from the prophet Jeremiah in verse 17 again when he says: "But you have made it a den of robbers." The reason Jesus did this is because in Jeremiah's day, Jeremiah was sent also to the temple to say to those who were coming into worship, Jeremiah chapter 7: "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" They were acting like thieves, going out to steal and to plunder and to pillage, only to come back to their den. Except that den was the temple itself. And so God told Israel through Jeremiah that judgment was going to come because of what they had done. God told them that the temple would be destroyed. And it was. That first temple was destroyed when the Babylonians destroyed it and God carried Israel away into exile. Jesus is saying that the same thing is going to happen now. This temple would also be destroyed. It would never bear fruit again, and no one would ever eat from it again. And that's exactly why they wanted to kill him. They knew perfectly well what he was saying to them. But instead of repenting, instead of turning away from it and turning to what they should be doing, they got angry instead. And they sought to kill him, just as they would do that same week on Good Friday. And in the process, they showed the truth of their hearts. They were all leaves and no fruit.

So on the next day when Jesus was coming back to Jerusalem, they saw the fig tree again. Only this time it was dead, completely dead and dried up. It had dried out entirely in less than twenty-four hours, which is a miracle in itself. But it's judgment had been swift, just as the judgment that was coming upon Jerusalem would be swift. In 70 A.D. it would be destroyed by the Romans, and the temple would be torn down. Jesus will also come again, Christians, to judge the world. And when he does, those who are all leaves and no fruit will also be judged. May we take his warning to heart!

But Jesus also comes to us today to give us the Holy Spirit so that we would be more than just leaves, Christians! So that we would also bear abundant fruit. Jesus comes to make us into something new, to make us call on him by faith. And when we are in Christ, Christians, we can have faith in God. When we are in Christ, we can pray to God with confidence, knowing that what we ask for will be ours through him. And when Jesus comes to judge the world, he will also deliver us. And we will be with him forever, bearing fruits for eternity. So Christians, let us listen to him. Let us call on his name and follow after him by faith, so that together with him, we may enter into the joys of paradise.

Let us pray. Almighty God, who has given us the Holy Spirit so that we would bear abundant fruit, help us to walk in the way that you would have us go, so that we may glorify you in everything; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.