

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Mark 11:12-24

Sermon Title: "The Truth in Fig Trees and Temples" (Palm Sunday)

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Have you ever tried to order something from the menu of a restaurant, and they didn't have it? On a particular night, you have a hankering for fish or chicken or steak, and you find that one item you are dying to eat, and when you try to order it, the waitress says they don't have it. I personally hate when that happens. I might pick two different items on the menu, but I want my first choice. Don't tell me you don't have it – I get really disappointed. I hate when I order an iced coffee in a restaurant and they don't have it, and it's the morning. The restaurant just opened. I hate when I order a steak on a busy night, and they don't have it. I got there at the beginning of the dinner rush, and they don't have certain foods?

The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus is hungry. He could go for a bite to eat. As he and his disciples are traveling from Bethany to Jerusalem, which is about a mile or two hop, skip, and jump away, Jesus spies a fig tree that is bursting with leaves. The fig tree is announcing to everybody that the time to pick

juicy figs is at hand. Come and get one. The problem is: the season for picking figs doesn't occur for another two months. Jesus and his disciples might already know this, but the fig tree doesn't. It has leaves – it should also have figs. But it doesn't. We have here some false advertisement. Finding nothing to curb his appetite, Jesus curses the fig tree and it immediately withers away.¹

What does Jesus have against a fig tree? So, it didn't have any figs among its big leaves now. It should bear figs eventually, right? The season is two months off, so the tree should have figs then. We might think that Jesus should find something else to eat, and let the fig tree do its thing in the right season.

The Gospel of Mark continues the story. Jesus and his men go to Jerusalem after the encounter with a fig tree, and they head directly for the temple of the Lord. The temple is ripe for the worship of God, or is seems to be. There are people congregating around the temple, ready to offer sacrifices in honor of God Almighty. The smoke rises from the altar, entering in the nostrils of God in heaven. Many prayers are spoken in the hopes of reaching the ears of God to answer according to his good will. There should be all

¹ Cf. Matthew 21:19.

sorts of worshipping happening around the temple, because that is what you go to the temple for (to give yourself to God).

But what do Jesus and the men discover? The buying and selling of goods. The loud racket doesn't come from people offering prayers but from hucksters plying their trade. Jesus doesn't see people walking humbly but worrying about getting the right sacrifice and having the right amount of change. There is no reverence. There is no thought of honoring God.

You see, people would usually come to the temple with a sacrifice in hand. They could offer an animal as simple as a young pigeon or a turtledove, or something more substantial such as a lamb. These animals had to be without blemish, so people would bring the best of their livestock. However, if they are traveling a long distance, they might not have the means to carry an animal. Or, they might not have an unblemished animal in their possession. So, the priests created a system at the temple, in which they could purchase an unblemished animal at a fair price. The money would go to the temple treasury for repairs, etc.

The prices were supposed to be fair, but the priests found ways to make them unfair. Somebody came up with the idea of creating a temple currency. This

means that anything bought at the temple had to be bought using a special coin that was only good around the temple. It's like going to an amusement park and having to use their special Disney dollars or whatnot. People paid for that currency, and the exchange rate might not be the same all the time. In fact, the exchange rate benefited the temple and its priests more often than not. So, one day it could be 15 Roman coins for one temple coin, and tomorrow it could be 20 Roman coins for one temple coin. Then, those selling the doves and lambs might charge 5 temple coins one day, but 15 the next day. And those animals were not always without blemish. The merchants sold whatever they could get rid of. The temple priests didn't care, just as long as they were getting people to use their special currency.

Jesus and his disciples walk in the middle of all of this. The temple building is right before them. The altar is aflame. The people are gathering. Like the fig tree, the temple is displaying all sorts of flash and pizzazz to anybody who arrives. It is saying, "Come and worship here." But like the fig tree, the temple and its priests bear no fruit. We have here once more some false advertisement. People receive no nourishment before the temple of God. God receives no adoration from the mouths and actions of the

people. So Jesus clears out the temple. He tells the merchants that they will no longer continue to deceive people, and their commerce immediately withers away.

What does Jesus have against one fig tree that announces that it has fruit but doesn't? The fig tree is the temple in Jerusalem. The leaves on the fig tree are the priests and altar and merchants selling supposedly unblemished sacrifices. The message is clear: if you are going to broadcast to all that you are a certain thing, and you end up being something totally different, you are living a false life. If the temple is supposed to be where people come to worship the Lord God, it has to be nothing else but the place to worship the Lord God. It cannot be anything else, or it will fail.

Earlier in Jesus' ministry, he preached to a multitude of people on a mount, and on that mount he talked about fruit.² He said that good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit. You might be able to tell by looking at the state of the tree. If the branches are full of lively leaves, then it should bear good fruit in its season. If the branches are leafless, and look dry and worn-down, the tree will probably not bear good fruit. Sounds logical. But then Jesus says, "Do you go to a thorn bush to look for grapes? Do you

² Cf. Matthew 7:15-20.

search among the thistles for a handful of figs? No, never. Thorn bushes grow berries that only birds can eat, and thistles only bear flowers for bugs to snack on. We find grapes on vines and figs in trees, and both fruits are edible and delicious.

Why would Jesus ask such a question about thistles and thorn bushes? Because the first thing Jesus says before talking about fruit at all is this: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” Look out for people who smile and say they follow God, and yet act a completely different way. Look out for those who say they believe but do not really believe, and think they can orchestrate their lives without God. Last weekend there was a rally in Washington DC called the Reason Rally. A bunch of atheists took over the Mall in DC, hoping to support other atheists in their non-beliefs. There were a number of keynote speakers who addressed the crowd, but there was one in particular who called himself Pastor M. Pastor M wore a mask over his face as he addressed the crowds, because he serves a rather large church somewhere, and he doesn’t believe in the existence of God. He doesn’t want to lose his rich salary or his cushy pension, so he put on a mask to keep his church from discovering his atheism. He is a

fig tree in bloom, but there is no fruit.

Today is Palm Sunday, and we celebrate the moment in Jesus' ministry when he enters Jerusalem riding a donkey. People throw palm branches and cloaks on the ground as a "red carpet", inviting Jesus to the city. Many people expect Jesus to enter the city and take it over. They expect him to topple the Roman government and establish a new Jewish government that was sympathetic to the people. If he intended to overrun the city, he would have entered it on a horse, not a donkey. The horse is the symbol of war and dominance. Kings enter cities on horses to show how powerful they are. Jesus would have had a spear or sword in his hand, and he would have had a host of soldiers marching in formation behind him. This is if Jesus meant to do what the people expected him to do.

Even Jesus would not be a fig tree bearing leaves but have no figs. Jesus would not come to the city under any false pretence. He meant to come in peace. Jesus rides a donkey, because such animals broadcast peace. He would not ride in to overtake the government, but to overtake people's hearts. He would not hold a sword in his hand but carry words of power in his mouth. At the right time, in the right season (so to speak), Jesus would bear fruit by offering his body

to eliminate the real enemies: sin and evil.

Jesus sees the fig tree and thinks about all those who say or act like they believe, but do not. Who knows why they don't believe? Maybe somebody told them not to believe. Maybe they had a bad experience in church, and then they went off the deep end to reject anything Christ has to say or offer. Maybe they want to put on a good front, look as Christian as they possibly can, and yet their heads and hearts haven't taken the step and made the commitment to God.

Some of these trees who bear leaves and no figs like the idea of bearing leaves. They want people to listen to them, and believe what they have to say. They bask in the limelight, and they sound so important, so genuine. They really stand in the way of people looking beyond them toward God. He is whom we should see when anyone speaks of him. But the fig tree with no fruit stands in the way, and won't get out of the way.

Jesus looks at the fig tree and thinks of those in the city of Jerusalem who are suffering from flash and pizzazz but no real meat. The priests at the temple taking money from innocent people, the scribes and Pharisees who would call for Jesus' head, and the

rabbis who would dare to call Jesus a false prophet. And then there is Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' own disciples, who walked in the city with the other disciples. As Jesus cursed the fig tree and overturned the merchants' tables, was he thinking of Judas's betrayal that would come by the end of the week? Was he grieving the fact that Judas wore the clothes of a disciple – he was acting like a good tree bearing good fruit – but he would soon exchange that all for 30 silver coins?

If we think about it, it must have grieved our Lord and Savior greatly to consider how he would have to clear out a temple for its false advertisement, rather than bless it for its faithfulness toward God. It must have grieved him to think of the thousands of people who placed palm branches and cloaks in front of his donkey, only to have them at the end of the week call for his crucifixion.

However, Jesus did not end his ministry with a withered fig tree and a corrupt temple. Our incorruptible Savior moved from the fig tree and the temple to the cross and then to the tomb. All was not lost in the mind of Christ. Hope still shined in the actions of Christ.

For on the cross he would hope that, some day, the

fig trees would soon produce figs, that they would bear the fruit they should. Some day the temple would be a place of free worship, where people connect with God and carry out his will in the world. Some day the wolves would take off their sheep's clothing and stop living a lie, and through the power of Christ's death learn how to act like sheep who know the voice of their Shepherd. Some day, the Pastor Ms of the world would remove their masks and stop living their lies, and in the face of overwhelming love and grace would believe that God the Father does exist. They would truly believe that Jesus died even for them, and that the Holy Spirit wants to rejuvenate their lives and ministries.

It is possible for anybody to bear fruit. Just approach Christ who say, "Come and take, and be satisfied."