

# ALL LEAVES AND NO FRUIT

I once saw a church sign that said, "God is looking for spiritual fruit not religious nuts." Jesus said: **"Therefore by their fruits you will know them."** (Matthew 7:20). The New Testament refers to bearing fruit over 50 times.

Jesus illustrates this truth in a dramatic way in our scripture today. Here in chapter 11 of Mark we are walking with Jesus and His disciples through the last week of His earthly life. It is amazing that Jesus was able to pack so much activity into a seven day period of time. He accomplished much during those seven days and not a single moment was wasted by our Lord. The week began with His triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem that served as a bold and deliberate announcement that He was the Messiah. The week ended with His crucifixion.

In this message, we are going to look at an event that occurred the day after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This event was designed to teach us about the judgment of God that was coming on the nation of Israel. They had rejected their Messiah and they were about to pay a terrible price.

While this text speaks primarily to Israel, there is also a word of warning here for all people. The Lord Jesus wants us all to know that He is examining our lives. He wants us to know that He is looking for genuine spiritual fruit in our lives.

Let's follow Jesus and His disciples through these verses today.

Remember from verse 11 that after Jesus went into the temple and had **"had looked around at all things,"** Jesus left Jerusalem and **"He went out to Bethany with the twelve."** Now in verse 12 Jesus and His men travel from Bethany back into Jerusalem. Listen to Mark's account starting in verse 12:

## **Mark 11:12-21**

- 12 Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry.**
- 13 And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.**
- 14 In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it.**
- 15 So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.**
- 16 And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple.**
- 17 Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.' "**
- 18 And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching.**

**19 When evening had come, He went out of the city.**

**20 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots.**

**21 And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."**

Today we're going to look at two of Jesus Christ's most misunderstood actions: Jesus' cursing of a fig tree and His action of driving out the merchants from the Jewish temple. On their own, these two events are very difficult to understand, but together these two events explain each other. The way Mark tells us about these two events, he wants us to know that they help explain each other. Remember that throughout his gospel Mark uses a sandwich technique, where he starts with one story, goes to a different story, and then comes back to the first story. Here we have the cleansing of the temple sandwiched in between the beginning and end of the event of the fig tree. This is Mark's way of telling us that these two events are related to each other, and that if we miss the meaning of the fig tree, we'll miss the meaning of the clearing out of the temple as well.

### **I. A Fruitless Fig Tree v. 12-13**

The text tells that Jesus is hungry. As He walks Jesus sees "**from afar a fig tree having leaves**". The tree is in full leaf, so Jesus goes to it hoping to find some figs to eat. When He comes to the tree, He finds nothing but leaves. Then Mark tells us the confusing statement, "**it was not the season for figs**". In order to understand what is happening here, need to examine these verses a little closer.

Fig trees were and are very common in Israel. The common fig, which is mentioned over 60 times in the Bible, is one of the most important trees in the Word of God.

It is first mentioned in **Gen. 3:7**, when Adam and Eve used its broad leaves to make aprons to cover their nakedness.

Figs were a vital part of the Middle Eastern diet. The fruit was sweet to the taste, **Jud. 9:11**. The first ripe figs were especially valued, **Jer. 24:2; Hos. 9:10**.

Fig trees were also valued for their shade. It was a sign of peace and prosperity to sit in the shade of a fig tree, **1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4**. It was under a fig tree that Jesus first saw Nathanael, **John 1:48**.

In Jeremiah 24 the Lord showed the prophet two baskets of figs, one full of good figs, one full of bad. Good figs were used as a picture of the remnant of obedient believers that God would bless, **Jer. 24:4-7**; while rotten figs pictured wicked men that the Lord would curse, **Jer. 24:8-10**.

Old Testament prophets often used the fig tree and figs as a sign of judgment, "And as fruit falling from a fig tree," **Isa. 34:4**; "I will send on them the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, and will make them like rotten figs that cannot be eaten, they are so bad," **Jer. 29:17**; "And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees," **Hos. 2:12**, "I saw your fathers As the firstfruits on the fig tree in its first season. But they went to Baal Peor, And separated themselves to that shame; They became an abomination like the thing they loved." **Hosea 9:10**; "He has laid waste My vine, And ruined My fig tree; He has stripped it bare and thrown it away; Its branches are made white," **Joel 1:7**.

That is a brief sample of what the Bible has to say about the fig tree.

Fig trees are unusual in that they can produce as many as three crops in a single year. The first crop is produced on the old wood. Early in the year, green knobs or buds appear at the end of the branches. They are called paggim and while this fruit is not as juicy and rich as the later fruit it is still quite edible.

After the paggim appear, the fig tree will begin to grow its leaves and new growth. The fig tree is unique in that it can be in full fruit, full leaf and full bloom all at the same time. The first full crop of figs become ripe in June, the second in September and sometimes, there is a third crop in December.

Since the fruit grows as the tree produces its leaves, it was reasonable for Jesus to assume that there would be fruit on the tree when He came to it. Yet, when He searched the tree, He found it was all leaves; there was no fruit to be found. This fig tree was deceptive because its leaves promised something the tree could not deliver. The leaves promised fruit, but there was none. There was nothing wrong with the soil. There was nothing wrong with the sap. There was simply no fruit.

A fig tree in full leaf in April should have been covered with early fruit. Since this tree had no early fruit, it was a sign that there would be no sweet fruit when the time for harvest arrived. This tree had nothing to offer and it was therefore useless! This tree was fit for nothing but to be cut down and fed to the fire.

Now there's more happening that first meets the eye here, because this event isn't just about Jesus having a hankering for a fig. When we consider this text, we must take it in its context. In **verse 1-11**, Jesus had just presented Himself to Israel as her King. He had publically declared His identity and Israel would ultimately reject their King.

Israel was just like this fruitless fig tree. They had all the signs of spiritual life, but they had no fruit. They were keeping the letter of the Law. They were carrying out the Temple ceremonies. They were observing the ancient feasts and the sacrifices. They were religious in every detail, but they had no spiritual fruit.

Israel promised all who saw her that she could show them the way to God. In reality, she could only show them the way to religious bondage and the way to Hell. Israel's religion was full of leaves, but it had no fruit. Israel looked alive, but she was spiritually barren.

Israel had been given every advantage that could be afforded to a people. They had received the personal attention and redemption of Almighty God. They had been planted in a good land. They had the Word of God, the prophets of God and the Temple of God. They had everything they needed for a spiritual bumper crop, but they remained fruitless.

### **I. A Curse on the Fig Tree v. 14**

Because the fig tree was barren when it promised fruit, the Lord Jesus pronounced a curse upon it. He declared that it was to be fruitless forever. If there were leaves on the tree, there should have been fruit as well. Jesus cursed the tree for its hypocrisy. **The lack of fruit was not the reason for the curse. It was the pretense of the leaves!** The tree was making promises it could not deliver!

Remember that Jesus is on his way to the Jewish temple, and what happens here with the fig tree is symbolic of what Jesus is about to do in the temple. There's a passage from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah that's especially relevant to what's happening here. This passage is found in Jeremiah chapter 8.

**11 For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, Saying, 'Peace, peace!' When there is no peace.**

**12 Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed, Nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; In the time of their punishment They shall be cast down," says the Lord.**

**13 "I will surely consume them," says the Lord. "No grapes shall be on the vine, Nor figs on the fig tree, And the leaf shall fade; And the things I have given them shall pass away from them." ' " (Jeremiah 8:11-13).**

This message from the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah around five hundred years before the birth of Jesus was a message of judgment against the nation of Israel. People of Jeremiah's generation were minimizing the seriousness of Israel's sins, downplaying Israel's rebellion toward God. So God says he'll judge Israel, and that like a fig tree with no figs, Israel will wither.

Jesus is using the imagery from Jeremiah and applying it to the temple in His own generation over five hundred years later. By having lots and lots of leaves the fig tree promised to be fruitful, but in the end it didn't produce anything. They were cursed, just like the fig tree. Two chapters later in Mark 13:1-2 Jesus says about the temple in Jerusalem, "**Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down.**"

We know from the historical record that Israel was judged for their rejection of the Lord Jesus. They paid a high price for their hypocrisy. They were destroyed by Rome in 70 AD and the population that survived were scattered around the world.

### **III. A Barren Temple v. 15-19**

Now sandwiched in the middle of the cursing of the fig tree is Jesus' action in the Jewish temple. Traditionally this event is called "the cleansing of the temple." The typical explanation goes something like this: Jesus was trying to reform the Jewish temple because of the dishonesty of the people selling sacrificial animals there. But I don't think Jesus is just trying to cleanse or reform the temple. If the fig tree in the previous verses and the following verses symbolizes the temple and Jerusalem and Israel, then Jesus isn't cleansing the temple, He's cursing it. Jesus didn't cleanse or try to reform the fig tree, He cursed it so it withered up and died. And I think what Jesus is doing here is similar, not a cleansing but a symbolic statement of judgment.

That's probably different from what you've heard before about this event, so let's look at it more closely. First let's talk about the Jewish temple itself. This is Israel's second temple; the first temple was built by Solomon, and it was destroyed by the Babylonians years earlier. The temple was rebuilt after the Israelites returned from exile. Eventually that temple was remodeled by Herod the Great, the Roman puppet king over Israel in Jesus' day. The area Jesus is in

is probably the outer court, often called "the court of Gentiles." The court of the Gentiles was an outdoor court that surrounded the entire temple structure.

It's hard to overstate the importance of this temple to ancient Judaism. Ancient Jews believed that their temple in Jerusalem was literally the center of the universe, because it was the one place in the world where heaven and earth intersected. They believed God's presence indwelt the temple in a special and unique way. They also viewed the temple as the only place where a person could find forgiveness of sins because it was the place where sacrifices were offered. The temple was also a symbol of Israel's national status. So the temple had both religious and political significance to the people of Jesus' day.

When Jewish people came to the temple to celebrate the Passover holiday, they had to offer a sacrifice and pay their annual half shekel temple tax. This explains the presence of the money changers in this outer court. The money changers were bankers who exchanged Roman currency for the half-shekel so Jewish people could pay their temple tax. You couldn't pay the temple tax with Roman currency, so you had to exchange it for shekels. The selling of animals in the temple courts for sacrifice was necessary because many people traveled too far to bring their sacrificial animals with them.

. What Jesus does is a symbolic protest, temporarily stopping the temple from functioning, causing a brief interruption in the offering of sacrifices. Notice that He drives out both those selling and those buying, which tells me that the issue isn't just that the sellers were dishonest.

The key to understanding Jesus' action here are the two passages from the Old Testament that he quotes in v. 17. The first Old Testament passage he quotes is Isaiah 56:7. The 56th chapter of Isaiah promises a future time when people formerly excluded from temple worship will be welcomed.

**"Also the sons of the foreigner Who join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, And to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants-- Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And holds fast My covenant-- Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices Will be accepted on My altar; For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." (Isaiah 56:3, 6-7).**

Many people of Jesus' day believed that the Messiah would drive out all foreigners, yet Jesus quotes a text that looks forward to the very opposite. Jesus doesn't clear the temple of non-Jewish people, but he clears the temple for them. So part of Jesus' action has to do with the inclusion of non-Jewish people within God's people, something that will take place when the Church is born.

The other text Jesus quotes here comes from Jeremiah chapter 7. Let me read the context:

**Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.'... Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to**

**do all these abominations'? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the Lord. (Jeremiah 7:4, 8-11).**

This section is just one chapter earlier than the passage about the fig tree we looked at earlier. In Jeremiah's day, Jewish people were living like the devil throughout the week, and then believing that they were safe from God's judgment because they went to the temple each Sabbath. They were trusting in the temple, rather than trusting in the God of the temple. So they turned God's holy temple into a hang out for robbers.

#### **IV. The Tragic Result v. 20-21**

The disciples heard Jesus when He cursed the fig tree, **v. 14**. The next day, as they passed by, they saw that the fig tree was "**dried up from the roots**". Peter called the Lord's attention to the tree. Jesus cursed it and it died from the roots up.

Again, this tree is a picture of Israel and her temple. They had been judged by the Lord for their hypocrisy and their rejection of the Messiah. They were destroyed from the root up.

The Gospel of Matthew records the message of John the Baptist to Israel, "**And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire,**" **Matt. 3:10**.

As you might imagine, there is a message here for us. When the Lord examines our lives, and He does, what does He see? Does He see us bearing fruit to the glory of God? Or, does He see a tree that has gone to leaf?

Let's face the truth today. We have been given every spiritual advantage God has to offer. We have His Word, His church and His Spirit. He has blessed us in abundance. There is no excuse for us being a fruitless branch!

We have all the appearances of life. We use the right Bible, sing the right songs, preach the right message and walk the right path. When people look at this church, they can see our leaves. They see our leaves, but is there any fruit?

Are we really living by faith? Are we really in love with Jesus? Are we really in love with one another? Are we a house of prayer? Do we practice forgiveness? Is there real commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, or do we merely give Him lip service? Is New Covenant Baptist Church all leaf? Or, do we have fruit that honors the Lord?

What about in your individual life? Are you all leaves, or do you have fruit?

Is Jesus really the first priority in your life, or is His will, His worship and His work just an afterthought?

Do you have all the trappings of religion and salvation, but no real commitment to God?

Do you shout, testify and pretend to worship while you hold things in your hearts against others?

Do you look and act saved at church but live like the devil everywhere else?

Do you plan your life around all the things you want to do but don't see the need to plan around the Lord's work?

Do you have any real fruit in your life?

Fruit is always the evidence of genuine salvation. When a person is saved by God's grace, they will bear fruit for His glory! (Ill. **John 15:5** – The fruit on the vine is evidence of life within the branch. As the branch yields to the vine and as the vine lives through the branch, fruit happens.) What kind of fruit?

A changed life – **2 Cor. 5:17**

A vibrant witness – **Acts 1:8**

The evidence of inward life – **Gal. 5:19-23**

Not everyone bears the same amount of fruit, **John 15:1-8**. But, everyone who is saved bears some fruit! In truth, every life, saved or lost, bears some sort of fruit, but only those in a right relationship with God will bear His fruit, **Matt. 7:18**.

When we are all leaf and no fruit we are living in spiritual hypocrisy. We are fit for nothing but judgment.

So, what does Jesus see when He looks at your life?

Take this message to heart you that do believe. The Lord is looking for fruit in the lives of His people. The Lord is looking for fruit in His church. When He examines us, does He find what He seeks? Or, does He see all leaf and no fruit? What do you need to do today?