

"He Found Nothing But Leaves"

Is Jesus about blessings and grace or about curses and judgment? Well, the answer is "yes." Jesus came talking about both. Many churches want to emphasize the blessings and grace of Jesus. That's actually right. That's the right emphasis. I'll talk a little bit about that today. But in this passage, Jesus' focus is primarily on curses and judgment. The emphasis in today's passage is about judgment.

We see Jesus *illustrate* judgment in this incident with the fig tree. We see Jesus *issue* judgment as he cleanses the temple. And I think we even see him *predict* future judgment against the temple and Jerusalem in this passage. And so today we'll be looking at Jesus talking about judgment. Of course we can't help but think about Christ's grace when we think of his judgment. But I want us to really reckon today with judgment. Jesus is holding out the threat of judgment to the Israelites. Let's really understand and wrestle with that. And as we do that, we'll see how the judgment applied to Israel is also an ongoing warning to us to remain steadfast in faith in God.

So let's look at our passage. Let's begin with this withered fig tree. In verse 12 we see Jesus heading out of Bethany on the way back into Jerusalem. Remember from last week, Jesus had left Bethany and the Mount of Olives and rode triumphantly on a donkey into Jerusalem. Then, at the end of the day, Jesus returned to Bethany. It was about 2 miles between Bethany and Jerusalem. Bethany was on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, and so they had to descend down the Mount of Olives and ascend back up to Jerusalem which was also on a mountain, just a little bit lower elevation than the Mount of Olives. The temple was situated in Jerusalem on the temple mount, the highest place in Jerusalem. This place was also known in Scripture, of course, as Mount Zion.

And so our passage begins with Jesus heading out of Bethany, back into Jerusalem. This was very common for Jesus to do, to stay the night out of the city back in the little village of Bethany. That's what he does again in our passage. He leaves the city again that night and returns to Bethany again, only to enter Jerusalem once more the following day. Bethany is where his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived, so he might have stayed at their place.

At any rate, in verse 12, we find Jesus on this short two mile road between Bethany and Jerusalem. And on the way, we're told that he is hungry. Maybe he announced that to the disciples. But he then proceeds to head to a fig tree in the distance. The tree was full of leaves; sounds like a healthy tree. And so Jesus walks over to it, and inspects it, and finds it fruitless. He then proceeds to curse the tree (at least that's how Peter describes it the next day). Jesus said, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again!" Verse 14 tells us that the disciples heard this, which sets them and us up for the sequel to the story the next day.

You see the temple cleansing becomes a sort of intermission for the story of the withered fig tree. Jesus then enters Jerusalem, cleanses the temple, exits Jerusalem and ends back up at Bethany. Since they left the city at evening, it was probably too dark to see the tree when they left Jerusalem. But the next day when they are heading back into Jerusalem, they all saw the fig tree. Withered! Dried up from the roots! Just yesterday it was full of leaves, nice and healthy looking, and now it's completely dead. Peter obviously makes the connection. He sees this

as a miracle! He's amazed! "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered away!" Jesus had miraculously cursed the tree to its death.

This is an interesting event. Why would Jesus curse a tree like this? What's probably caused the most discussion is verse 13. Verse 13 says that "he found nothing but leaves, *for it was not the season for figs.*" Why would Jesus curse this tree if it wasn't even the season for figs? Could the tree be blamed for not having fruit when it's not the right season? Shouldn't Jesus have known it wasn't the season for figs? Why would he have even looked on the tree in the first place?

Well, that's actually the key. Mark gives us a very important insight by telling us that it wasn't the season for figs. Mark's giving us a clue about what's going on. The fact that it wasn't the season for figs isn't so much an explanation about the tree as an explanation about Jesus. It's giving us a clue to what Jesus is doing here. You see, Jesus is teaching a lesson here. Jesus isn't crazy. He knew that it wasn't the season for figs. He made this big scene with the fig tree to teach a lesson. He walked up to this tree, knowing well that there wouldn't be any figs on it. Jesus was giving a visual lesson. Remember, Jesus often taught in parables. Here Jesus basically acts out a parable. He acts out a parable, and like parables, there is a message being taught.

This isn't anything new either. Jesus wouldn't have been the first prophet to act out a parable. Several of the prophets of old did this. For example, God had the prophet Isaiah walk barefoot and naked as a sign of judgment against the Egyptians and Ethiopians (Is 20). The Lord said that just as Isaiah walked barefoot and naked, so the Egyptians and the Ethiopians would be led away barefoot and naked as prisoners by the Assyrians. God had the prophet Ezekiel take a brick and write Jerusalem's name on it, and then set up a mock siege around that brick (Ez 4). The Lord said this was like the judgment that was coming upon Jerusalem. God had the prophet Jeremiah wear a loincloth for a time, and then take it off and hide it. Then God had Jeremiah come back and find the loincloth, and when he found it, he found that it was spoiled. The Lord said that he was going to spoil Israel like that loincloth, because the people had hid themselves from God like the loincloth.

And so Jesus was acting out a parable, much like the prophets of old. This is called "prophetic realism." So what was the lesson then of this acted out parable? What was Jesus teaching here? Well, he too was illustrating judgment that was coming upon Israel. If you look in the Old Testament, you'll find a number of references to Israel being like a fig tree. You also find references to Israel being fruitless. Sometimes this same message is made with a fruitless grape vine, instead of a fig tree, but it's the same message.

One Old Testament reference that may be behind this passage is Micah 7. There the prophet laments that the situation at his time is like when the summer fruit has already been harvested, and there is nothing left. Micah longs for the fresh grapes and the first ripe figs of the season. But there is no fruit for Micah - *it's not the right season.* And Micah sees that as like the situation of Israel - fruitless. Micah says that the godly have perished from the earth and that everyone is out to get each other.

It seems Jesus is making the same point here. It'd be hard to see this withered fig tree in any other light. Israel is again likened to a fig tree out of season - fruitless. The result is cursing and judgment. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is a warning of imminent judgment to Israel.

And don't miss the fact that this was a miracle. Yes, it was a parable, but it was also a miracle! Peter's surprise should tell you that. The fact that the fig tree

was so green and leafy one day and completely withered and dead the next day should tell you that. But this is a different kind of miracle. This is a miracle of destruction. Jesus' miracle was not a positive thing but a negative thing. If you count the exorcisms, this was Jesus' 18th and last miracle in the book of Mark. The only other miracle left in Mark is the resurrection, which clearly stands on its own. But the first 17 miracles were all very positive. They were symbolic of Jesus' ministry of blessings and grace. When Jesus healed the leper, he proclaimed his power to remove uncleanness. When he cast out demons, he proclaimed his power over Satan. When he gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, he proclaimed his power over spiritual dullness. When he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, he proclaimed power over death. These miracles were all earthly signs of Jesus' eternal blessings that he is bringing. Jesus ministry is to bring us to a place where our bodies don't break down, where Satan is fully conquered, where death is destroyed. The first 17 miracles in Mark showed that. They were a sign of Christ's blessings and grace.

But look at this miracle. This miracle was a sign of Jesus' curses and judgment. Jesus cursed the tree and it miraculously died. This 18th miracle pictured something different. It did not picture Jesus' blessings and grace. It pictured his curses and judgment. Again, Jesus came teaching both. Of course the fact that there were 17 positive miracles reported and only 1 negative miracle, shows you Jesus' overall emphasis. But he did come to teach both. The other side of the coin of blessings and grace is curses and judgment.

And so what Jesus illustrated with the fig tree is then seen in reality with the temple - at least a partial foretaste. When Jesus cleansed the temple, he was issuing judgment to Israel. He was warning of the very judgment that he was illustrating with the fig tree. Fruitless Israel was being threatened with judgment.

Just look at the situation of the temple. This is descriptive of the state of Israel. Jesus says in verse 17 that the temple had become a "den of thieves." Those words had been uttered before about the temple. The prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 7 said that Israel had made the temple into a den of thieves. Interestingly, at the time, Jeremiah describes the people as putting their trust in the temple. They thought that would protect them from the attacks of the enemy nations. They exclaimed, "The temple of God, the temple of God" (Jer 7:3). The logic was that God dwelt in the temple, it was his house, so surely he would protect it. They thought they could trust in that, and then just live anyway they wanted. They stayed close to the temple, but didn't truly honor God. They were spiritually thieves and bandits, just hiding out in God's temple. But Jeremiah said that the people believed in a lie. He said that God would not spare the temple even in bringing judgment to that place. Jeremiah said God would only spare the people from judgment if they repented and bore the fruit of godliness.

Well the same sort of thing was happening again with the people here in Mark. There again was a sort of external security found in the temple. Just think about what Jesus cleansed. He threw out the money changes and the people selling doves. These people were facilitating the external worship of God. The law required the temple tax to be paid with the shekel of the sanctuary, so the money changers were there to help. The doves being sold were the typical sacrifice for the poor. And so these sellers were facilitating the external worship of God. But Jesus threw them out.

But notice he also threw out the buyers as well - verse 15. Often the sellers get the bad rap here. They are seen as the ones referred to as the den of thieves, but the original Jeremiah passage uses that term very loosely to refer to Israel's

overall sinfulness. The buyers too are culpable in this. It would have been much more convenient to take care of getting your sacrifice and changing your money right at the temple.

So here we have Jesus judging both the buyers and the sellers. Obviously this whole practice meant that there was big business to be made around supporting the worship of God. It meant that people were actively coming to worship God. The people were keeping the external of the law. They put a lot of trust in the temple and the temple practices. But their actions here show that they missed the underlying spiritual value of the temple. They missed the point. They ended up perverting the temple itself. And so Jesus cleansed the temple. He wouldn't even let anyone bring anything through the temple - people were probably using the temple courts as a short cut when moving various things. But Jesus stopped that as well. All of this was certainly a rebuke against the buyers and sellers. But the reaction of the religious leaders in verse 18 shows that they especially saw Jesus' actions as a rebuke and judgment against them.

And so Jesus declares in verse 17 that the temple was supposed to be a house of prayer! The people needed to look beyond the physical structure and the external keeping of the law, and look at the heart of the matter. The temple was God's specially chosen place where he promised to draw near to the people. It was a holy place. By turning the temple into a swap meet or a short cut, they had made their worship about convenience. Whatever made it easiest to keep the externals of God's law was their first priority. But when worship of God becomes about convenience, then that typically means there is a heart problem. It's not that God wants worship to be inconvenient, but if you are willing to do away with holiness in light of convenience, then you have gotten off track. This was a judgment against Israel for being more concerned with outward religiosity than in having a genuine love for God that looked to bear godly fruit.

The judgment against Israel becomes even more pointed when you read the full quote of Jesus in verse 17. Jesus is quoting the prophet Isaiah and says that the temple was to be a "house of prayer for all the nations." "For all the nations." The context from this quote from Isaiah really is about the Gentile nations. Isaiah is talking about how God will not turn away those Gentiles who earnestly seek God at his temple. The temple was to be a house of prayer for all the nations. And yet, sadly, the place where the Jews had setup all the buying and selling at the temple was in the Court of the Gentiles. The Court of the Gentiles was the outermost court, and it was the only part of the temple that the Gentiles were allowed to enter. And so the earnest Gentiles who might come seeking the Lord at his temple would be confronted with a very bad setting to worship and pray. It would not have been very quiet with all the trading going on. It would have been full of distractions if people were using the court as a shortcut for moving items. Besides the fact that the Jews perverted this holy place with all these common activities, it would had just been very distracting to any Gentile that had come to actually pray to God.

Surely this was part of the judgment against Israel as well. At that time, the Jews had become very prideful as an ethnic people. They despised the Gentiles. And yet God had always intended for his blessings to go to the nations. Israel was to be a vehicle for that. Instead, they took pride in themselves and in their ethnic heritage. They took pride in the outward acts of religion. But their real fruit of godliness was missing. They replaced holiness with convenience. They replaced godliness with ritualism. They replaced humility with pride. They should have had humility for God's blessings, but instead just took them for granted.

And so with the cleansing of the temple, Jesus was making a statement. What was pictured with the fig tree was the problem with Israel. The judgment illustrated with the fig tree was a picture of the judgment announced at this cleansing of the temple. Israel was only concerned with outward externals, and they didn't even keep that properly - desecrating the holiness of the temple. How would Israel respond? Would this spark repentance and reform, or lead to a more decisive judgment?

Well as history shows us, Jerusalem would face judgment in 70 AD. In 70 AD, Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Romans, and the temple along with it. Elsewhere Jesus explicitly predicts the judgment that would destroy the temple. But I believe this passage also predicts that judgment as well. We've already seen the withered fig tree as an illustration of judgment. We've seen the temple cleansing as an issuance of judgment against Israel. But Jesus solemn statement in verse 23 also looks forward to judgment against Israel and the destruction of the temple. In verse 23, Jesus says, "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says." Now certainly this verse is a call for faith in prayer. But it also is a profound sign of the times. Jesus says "*this* mountain." Jesus isn't talking about faith that can cast any mountain into the sea, he's talking about faith that can cast "*this*" mountain into the sea. He's talking about a specific mountain.

Well which mountain was he talking about? Well there are basically two options. Remember they are on the road between Bethany and Jerusalem. Bethany is on the Mount of Olives. That is one option. Jerusalem lies on top of a mountain too, usually referred to as Mount Zion. That's the other option. Which one do you think he was referring to? Well commentators don't all agree. Actually either option is rather provocative. If it was the Mount of Olives that he's referring to, Jesus might have in mind a prophecy from Zechariah 14 which predicted the splitting of that mountain at the end of history, right when final judgment would come. So if it referred to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus is surely still talking about judgment.

But I personally think Jesus was referring to the temple mount, to Mount Zion, where the temple was. Just think of the context. Jesus talks about "*this* mountain" as an answer to Peter's surprise about the withering of the fig tree. The withering of fig tree is divided into two different passages that surround the passage about the cleansing of the temple. That ties the withering of the fig tree event together with the cleansing of the temple. These events are intended in Mark to be read together - Mark is connecting them for us. Both the withering of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple are talking about the same thing -- judgment against Israel. And then at the end of the passage he talks about removing "*this* mountain". The focus has been on Mount Zion. Why would it change now? In fact, Jesus had just said that the temple was supposed to be a house of prayer, now he turns to talk about how to have powerful prayer. Not prayer that can move mountains, but prayer that can move "*this* mountain." Nothing in this passage really suggests the Mount of Olives. The focus has been on the temple mount, on Mount Zion.

So if Jesus is referring to the temple mount, then think about the significance! This would have been shocking for Jesus to say. Imagine if you were a Roman Catholic and the Pope said to you, if you have enough faith, you can pray, cast the Vatican into the Mediterranean, and it will be done. Wouldn't that be shocking? What would that say about the Vatican which they place so much value on?

Well isn't that the problem with the Israelites? They had placed their faith in the externals. They had placed their hope in the temple. They, like the Jews during Jeremiah's time were proclaiming, "The temple of God, the temple of God." That is where their faith was. But listen to Jesus exhortation in verse 22, "Have faith in God." Not in the temple. Not in your ethnic heritage. Not in the outward rituals of the law. Not in ceremonial cleanness. Not in convenience. "Have faith in God."

The Jews needed reformation. They needed to repent and change their focus. God's judgment was imminently upon them. You see, if the people really realized what the temple represented, they would realize that their God was bigger than the temple. Even King Solomon when he built the first temple recognized that God could not be contained in the temple. The people should have looked beyond the temple. They should have realized what it stood for - God drawing near to man. That was the purpose for which it stood. And in light of the coming of Jesus, that meant we needed to readdress the purpose of the temple. You see, with the coming of Jesus, God had drew near to man in way never done before. He drew near to man in a way far greater than he did through the earthly temple. Jesus was the true temple of God, because he himself was God in the flesh.

With the coming of Jesus, the earthly temple was no longer in season. It represented the old covenant. Now with the coming of Jesus, that temple could be cast into the sea. And it would be, figuratively speaking. It would be soon destroyed by the Romans. It would be destroyed as an act of judgment. Because the people had put their trust in the externals of that earthly temple. That was bad. That alone is worthy of judgment. But even worse, when the true temple had come, Jesus Christ, they missed it. They refused to believe in Jesus. And that was a judgment with even worse consequences.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Christ came in this passage declaring judgment and curses. You see, Jesus does confront us with the threat of judgment. If we think we are Christian, but aren't really walking with the Lord, he confronts us with the threat of judgment. If we think we follow Christ, but are really following someone or something else, God confronts us with judgment.

How should we respond to threatened judgment? We should respond with repentance and faith. Remember Ninevah. God sent Jonah to proclaim imminent judgment on them, but the people repented and God spared them. Interestingly God used a withered plant there to teach Jonah about God's grace and compassion. You see God's blessings and grace is the other side of the coin to God's curses and judgment. If Christ brings a message of judgment to us, it's so that he can draw us to his grace. Just look at Mark. Seventeen miracles in a row that show Christ's compassion. Then this one miracle to warn us of judgment. He warns us of judgment so that we can repent! So that we stop having faith in the wrong things and place our faith in God. So that we can start bearing fruit of obedience and faith. So that we bear fruit that is in keeping with repentance.

Christ's threat of judgment can be one of two things to us. It can bring actual judgment upon us if we ignore this message and continue on in our sin and rebellion. Or it can bring cleansing and reform. You see, if we repent when judgment is threatened, then Christ's message brings to us not judgment, but reformation! Christ's message of judgment brings us to the cross. On the cross, Jesus was judged for us. He bore our punishment and judgment on the cross. On the cross, he suffered worse than any withered fig tree. He took the punishment so that we would not have to face judgment, but instead could taste of reform in our lives. He wants us to follow him, to bear fruit, to taste of blessing instead of cursing.

We might be tempted to think this threat of judgment is only for those outside the visible church. In one sense this is true, in the sense that true Christians no longer face any judgment or condemnation, because Christ paid that for them on the cross. But not everyone in the visible church is really a Christian. Some have not yet really tasted of a saving faith. To them, the threat of judgment is real. See, don't miss the fact that this message of judgment came to the visible church here in our passage. It came to Israel, God's chosen nation. It's a judgment that was executed in part on 70 AD. God calls to his visible church to hold fast to Christ in faith and repentance, or threatens to remove the lampstand from our church. Just read the letters to the church in Revelation to be reminded of that.

The Lord has brought us a very fitting passage for today, hasn't he? You see this evening is the Reformation Rally. Sometimes the church can go astray. Sometimes individual believers can go astray. And yet at the Rally this evening we will celebrate God's reforming hand in our church. It is that hand which preserved the biblical faith during the Protestant Reformation, and it is that hand which is continuing to purify his people. He is continuing to make his church more and more faithful to his Word. I believe that is the message we should take away from this passage. We are reminded today that we need to be ever reforming. This doesn't mean we are becoming something new or different. It means that we are ever looking for Jesus to cleanse us, to bring us into a more and more pure expression of his church. That means that we become more and more sanctified in our obedience to God's laws. That means that we worship God more and more in the ways he has commanded us. It means we teach and preach his Word more and more in truth and not in error. It means we become as a church a more faithful representative of Christ.

And so saints of God, let's seek Christ's reform that brings fruit. Surely Jesus wants to bring this in our life. That's why he cleansed the temple. That's why he rebuked the fig tree. That's why he has you in the pew today. Be encouraged. If there is to be cleansing and reform in each of our lives and in our church, it will be through the same Christ who cleansed his temple. Let us seek his cleansing reform. Let us have faith in him. And let us be sensitive to his call to repent when it comes in our lives. To him be the glory, great things he has done... and continues to do! Amen.

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