

NOTHING BUT LEAVES

Mark 11:12-26

As we come to the Gospel of Mark this morning, we find ourselves in a text that is going to reinspire and remotivate our vision as a church to have “deep roots” and to “bear fruit”. That’s what this passage is all about! We want deep roots in the Word of God. We want to know truth, what we believe and why. However, we don’t just want to know it. At the end of the service today, we don’t just want to say “amen” and everybody goes home with more knowledge. The endgame is not just learning truth is it? It’s applying the truth and bearing it’s fruit. Truth is required but truth is to bring forth fruit! Today we’re going to see just how critical our vision is because Jesus is serious about finding fruit to enjoy in our lives and in our church. He wants to bear fruit through us to bless others and glorify Him.

“On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing from a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” And His disciples were listening.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple area and began to drive out those who were selling and buying on the temple grounds, and He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple grounds. And He began to teach and say to them, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” And the chief priests and the scribes heard this, and they began seeking how to put Him to death; for they were afraid of Him, because all the crowd was astonished at His teaching.

And whenever evening came, they would leave the city. As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. And being reminded, Peter said to Him, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree that You cursed has withered.” And Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted to him. Therefore, I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted to you. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you for your offenses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your offenses.”

So as we come back to Mark this morning we pick it up the next day, the morning after what is traditionally called the Triumphal Entry or Royal Entry that we studied last Sunday. We’re in the last week of Jesus’ life, traditionally called Passion week. For the next few days of His life, He’s going to be in and out of the Temple, proving Himself to be the Messiah and it’s all going to further accelerate the actions of His enemies to bring about what God’s hand has predestined to occur – which is His crucifixion.

I. MARK’S STYLE OF WRITING.

But before we jump into the text I have to remind you of Mark’s writing style because today I think we have one of the clearest examples of his writing style. None of the gospels are just random collections of events from Jesus’ life. The authors have a purpose or what we call an authorial

intent. They're writing with intentions. Mark is writing from Peter's perspective of Jesus to Roman Christians suffering persecution and that is evident throughout this gospel.

And I've mentioned last week Mark, I'll remind us, **is like a sandwich artist**. He doesn't draw sandwiches (that's weird to think about) but he makes them. As a joke I tell you he could work at Subway – that's what they call their employees (not fast-food workers but sandwich artists). What Mark will often do as he's writing, inspired by the Holy Spirit of course, is present various historical accounts in the form of **a literary sandwich** made up of one slice of bread, then the meat, then the other slice of bread. Last week the healing of the blind man was the meat in the middle that served as the interpretive guide to the two sets of blind people around it (which served as the slices). The middle part, the meat, reveals what's going on in the bread parts.

It's similar today. If you want to understand the curse on the fig tree, you've got to go to the meat for it to be interpreted. The cursing of the fig tree (the first slice) is explained by the meat of sandwich (the temple cleansing). In it's simplest form, it's an a-b-a chiastic structure.

- A. Jesus curses the fruitless fig tree.
- B. Jesus rebukes the fruitless chief priests and scribes.
- A. The disciples notice the withered fig tree.ⁱ

If you've been coming to the Sunday school in Daniel, this is not new to you. Larry has been showing this in the chapter divisions of Daniel. The entire chapter structure is chiastic. Chiasms are a literary device and technique used to teach and help memorize. Verses 27-33 are part of a more detailed chiastic structure of this passage, we'll leave those for next week. I do point this out though because to understand the cursed tree, you have to understand the structure. You may think it's a little deep but here's why this is important:

❖ **Proper application rests on accurate interpretation.**

So it's critical. Every time I preach, I'm basically teaching us how to interpret and apply. You're learning how to approach and handle the Bible. It's like a homiletics class every Sunday.

II. **JESUS CURSES THE FRUITLESS FIG TREE. (VV. 12-14)**

In verse 12 Jesus leaves Bethany which is where He stayed the night (v.11), in the Mt. of Olives area from where He rode in on the donkey and healed Lazarus. This was the village of Mary and Martha and He would spend time at their house (Jn. 11:1; 12:1). And as they are walking back to the temple, Jesus is hungry and sees a fig tree in leaf. Fig trees are very common in Israel. I remember my first fig tree experience in Cordoba, Argentina staying at an Airbnb. The host at the place we stayed was picking figs off the tree in the backyard for breakfast and this passage always reminds me of that. Jesus is looking for some fruit from this fig tree but finds none.

One of the confusing things for people is that even though Jesus is looking for something on this tree, Mark says in verse 13, "for it was not the season for figs." What's up with that? Well, some think even though it's not the season for figs, there should be by this time appearing even before the leaves, these little nutty, **edible knobs or nodules called paggim, or green figs.**ⁱⁱ In Arabic, they're called *taqsh*. There's **nothing but leaves** on this tree. So the tree is *professing* to be something is really doesn't have. It's a professing fruit tree but there's no fruit to enjoy so you could say it's not possessing tree. The result, Jesus curses it.

Now this shocks a lot of us. Is Jesus just having a bad hair day? Did He wake up on the wrong side of the bed? Is He short-tempered? Is this inconsistent with His character? No. Why? Because Jesus is performing **a prophetic act** that is symbolic of what takes place in the meat of the passage. It's symbolic of **Israel's status before God**. Year after year He has come looking for spiritual fruit in Israel – the fruit of righteousness and blessings to the nations – but **He can't find any fruit to enjoy**. Israel professed to know God and bear fruit for God, you'll remember from 7:6, but their hearts were far from Him. There was no true spiritual fruit to be enjoyed.

Maybe Jesus had Micah 7:1 in mind, “Woe is me! For I am like the fruit pickers, like the grape gatherers. There is not a cluster of grapes to eat, or a first-ripe fig which I crave. The godly person has perished from the land, and there is no upright person among men... the best of them is like a briar, the most upright like a thorn hedge.” So this is not just Jesus getting hangry. **It's a prophetic warning sign of God's judgment coming upon Israel who is a fruitless nation for God.**

❖ **Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is a symbolic of judgment on fruitless Israel.**

What Jesus does may seem like a shock to many who think Jesus was this soft spoken, never offensive, gentle, effeminate teacher. But what Jesus does is consistent with God's character. If He gives us time and time again to repent and turn back to Him but we refuse to bend, there comes a time when all He can do is bring judgment. That's what a good and just God must do.

Throughout the OT, Israel has been likened to a fig tree (Hos. 9:10; Nah. 3:12) and God keeps coming to them (Jer. 8:13) looking for fruit but finding nothing. And the reality is that He has given Israel a long time to repent and receive Him as their Messiah but she refused (just like Jezebel in Rev. 2:20-23). John told the Pharisees 3 years ago that the axe was at the root of the tree and in danger of being cut down (Matt. 3:10) but they wouldn't heed his message to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

In Luke 13 Jesus told a parable: *“A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, ‘Behold for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground? And he answered and said to him, “Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.”* Well, here we are after Jesus has been digging and fertilizing – still nothing. And they end up cursed after rejecting the gospel. According to Romans 11 we know it's not forever. He will restore the fortune of Israel. He still saves a remnant among the Jews today. But this is very revealing of God's character. And in a sense, we have to sound the alarm a little bit this morning and say that we'd **pay attention to our fruit bearing**. For us not to bear fruit is sin (Jn. 15:1-11) and maybe even evidence that we don't really know God at all (Matt. 7:15-20).

Despite every spiritual blessing and advantage (the adoption, the glory, the law, the temple service, the covenants, the promise, the Messiah – Rom. 9:4-5), Israel failed to produce fruit.ⁱⁱⁱ Just like Samson... he could've been a world-changer but he wasted the gifts of God given to him.

But now think: **we're in that privileged position as the Church** – having been grafted into the commonwealth of Israel and made partakers of the promise (Eph. 2). God has given all of us opportunities and resources and talents and spiritual gifts and the Word of God and the treasure of the gospel – in Christ He has adopted us and dumped all the spiritual riches in the heavenly places

on our heads (Eph. 1)! And we've got to ask the question, "What are we doing with it all? Are we bearing fruit?"

❖ **In Christ, He has equipped and empowered us to be fruitful!**

He doesn't bless us with all of this so that we can sit back and just enjoy our salvation but so that we will take advantage of it and walk in the good works He has prepared for us (Eph. 2:8-10). Salvation is not the endgame. We are saved so that we will join in on His great redemption story and bear fruit of redemption (Eph. 2:8-10). Not saved by good works but unto good works. Fruit bearing glorifies God.

John 15:8

"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples."

You know, God chose to bless Abraham so that he might be **a blessing to the nations** (Gen. 12:1-3). And that's what Israel forgot (Jonah being a prime example in that he didn't want the Ninevites to be saved) and this is one of the main reasons why Jesus comes and clean house. But notice what part of the house (the temple) He cleans: The Gentile Court. Gentiles being non-Jewish.

III. JESUS CLEANSSES THE COURT OF THE GENTILES. (VV. 15-18)

You had in the temple area this high-wall partition wall that separated the large gentile court from the interior temple precincts. And this gentile area was thought to have little sacred significance. But this is the area that Jesus comes into and starts driving out all the moneychangers and buyer and sellers. He starts overturning the tables and refusing to let people carry merchandise through it like it's some type of shortcut (see that in v. 16). This was, by the way, the 2nd time He's done this. He did this at the beginning of His ministry as well (Jn. 2:13-22).

But why? Because Jesus thought it was incredibly sacred. He wanted a place where gentiles could come and worship Him. Don't think that went unnoticed to Mark's Gentile original audience! **He wanted to make a way for Gentiles to worship Him.** He wanted God's house to be a house of prayer for **the nations**. But many of the religious leaders, if anything, despised their gentile visitors. Some were hoping that when the Messiah came, He would cleanse God's house from the gentiles. No one could pray in the environment where they were supposed to be worshipping. How disappointing for those who had come on a long journey all the way to Jerusalem to learn about the God of Israel only to find they were taken advantage of through profiteering and not wanted there.

Now, exchanging money and currency for foreigners was a necessity. For some, it was necessary to have to buy an approved animal to sacrifice, but historians say they already had 4 markets for this out on the Mt. of Olives^{iv} and there was some sort of competition going on and they were selling them for a marked-up price and ripping people off with inflated exchange rates. It was a money-making scheme. Extortion. It had become a den of thieves and the **commercialism** of it all was ruining the opportunity for worship. God hates when things that were meant to be a blessing become ruined through commercialism.

And I think that's why this tree withers from the roots up – I think it's symbolic of the spiritual looking but spiritually dead religious leaders who corrupted the rest of the nation and prevented others from coming to know God through their love of power and money and not their love of God and people. The whole reason God gave them the temple and His Word and whatever else is because He wanted them to share the blessings with others. Instead, they had become apostate.

This temple area was magnificent. It was 500 yards long, over 300 wide. Made of white, polished marble. Cedar ceilings. Gold. Portico columns 3 stories tall and so big it took two men's reach to wrap around these things. The men were decked out in fancy robes. It all looked really spiritual. But God knew their hearts. There was no righteous fruit to enjoy. Like Jude's description of false teachers, they were, "autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted." It don't get deader than that. We need to remember God cares more about the heart than the exteriors. That's why He allowed the temple to be destroyed in 70 A.D. and we worship in spirit and in truth.

And remember, it's our turn to be in the privileged position – to bless and be a blessing.

❖ **The Church is to be a fruitful blessing to the nations.**

Is that us? Is that us, Chadron Berean? Are we a blessing our neighbors? The nations? We should be because judgment begins with the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17) and we're being examined for fruit right now (Rev. 2-3). And one day we're going to stand before him and give an answer for how we stewarded all the blesses He has entrusted us with. You remember the parable of the Talents? It didn't matter how much they'd been entrusted with or if they received different amounts of talents. What mattered was that they used the talents and didn't bury them (Matt. 25:14-30).

Even though these leaders (roots) failed, one day Jesus, **the Root of Jesse** is going to come and He is going to reward everyone who has stewarded His Word and Gospel and spiritual gifts and talents and resources well. And He will once again cleanse on a global scale and set up His kingdom and those who were faithful will serve Him in it and for eternity (Rev. 20:4-5; 22:3). This is a glimpse of the judgment coming on a global level when He returns.

After Jesus cleansed the temple, Jesus did some teaching and the people were amazed according to verse 18. But the chief priests and scribes were seeking to assassinate Him because it says, "they were afraid of Him." They were afraid of the people who admired Him and are probably more afraid that He would continue to expose their hypocrisy and take away their positions.

When evening came, Jesus and the disciples left the city and as they were coming back in the next morning, verse 20 says, Peter noticed the tree and said, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered." It withered overnight and from the roots up. There's something about the way it withered that you could tell the roots were deader than the top. And rather than using this to explain the symbolic significance of it, **Jesus decides to focus on the means by which the miracle happened** because it's the means by which we're going to bear fruit.

IV. JESUS TEACHES THE DISCIPLES A LESSON ON HOW TO BEAR FRUIT. (VV. 19-26)

Jesus says, "Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him." What's Jesus saying? Well, I'll just save us a lot of time at this point and say you cannot bear fruit on your own. What Jesus did He did by faith in the Father, trusting in the all-powerful Father. He was always depending on the Father. It's the same with us. We cannot bear fruit and move "spiritual mountains" on our own. You just can't do it. Even if you want to do it on your own, you can't. It's impossible. You have to have a confident, trust relationship with the One who can do anything.

❖ **Fruit-bearing is only possible by trusting in His power to work through you.**

We don't have the ability to bear fruit. We need divine help. In fact, until you trust in Christ you can't even begin to bear fruit for God (Rom. 7:4).

Not long ago you might remember I showed you how through prayer, which expresses our dependence on God, we open the valve that releases God's infinite power reserves. Well, so it is through a relationship with God that we will tap into that power. But you have to ask for it and always be depending on Him because apart from Him we can do no thing (Jn. 15:5).

But what will hinder those power reserves from getting to us and clog up the pipe is when we are out of step with God, when we sin and don't confess it and repent of it. When we don't walk by the Spirit and harbor little grudges or nurture an unforgiving spirit, we clog up the pipes and our communion-fellowship with God.

❖ **Disharmony with others will hinder our fruit-bearing because it hinders our prayers.** We need to make sure that when we come to serve God and bear fruit, we've done everything we can to make things right with others we've wronged. Leave our sacrifices at the altar and go address the situation with our brother if there's an offense. Jesus taught this elsewhere as well (Matt. 5:23-24; 6:9-15; Luke 11:2-4) and Peter. 1 Peter 3:7 says, "You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered." That's a great text for us to know on Valentine's Day, huh?

If you want to be fruitful, you've got to trust God, rely on His divine help through you, and you've got to walk the walk. Be humble. Be forgiving. Not nurturing unforgiveness.

To wrap all this up, let's just ask this question:

***"If Jesus came and examined our church and our lives, would He find fruit to enjoy?
Does He find fruit to enjoy in our church and in our lives?"***

That's His desire. He wants us to be fruitful – to **flourish**. You might hear me use that word a lot this year because not every year, but some years, I choose a word that I want to define my year rather than a New Year's Resolution. And from the beginning, God's desire was for His creation to flourish and be fruitful.

All you have to do to see this is to go back to the **creation mandates**. When God blessed in the days of creation it was His imparting to the creation – the plants and animals and man & woman – the ability to do that. **He equipped and empowered everything to be creative agents** who will reproduce after their kind. He created the plants with seeds in them. The animals God blessed, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." In Genesis 1:28, God said to man, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

This is God's nature. He creates, equipping His creations and empowering them, blessing them so they flourish. But we have an enemy who wants the exact opposite. He comes to steal, kill and destroy (Jn. 10:10). To take power. To take life. So it there's a battle between life or death and fruit or fruitless. And these final thoughts, a lot comes from The Engagement Project study we're starting tonight... but when you go back to God's original design, you see the ways **God desires fruit. In three ways we'll see it:**

1. Physically

God says multiply physically. Fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). Through our marriages He is seeking godly offspring, fruit of the womb. What do think the enemy wants? Not godly marriage. Abortion. Gender confusion. Homosexuality. Satan wants to keep people from the joy of having a family done God's way.

2. Vocationally

God created vegetation on day 3 in chapter 1 but when you get to chapter 2:5 you see He hadn't created plants of the field, maybe like wheat and corn – but why? “For there was no man to cultivate the ground.” It required a man to cultivate it. God created Adam to work by tending the garden, cultivating it and to keep the good fruit reproducing.

As much as we would like to think working is a curse that came after the fall, it's actually a blessing God gave to Adam *before the fall*. Yes, work is now by the sweat of our brow (Gen. 3:17-18) but it's still good. Work gives a sense of accomplishment and purpose and reward and when done for God, it's worship! Colossians 3:17 says whatever we work at, we are to work at it for the Lord!

Psalm 128:2

“How blessed is everyone who fears the Lord and walks in His ways, when you shall eat of **the fruit of your hands**, you will be happy and it will be well with you. Your wife shall be like a **fruitful vine** within your house, and your children like olive plants around your table. Behold for this shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.”

Isn't that great? How rewarding to work hard with your hands and take in the fruit of it. That's why many of us love gardening. It's more than the flavor, it's the reward of hard work cultivating it.

But what do you suppose the enemy would be after? To keep us from working hard for the Lord. To even keep us from working, period! I think he'd be all for making us dependent on welfare programs and putting in place universal income policies. He'd love a steady flow of stay-at-home stimulus checks. Welfare is so damaging to people. I deal with it all the time. It makes people thankless and entitled and manipulative. They lack the joy of hard work and rewards and suffer because well, it's sin. The Apostle Paul said that if a man doesn't work, he doesn't eat and we aren't to associate with him if he's a professed believer (2 Thess. 3:6-14). Biblical justice and compassion according to Paul is actually to deprive people of bread who refuse to work so that they learn to enjoy the fruit of their hands.^{vi} That's compassion. We want to help those who have real needs, but not support the lazy, negligent and greedy busy bodies. If we don't work, the Bible says we're worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:7).

Christians ought to work heartily for the Lord, shunning mediocrity and pursuing excellence. We ought to be the most creative workers in the world. If you're a baker, you make the best cupcakes. If you're a farmer, you aim to grow the best crops and make the most of the land. If you raise cattle, they're the Lord's cattle. If you rear children, you rear them in the Lord. If you're a cleaner, you clean like no one else. If you're a shoemaker, you make the best shoes. We could go on and on.

3. Ministerially/Spiritually

As believers, we're all ministers. Not just the men behind pulpits. The entire job of a pastor according to Ephesians is to make sure you guys know that God has empowered you to go and make disciples. That's the **Great Commission Mandate** (Matt. 28:18-20). God has empowered, through the Spirit, each of us with spiritual gifts. We have talents and resources and gifts to build the body of Christ with and a gospel to share with those around us. We have God's Word to share, the “word of life” (Philippians 2:16). We share with others **through relationships** we build with them.

But what would the enemy have? I think he'd rather keep us isolated. Keep us at home, doing church online only, not exercising our gifts or talents. To keep us from relationships and ministering to one another and to our neighbors.

Satan's goal: Fruitlessness. Death. Not-flourishing in any way.

God's desire: Fruitfulness. A zeal for flourishing life. Equipping and empowering His creations so that He can bear fruit through us.^{vii}

Lord, we know that You are a wonderful Creator God who seeks to empower and equip your creations to be fruitful, flourishing creations whom you can bless and use to be a blessing. And it's my prayer this morning that we would be life-giving fruitful people that prove to be Your disciples and glorify You. Proverbs 11:30 says, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life and he who is wise wins souls." Grant us wisdom to be wise soul winners, trees of life, who bring life and blessings to everyone around us and glorify you. May we bear much fruit as so prove to be your disciples.

ⁱ Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 2* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 298

ⁱⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective, Volume 3* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press), 1207.

^{iv} William Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, v. 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 403.

^v Constable's Notes, *Notes on Mark, 242*, accessed 11 February 2021, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/mark.pdf>

^{vi} John Benzinger, *Stand: Christianity vs. Social Justice, Part 1* sermon from Redeemer Bible Church, AZ, https://youtu.be/buJ3rVM8r_A

^{vii} Del Tackett, *The Engagement Project*.