

“The Temple and the Tree”
The Gospel According to Mark 11:12-24
September 2nd, 2018

Not everything is as it appears to be. Consider this true story as reported last month in *WORLD Magazine*, its August 18th, 2018 issue:

Officials with the Arizona Department of Public Safety say Matthew Disbro ran into trouble when he tried to pull over a car carrying two men on a state highway in Phoenix.

The problem: Disbro wasn't a police officer, and the two men he wanted to pull over were state troopers in an unmarked car. Police say when Disbro flipped on the police lights of his black Dodge Charger, the two troopers in a yellow Ford Mustang ran a check on the Charger's license plate.

Disbro reportedly drove alongside the Mustang and gestured to the undercover troopers to pull over. That's when the troopers turned on their own real police lights and pulled Disbro over. The fake cop was found with a fake uniform and charged with impersonating an officer!

Not everything is as it presents itself; this is true of people, as we've just seen. And it is true of things. We have two such things presented in the text of sacred Scripture before us today.

We're in the midst of the 11th chapter of the New Testament Book bearing Mark's name; a sermon series I've entitled, *Service and Sacrifice: HallMARKs of Christ*. We looked last Sunday morning at the first 11 verses of **March Chapter 11**, where we examined Jesus' triumphant arrival in the Holy City, Jerusalem. That kicked off Jesus' final week of earthly ministry, as he now ministered openly on the home turf of the unbelieving Israelite teachers of God's law.

In our text this morning, **Mark 11:12-24**, we see Jesus angered at two objects that presented themselves as one thing, but they were not at all what they appeared to be.

The Gospel According to Mark 11:12-24:

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."

²² So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ 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. ²⁴Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*.”

When we consider the verse immediately preceding today’s text, we’re told that Jesus’ first stop upon arriving at Jerusalem was to go to the Jewish temple. Verse 11 tells us what He did there. “...So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve.” The setting for today’s text is the next morning; we see Jesus and His disciples returning to Jerusalem from Bethany, some 2 miles away. And Jesus was hungry; looking for something to eat.

Our first point is found in verses 12-14, “The Tree Cursed.” From a distance, Jesus noticed a fig tree with luxurious leaves, and He goes to it in hopes of finding some figs on it to eat. So, we have a couple of indications of Jesus’ humanity in these verses. For one, He was hungry – Jesus experienced hunger because He was fully man. As such, He wasn’t exempt from human frailties. The other indication of Jesus’ humanity was that He went to the tree, looking to see if it had fruit. As God, He didn’t need to go look through the leaves; verse 13 reveals it wasn’t the season for figs. Jesus went to the tree for the purpose of making a point.

The Old Testament compares Israel with a fig tree. **Hosea 9:10** - “I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstfruits on the fig tree in its first season.” The Scriptures picture the destruction of the fig tree associated with God’s judgment. Consider, for example:

- **Isaiah 34:4** – “All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; all their host shall fall down as the leaf falls from the vine, and as *fruit* falling from a fig tree.”

- **Hosea 2:12** – God speaking here of Israel - “And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees, of which she has said, ‘These *are* my wages that my lovers have given me.’ So I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall eat them.”

- **Luke 13:6-9** – “A certain *man* had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, ‘Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?’ ⁸But he answered and said to him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize *it*. ⁹And if it bears fruit, *well*. But if not, after that you can cut it down.’”

Jesus’ point? In cursing the tree, which promised what it didn’t deliver, so unfaithful Israel, the recipient of much benefit from God, would be cursed.

The fig tree promised much, but it provided nothing! Plenty of leaves but no fruit. Likewise, we may see bustling religious activity, but no sincerity and truth; tremendous promise, but poor performance. Jesus was predicting the downfall of unfruitful Israel. “Not that He was ‘through with the Jews,’ but that in the place of Israel an international and everlasting kingdom would be established, a nation bringing forth not just leaves but fruits, and gathered from both Jews and Gentiles.” (Hendriksen, 443)

The second point is found in verses 15-19, “The Temple Cleansed.” The market place all around the temple impeded access to it; there were even people passing *through the temple* as a shortcut to some other destination! *What?* There were sellers of wares in the outer court;

animals and birds sold that were set aside for a holy purpose (sacrifices on altars of the worship of God).

If Jesus was upset at the fig tree for not producing fruit, he was boiling hot over the misuse of the temple for worldly pursuits! Talk about hangry! He is jealous for His glory, and expects the holy things – His Word, His House, His People - be treated as such.

I think of King David ordering the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Those bringing the ark back to its proper home were warned not to even touch the ark. After all, it was holy – it represented the presence of God among His people. *Remember what happened to Uzzah when he touched the ark?* God struck Him dead! Of course, Uzzah was duly warned; yet, it all seemed so innocent. Oxen carrying the ark stumbled, and Uzzah reached out His hand to steady the falling ark. *Severe?* Hmmm. God’s holiness is supreme. God evidently detected presumption and irreverence in Uzzah’s heart.

Jesus was rightfully angry that the sacred place – the temple - was being used for a purely secular purpose. As the fig tree in leaf should have produced fruits, so the temple, the Jewish house of worship, should produce God-fearing men, women, and children who lived for God’s glory. The magnificence of the Temple and its ceremonies hid the fact that Israel had not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Jesus cleansed it to be rightly used for prayer.

Dear ones, when the practice of “religion” becomes nothing more than a means to what people are really interested in – such as convenience, social advancement, financial gain, and the like – there is nothing left of genuine devotion.

Jesus here elevates the importance of houses of worship; our context is Protestant Christianity. We realize that the building isn’t the real church; the people gathered in worship fellowship and service are. We should learn from Jesus’ cleansing of the temple that the sanctity of the building is important to Jesus. The sanctuary shouldn’t be a place for commerce, trading, or financial exchange, with the exception of the regular giving of our tithes and offerings, themselves acts of worship. The Church – people and building – exist for pointing others to Jesus – there’s an interesting side road if we consider the architecture of church buildings on how this is done, but that’s the substance of another message.

We’ve seen the **Tree Cursed** and the **Temple Cleansed**. We now see, thirdly, **in verses 20-24, “The Teaching Clarified.”** It seems pretty crazy to go from two illustrations of God’s judgment – the withered fig tree and the misused temple – to believing prayer. But, prayer is the means by which embrace the faith in God and His Word that is required to escape the coming judgment.

Jesus came to Jerusalem seeking spiritual fruit and true worship. He urges us to repent before it is too late. Similarly, He comes to us this very moment. *Is that what is most noticeable about your life and that of your Christian fellowship with others?*

“The point, which Mark draws us to again and again throughout the gospel, is the need for the risky commitment of faith.” (English, 189)

We shouldn't understand verse 24 to teach that if we pray hard enough and really believe, God is obligated to answer our prayer, no matter what we ask for. That is faith in faith, not faith in God. True faith in God is based on His Word and His Word reveals His will to us. It has been well said that the purpose of prayer is not to get man's will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth.

We've seen God created the Temple and the Tree for a specific purpose. And, even though they appeared to fulfill this purpose, in actuality, they were defiled, useless, and repugnant to a Holy God. They stood worthy of His holy judgment. *How might this text apply to us?*

Dear one – if you are a Christian, then you must think, speak, and act like one! Believers in Christ don't go prowling the streets looking for sinful flings or relationships; we make promises to our spouses and church that God expects us to keep! We exist for God's glory first and foremost, not for our entertainment.

The Lord's Supper which we're about to observe is one of the holy ordinances that God has given to His people. If you are living a lie – outwardly projecting a holy lifestyle, yet inwardly (or situationally) desecrating the love God has extended to you, you must get your stuff together.

The concluding illustration today is about a boy named James who entered the US Army as a hospital assistant and wound up as Inspector General of the Army Medical Department.

On July 5th, 1813, a scrawny 18 year old banged on a US Army registrar's door. His name was James Barry and he said he wanted to do hospital work. Within a year and a half, not yet 20 years old, James was promoted to assistant surgeon. Over the next 12 years, he rose to surgeon major, then deputy Inspector General, and finally, after a lifetime of devotion, James rose to Inspector General, the highest-ranking medical officer in the US Army.

Once described as “the most skillful of physicians and the most wayward of men,” this learned and fully competent doctor was also credited with an unusually quarrelsome temper. At least once, Dr. Barry fought a duel. Throughout his army career James was often guilty of breaches of discipline, often sent home under arrest.

Even so, James Barry was not a rowdy. Quite the opposite. It was noted that the style of his conversation was greatly superior to that usually heard at a mess table in those days. Before we judge Dr. Barry too harshly, it would be good for us to consider the day he passed away.

For this has been the ultimate success story. Yet Dr. Barry was not so much a success for what he *did*...as for what he *hid*!

James died in London on July 25th, 1865. That's when everyone discovered the secret he'd kept for over half a century... a secret not even barely suspected by his servant of many years.

When word got out, an official report was immediately sent ... that Dr. James Barry... the late Senior Inspector General of the Army Medical Department...the highest-ranking medical officer in the United States Army...was actually a woman!