

First Baptist Church Merritt Island
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Genuine Spiritual Power
Mark 11:12-33

Our text for this morning is one of the more difficult passages to study in the entire book of Mark. A famous atheist named Bertrand Russell wrote a book entitled, "Why I am Not a Christian." This passage was one of his examples of why he wouldn't believe in Jesus. Some atheists point to the behavior of Jesus here and say He was a hypocrite. Other atheists have pointed to what Jesus says about prayer as evidence that the bible isn't true. So, this is a passage that challenges us to think clearly and consistently. My prayer is that God will help us understand what we most need to understand and trust Him with anything that feels unclear.

So, let's jump into the next passage in our study of the Gospel of Mark...

Mark 11:12–14

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 13 And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. 14 And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

Jesus is walking into Jerusalem to begin His final week of ministry on earth. He's hungry and sees a fig tree full of leaves. So, He goes to see if there are any figs to eat. When He discovers there are no figs, He curses the tree.

Wait. Is Jesus taking out His frustration on a tree just because it wasn't the season for it to have fruit? That sounds like something we would do if we had God's power. If I rolled up on a Krispy Kreme when the Fresh Donut sign was flashing only to find out they didn't have any donuts, I'd shut them down in a heartbeat. But that doesn't sound like the perfect Son of God. So, what's going on here? There are a few things I think we need to consider to understand the point of what Jesus is doing.

First, Jesus is teaching His disciples an object lesson. Verse 14 explicitly states that Jesus spoke to the tree in a way all the disciples could hear. Jesus is teaching His followers a lesson. That means His encounter with the fig tree isn't really about the fig tree. When my kids were young, there were times when I acted like I was feeding baby dolls to encourage my kids to eat. I would act sad or disappointed when the baby doll didn't take a bite. Now, I didn't actually expect the doll to eat. I was using it as an object lesson. Jesus is doing a similar thing here. He isn't angry at the tree. He is using the tree as an object lesson.

Second, there are different stages of development for figs. In Jerusalem, mature figs mostly developed between the months of June to November. However, earlier in the year, those figs start as buds. So, by the time the tree is full of leaves, it should also be full of *immature* figs that aren't ripe for harvest but can still be eaten. However, the tree in our story is "nothing but leaves." Even though it was in full leaf, it was completely barren of fruit.

Also, there were many varieties of fig trees in Israel during the time of Christ. While most of them bore fruit during the same season, there were a few rare species that would produce mature fruit earlier than the regular fig season. And the way to tell whether or not a fig tree had figs was not so much the time of the year but by the condition of the leaves. And the tree in our story is full of leaves, indicating that there would be figs even though it wasn't fig season.

So, what's the point? The point is this tree is advertising fruit, but it's completely barren. It's all show and no substance. And, when a hungry person comes to be nourished, they walk away every bit as hungry as when they arrived. That's the lesson of the fig tree. Jesus is saying hypocrisy isn't acceptable. Jesus doesn't endorse it or ignore it. He opposes it. That's the object lesson.

And Jesus teaches His disciples that lesson because of what He's getting ready to do.

Mark 11:15–19

15 And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. 16 And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17 And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." 18 And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. 19 And when evening came they went out of the city.

Immediately after giving His disciples the object lesson about hypocrisy, Jesus goes into the temple and begins opposing the hypocrisy He finds there. He says the temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for all the nations, but they had turned it into a den of thieves. Let me give you just a bit of context here.

For a thousand years, the Temple at Jerusalem was the place on earth where God chose to manifest His presence most clearly and powerfully. It was the primary place of worship and sacrifice for God's people. And it wasn't intended to be an exclusive club for ethnic Jews. There was an open invitation to the people from any and every nation to be part of God's people.

So, when God gave the plan for the Temple, the largest part was a courtyard for the Gentiles. Here's an artist's rendering of the Temple at the time of Christ. The structure at the center is the Holy Place where God's presence was manifest most powerfully. The large courts on either side are the courtyards for the Gentiles.



So, God's plan was that people from all the nations would be able to worship Him at the Temple. But there was a practical challenge to that. When people would travel long distances to come to the temple, it was very difficult for them to bring their sacrifices with them. So, God made a provision for them to buy sacrifices once they got to Jerusalem.

However, by the time Jesus walks into the temple in our text, the courtyard for the Gentiles has turned into a type of flea market atmosphere where people were selling sacrifices at a marked-up price. They were also in the business of making people exchange their money for a specific currency accepted at the temple, all for an extravagant fee, of course. The court of the Gentiles had become such a crazy atmosphere that people had begun using it as a shortcut to get to parts of the city without having to walk around the massive temple compound.

So, the temple was corrupt with hypocrisy. From the outside, it looked like a thriving place of worship, filled with people and sacrifices and life. But inside, it was a place where selfishness and greed and personal convenience were more important than holiness and God's glory and serving people in need. Like the fig tree, it advertised spiritual fruit but was barren.

And what was the lesson of the fig tree? Hypocrisy isn't acceptable. Jesus doesn't endorse it or ignore it. He opposes it.

So, when Jesus shows up on this day, He has come to bring judgment. He isn't being impulsive or irrational. He's been traveling throughout Israel for 3 years, calling people to repent because the Kingdom of God was at hand. He taught in the Temple when He was 12 years old. He went from synagogue to synagogue, engaging the religious leaders with truths about His Kingdom. But the religious leaders rejected Jesus and oversaw a system of worship that was corrupt and fruitless.

And Jesus rejected it. He turned the tables over and threw people out. He confronted and condemned the whole charade. And this is where we need to kind of zoom out and get a bigger picture of what Jesus is doing here.

In two chapters, listen to what He says.

Mark 13:1-2

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" 2 "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

After Jesus rejects the hypocritical religion at the temple, He prophesies about the destruction of the temple. This prophecy was fulfilled in 70 AD when the Roman Emperor Titus leveled the temple in Jerusalem. But, even before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, there was another important event at the temple.

As Jesus was hanging on the cross, listen to what occurred at the temple.

Matthew 27:50-51

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. 51 And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

That curtain in the temple was at the entrance to the Most Holy Place, the place where God's presence was actually made manifest. It stood as a reminder that our sin separated us from God and would keep us from being able to enter His presence. But Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins so that we could be forgiven by God and have the privilege of entering His presence as His children. The reality is that the sacrifices at the temple were just shadows of the sacrifice Jesus would offer through His death. And, once the ultimate sacrifice was made by Christ, no other sacrifices needed to be made and we no longer needed to be separated from God.

That means, Jesus didn't reject the temple as much as He replaced the temple. Listen to Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

God's design is for His people to be His temple. He wants to make His presence and power known in and through you in this world. Jesus didn't so much bring an end to the temple of God in Jerusalem as He brought a beginning to the temple of God in His people. God has a plan to restore the temple in the future, but in the meantime, His plan is to raise up a new kind of temple in His people.

If you have placed your faith and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are the temple of God. If you have never placed your faith and trust in Jesus, don't leave this place today without doing so. You can be forgiven of your sin and filled with Christ's Spirit today. You can be the temple of God!

What an amazing truth! Jesus came so that He could make a way for you to be the temple of God. He made it possible for His Spirit to live in you so that His glory would on display through you. That's an invigorating thought.

But it's also a sobering thought. Remember the lesson of the fig tree? Hypocrisy isn't acceptable. Jesus doesn't endorse it or ignore it. He opposes it. What does Jesus do with greed and selfishness? What does He do when people value their way of doing things more than pursuing His glory or serving His people? He opposes it.

So, how do we live as temples that glorify God? How do we live as people who are not just adorned with the leaves of religion but are filled with the power of God and the fruit of His Spirit?

That's what the rest of our text reveals to us.

Mark 11:20–25

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. 21 And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." 22 And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. 23 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 will come to pass, it will be done for him. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

The following day, Jesus and the disciples are heading back to the temple. And they pass the fig tree that symbolized the hypocritical religious system of Israel. Like the religious hypocrites, the fig tree was withered away to its roots.

The disciples are struck by the contrast. The temple was empty of spiritual power, but here's a visual reminder that Jesus is full of miraculous, spiritual power. And what does Jesus say is the key to authentic spiritual power that keeps us from becoming religious hypocrites?

Verse 22: ***And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God."***

Jesus says authentic spiritual power comes through genuine faith in God. And that gives us our big idea for today.

Big idea: Authentic spiritual power comes through genuine faith in God.

Authentic spiritual power isn't something we can manufacture on our own. It's not found in the work we do for God. It's found in the work God does in us.

The word faith means to believe and trust in something or someone. And who are we to believe? Who are we to trust in? God! Jesus is calling us to believe in God's promises and depend on God's power. So, when Jesus confronts hypocrisy, He isn't calling us to straighten up our lives by our own power. He's telling us to look to God by believing all of God's promises and depending on all of God's power. He's telling us to put away self-righteous religious hypocrisy by humbly bowing before God in simple faith...believe He will do all that He says He will do.

And, in the time we have left, I want to quickly show you three expressions of this kind of faith in God that we see in our text. And, let me warn you that each of them could be a sermon in itself. But I felt like it was best to keep them within the context of this teaching because that's how Jesus teaches them in our text. So, what does it look like to have genuine faith in God, to depend on Him and not ourselves?

1. Genuine faith in God is marked by Confident Prayer to God.

“Have faith in God. 23 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 will come to pass, it will be done for him. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

The first expression of genuine faith in God is confident prayer to God. Jesus says that prayer connects us to the kind of power that can take mountains and move them into the sea. Our world can be transformed by the effective prayers of God's people when we pray with the kind of faith that believes God can do the impossible.

Now, don't rip this out of its biblical context. This isn't teaching a name-it-claim-it kind of praying that basically turns God into our cosmic butler. The emphasis here is that effective prayer is filled with confidence in the power of God. We don't have faith in prayer, we have faith in God. We don't have faith in faith, we have faith in God.

Listen to the way 1 John rounds out our understanding of this concept.

1 John 5:14–15

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

This is effectively saying the same thing Jesus is saying in our text. John adds the phrase “according to His will.” He's saying that our praying is confident when we believe in God's power and pray according to God's will. But how do we know what God wills? The answer is that God's will is most clearly found in His word, the Bible. We can know that we are praying according to God's will when we are praying according to God's word, the Bible.

For instance, we can confidently pray for God to supply any and every need because that's exactly what He says He will do in Philippians 4:19. So, no matter how impossible your need may seem to be, pray in faith that God can do the impossible and He will do it by His unstoppable power.

So, is the temple of your life marked by confident prayer to God that is aligned with His word? What impossible-sounding promise from God's word do you need to be claiming in passionate prayer?

2. Genuine faith in God is marked by Gracious Forgiveness of Others.

25 And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

Remember, self-righteousness is the root of hypocrisy. That means people who come to God have to realize that they aren't righteous in themselves. They have to realize that they don't deserve God's blessing, they deserve judgment. The hypocrisy of the religious leaders wasn't that they were broken, sinful people, it's that they refused to acknowledge they were broken, sinful people.

They refused to repent and turn to Jesus.

The reality is that we are all desperately in need of God's grace. That's why we need Jesus. We need His gracious work to provide forgiveness for our sin and restoration with God. Any blessing we receive is on the basis of Christ's goodness and not our own.

And one of the marks of being a person who is transformed by the grace of Jesus in us is that we desire to see the grace of Jesus extended to others.

And, for many in this room, I know this can feel like a massive hurdle. You've been sinned against in terrible ways. You live with the scars and reminders of other people's sin. And, then you struggle because you feel like a hypocrite because those relationships are unresolved.

And I think it's no accident that Jesus gave this command to forgive in the middle of this context. What I mean is that this text is surrounded by examples of Jesus having unresolved conflict with other people. So, forgiveness isn't always the same as reconciliation because reconciliation often requires something from the other person, namely repentance. We also see that Jesus is confronting sin and bringing consequences to those who persist in it – He's turning tables upside down and sending people out of the temple. So, forgiveness isn't ignoring or covering up sin.

Forgiveness is releasing our right to hurt others in response to the way they've hurt us. It's letting go of the desire to pay them back with the desire that they will repent and turn to Jesus for grace. That's why Jesus, though He was unreconciled with those who crucified Him could still pray, "Father, forgive them."

And don't forget what we've already said – genuine faith trusts in God's power and not our own. The only way we can show that type of forgiving grace is through the power of Christ in us.

So, is there a place where you need grace to forgive? Why don't you bring that to God in prayer this morning? Ask Him to help you release the desire to pay back the people who have sinned against you. Ask Him to help you want them to repent before God and experience His grace. Ask Him to allow genuine forgiveness to flow through you to those around you.

3. Genuine faith in God is marked by Humble Submission to Jesus.

Mark 11:27–33

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, 28 and they said to him, "By what authority are you

doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” 29 Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30 Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.” 31 And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 32 But shall we say, ‘From man?’—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. 33 So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

The day after Jesus turned over the tables in the temple, He goes back. And the religious leaders basically ask Him what right He had to take over the temple the way He did. And Jesus knows they are just playing games with Him. They've already made up their minds about Him and are plotting to kill Him. They're just trying to get Him to say something publicly that would turn the crowds against Him. That's actually what all of chapter 12 is about. So, we'll talk more about that in the next couple of weeks.

But, for this morning, I just want you to consider the major takeaway here. The religious leaders are rejecting the authority of Jesus. They are saying, “Jesus, you don't have the right to come in and disrupt our lives.”

And, let me cut to the chase as we close. It's easy to look down our noses at the spiritual leaders for rejecting Jesus, but how do you and I respond when Jesus comes to us and turns the tables of our lives upside down? How do we respond when Jesus wants to change our way of doing things? In other words, who is in control of your life? You or Jesus?

Genuine faith in God is expressed in humble submission to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It looks like laying our lives down before Jesus and saying, “Jesus, change whatever you want to change. Remove whatever you want to remove. Show me the way you want me to live, and I will follow you as you give me strength.”

Have you become the temple of God through faith in Jesus?

Are you living with genuine faith in God?