

On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1977, a revolution occurred in the media industry of North America. A 'then' unknown giant was coming onto the scene and breaking the mold for home video viewing. It was going to fully standardize a sales industry for more than two coming decades, and you could find them in every single person's home in just a few short years. By now, some of you have understood which medium I'm talking about, and that is the Video Cassette Tape. The VHS, produced by the Japanese company JVC, was meant to be an unlicensed product that any major company could adopt and be interchangeable for any consumer and any machine they purchase, to use. (This runs completely contrary to the competition, Sony's Betamax, which attempted to corner the industry. But, that's an illustration for another sermon). It took Canada and America by storm; by the early 1980s, almost every house had a VHS machine of some type, and a collection of growing movies. Hard to imagine, especially considering the 79-89\$ original price (\$211 today) simply to watch a movie! This is completely unfathomable to my generation; not having instantaneous and "FREE" access to a plethora of movies.

I could reiterate this illustration with almost any technology, in reality though. We now have tiny personal computers in our pockets, our laptops and desktops becoming increasingly faster and cheaper every year; and as one amazing technological breakthrough begins, it seems as if another comes swiftly to an end. This same idea, called obsolescence, has actually been happening for thousands of years in many different ways. Look at the advent of the motor car at the turn of the last century; or perhaps the Gilded Age before that with the great industrial revolution. The steam locomotive revolutionized rapid mass transit across Canada and America in the early-mid 1800s. Travel back to ancient Rome during the time of Christ, and with the *Pax Romana* (the Roman Peace), it was 'relatively' safe for people to travel almost anywhere in Europe and many parts of East Asia. The road system was extremely elaborate and well maintained, the Roman army patrolled the Mediterranean Sea constantly; crushing any pirates and looters who would seek to plunder a lowly merchant ship, and in Israel, our Messiah was walking the earth, teaching about the great changes that would be coming to the Kingdom of God on earth. This Sunday, we're going to discuss the great changes that Jesus was ushering through a pivotal moment during His Passion week. Some of these changes were of a magnitude that the Jews could not comprehend, for their worship system was so ingrained they could imagine nothing else. Much like the advent of the DVD phasing out VHS, we will witness a moment when Jesus prophesies the phasing out of an old, obsolete system, and usher in a new fresh one.

If you have a Bible, please turn with me to Mark 11:12, as we begin reading about Jesus and the disciples walk from Bethany on the Monday of His Passion week. If you do not have a Bible, there are Bibles sitting under the chairs in front of you and in the smaller blue Bible we are on **page \_\_\_\_\_**, for the large print black Bibles, we are on **page \_\_\_\_\_**.

<sup>12</sup>The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.<sup>13</sup> Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. <sup>14</sup>Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

<sup>15</sup>On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves,<sup>16</sup> and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. <sup>17</sup>And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

<sup>18</sup>The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.<sup>19</sup>When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.<sup>20</sup>In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. <sup>21</sup>Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” <sup>22</sup>“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. <sup>23</sup>“Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. <sup>24</sup>Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. <sup>25</sup>And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Now my friends who are vegans, hold your great offense here to Jesus cursing the tree. If I may be bold as to borrow the words of Pastor Tom, “[...] have we become so sensitive that we might be too easily offended and actually miss something that might be good for us?” I have to admit, I was a bit put off at this first act of Jesus. It is such a difference from the Jesus we have come to know. It is even a staunch change from Jesus’ first entry into His Passion week. Here is the first point for those who are following along; **1]- Let’s analyze what the text says.**

To recapture it for you; first, He came in to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey that has never been ridden before, fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy of the Messianic arrival from Zech. 9:9. The people have lined the streets, waiving their palm fronds and reeds saying, “‘Hosanna!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” <sup>10</sup>“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” He enters the complex, sees what He wants to see, and return to Bethany for the night. The next day, they’re on their way back to the temple complex when Jesus spots a possibility of a food source in the distance. Remember that we’re in ancient Israel, and if you were hungry on the roads there wasn’t a McDonald’s on every corner in Israel like there is now. Jesus is hungry and he happily approaches the tree, and because it’s in leaf, He expects that though it is not the season for figs, that He will find figs on the tree. Some people have said it was foolish of Jesus to expect that figs would be growing before the season had begun, but they miss the fact that Jesus well understood they were out of season. It was because this tree had begun to bloom and *should* have fruit growing from it, that He approached it in the first place. That’s our second point here; **The fig tree should have fruit.**

Upon closer inspection, a different story is revealed. “May no one ever eat fruit from you again,” He says. All of His disciples heard Him say this and they moved on. Treehugging jokes aside, why does Jesus curse this fig tree? What did the fig tree ever do to Jesus?

For this, we have to look at Mark’s style of writing. It has happened multiple times in His Gospel where he intentionally sandwiches one story inside of a greater story for the purpose of illustration. Mark is drawing us a picture with Jesus actions; he is trying to communicate a central idea through this portion of Scripture. To find out what the *meat* of this story sandwich is, we read on to the actual “meat” of this story.

Jesus enters the temple complex, specifically the court of the Gentiles, and we see that they have set up a market within the court itself. This is hard for us to imagine, because we only have one ‘sanctuary’ in our churches, but in the Jewish temple there were four different courts. The outer court (aka the Court of the Gentiles in which we would all be standing), The Women’s Court, The Court of Israel (for the men) and finally the Court of the Priests (which only priests could enter). Only true Jews were allowed to enter the inner courtyards, and so anyone outside of Gods chosen people, even if they adhered to Judaism, had to stay and worship God from the outer court. How hard would it be for us

today if the St. Albert Farmers Market set up residence in the foyer of this church? The booths, the ATM truck parked at the doors, people screaming and hollering for a deal. On top of all this commotion, only some of us are allowed to worship in this room. The rest of you have to stand at the door, and peer inside in order to hear the Word of God preached. You are fighting just to be near the door so that you can catch a glimpse of what was happening inside and there's a plaque on the wall that says "Entrance of Gentiles will result in immediate death."

Yet another insult is compounded to God in this case. It is well understood that at this market place within the temple, there are exchangers of money and of animals. These men would be merchants who bring in animals meant for sacrificial use. The money exchange would be there so that pilgrims travelling from afar with different values of money could exchange their foreign dollars for the silver Didrachma which was used to pay the temple tax. Christ ends this foolishness in the Gentile Court. He drives them out, with a whip made from cords according to Matthew, and His reasoning is very clear; you have made this house of prayer *for every nation* into a hideout for thieves. It is extremely likely that these men who exchanged money *tipped the scales*, so it were, during their transactions. The lowly servant farmer would have no concept of what his coins are worth. The merchants could say anything to squeeze a few dollars more out of the laymen.

Not only this; but the circumventing of the Levitical sacrificial system offensive to God. Instead of coming to the temple with your unblemished animal or your bird meant for sacrifice, you could march into the court of the Gentiles, buy any of the animals they had waiting, quickly walk into the inner court, make your sacrifice, and leave without hindrance. The heart of the action towards God had been 'streamlined.' The Jews had turned the temple into a convenience store, and allowed thieves to rip off their own people coming to worship. **"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"**

Christ quotes Isaiah and Jeremiah to emphasize his goal here. He is explaining Himself to a perturbed and extremely angry temple authority. Since the beginning of His ministry, Jesus has been challenging the Jewish religious authority. They have often come to Him with difficult questions, meant to trip Him up wherever He has gone. But now, He is on their turf. He's brought the conviction to *their* doorstep. No longer are they attempting to trip Him up, but He is tripping them up. To the great embarrassment of the temple authority, the crowds were in awe and amazed at His teaching and so they couldn't do anything about His presence. They hated his actions so much, and were so afraid of Him that they planned to kill Him. Some commentators suggest that this action was the proverbial straw that broke the camels back. This indictment by Jesus of their lackadaisical attitude towards temple worship and the Gentiles was what brought on the heap of offenses that would result in the crucifixion of our Messiah. It makes much sense too; in only four short days, He will be hung on the tree.

The broad picture can only be fully understood though, when we conclude this section of Mark's Gospel with the passing of the fig tree on Jesus and the disciples march back to Bethany.

When the evening time had come, and Jesus had kept people from carrying merchandise through the temple all day, he left the city. In the morning on their way once again, they come across the fig tree on the route they took the previous day. Peter is shocked and finds the tree completely withered *from the roots up*. There is no chance of this tree making any recovery, for it is not just sickly and dying, but completely dead and useless.

Before we jump to Jesus' response to this event, this is the moment where Mark's sandwiching of these two stories comes to fruition. The fig tree cursing, the temple cleansing, and the fig tree found dead come together as a judgement against the nation of Israel. Jesus curses the fig tree upon His approach because from afar, it appeared to bear fruit but upon closer inspection, there is no fruit to be found. Unlike the criticism we might have for Jesus' "outburst of ill temper" (according to famed atheist Bertrand Russell), this is an **object lesson meant for the disciples** about the great failure of appearing to be fruitful and then in the end, bearing no fruit at all. It is no coincidence that Jesus uses a tree and unfruitfulness as a parable here. We read in John's Gospel, Chapter 15 *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."* The religious leaders have failed to bear their fruit for the Kingdom of God, and they are being pruned. In fact, their authority has completely withered away and is dead. Jesus has prepared the temple for its ultimate destruction, just like the fig tree. This sentiment is echoed later on in the Passion Week narrative where Jesus says in Mark 13:2, "Do you see all these great buildings?" "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." The cleansing and the tree was a foreshadowing of what was to come a short time later.

So **what does the temple have to do with a withered fig tree?** The fig tree is a picture of the temple's imminent destruction and secondarily, the fig-lessness shows us the lack of fruit for God of the nation of Israel and the religious elite. Both the temple, like the fig tree wither and die. For the nation of Israel; Jesus pronounces judgement through the parable of the vineyard tenants in Mark 12.

Mark has made this picture clear to us, but what is unclear now is Jesus' seemingly left-field response to Peter's remark about the fig tree. If I was Peter in this situation, I would be expecting Jesus to explain His reasoning for the trees cursing, His drawing of the similarities between the temple, the religious leaders, and their failures. Instead, He speaks on the great importance of faith in God.

"Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" – "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them."

What, Rabbi? I imagine Peter's first thoughts. "What are you talking about, Teacher?"

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Instead of pronouncing the judgement we expect, Jesus takes this time to give another picture about the importance of a persistent and enduring faith, especially through prayer and forgiveness. He reiterates the theme He's started of "ask of it and you shall receive." Instead, while we pray, believe it and we shall receive it. If you have anything against anyone, forgive them.

**So what does all of this passage mean for us today?** We talked a lot about what Jesus did, but not how we live because of it. How can we apply this important teaching of Jesus to us? **It means we are living under a new covenant!** We are no longer bonded to the law which leads to death. Romans 7:4-6

“So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”

**Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.”** (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul explains to us through his pastoral letters just how the change from the old covenant to the new was made in regards to the temple itself. Christ rose up the temple again after 3 days, but not in the ways that the Jewish religious leaders expected it to be raised. He was raising it inside of us. The shackles of meeting God in a specific location is gone for us. The veil between us and God is torn.

**We live in the new way of the Spirit now**, and not the old ways of the law. We are not married to the old way, the way that could never buy us our righteousness because it was never meant to. Paul says, “For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.” (Rom. 8:3). The law was meant to show our iniquities to us. We no longer are sacrificing at the temple, because the temple was shown by Christ to be illegitimate. We no longer shed the blood of animals on the alter, because the blood of the true animal; the lamb of God, was shed on the alter once and for all sin. We don’t need to pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to converse with our God. We live in the freedom brought by Christ’s sacrifice and have open communication with Him directly.

If you don’t know Him personally here today, there’s nothing holding you back. You aren’t forced to meet in this room in order to meet with God. There’s no difficulty of relationship; every excuse has been removed for us by God Himself. All that’s required is asking Him to be your life. It is the most important decision you will ever make, and it will pay dividends for the rest of your life one hundred-fold. If you’re are in a committed relationship with Him, like I’m sure many of us are, make sure we are observing those in our lives who need Him the most. Pray for them with great and bold faith like Christ instructed to Peter to do on the road from Bethany. As Jesus says, “If you have anything against anyone, forgive them.”

Let us pray together:

-For open hearts, receptive to the Gospel

-For revelation for us on how to live our faith daily

-We thank you; for your abounding love that we could come to know you

