

Nothing But Leaves

Mark 11:11-22

What would you think if someone came to your home for dinner and handed you a bakery box at the front door? Wouldn't you expect there to be something really fattening and delicious inside? Let's make the situation even worse. Let's say you gave you child money to buy you a nice fattening and delicious item at the bakery. Now when they came home and handed you the bakery box, wouldn't you *expect* there to be something inside? Now let's take this illustration to the home garden. How many of you plant and sweat and tend a vegetable, fruit, or flower garden at home? As the season progresses, don't you look forward to and even expect there to be produce on the plants? Let's now look at today's passage of Scripture and read this very unique account. Keep in mind that Jesus has just entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as all the people crowded around Him with singing and loud Hosannas. This was a time of great celebration; the Messiah/King was coming to Jerusalem, making His way there on a donkey as foretold in prophecy. This was a great moment in history for Israel. Now our text ...

Read: Mark 11:11-22

Jesus, Messiah/King, enters Jerusalem and goes to the temple. Somehow the fanfare has died out and the praising crowd is no longer in the picture. Jesus enters the temple court, the place where *all people* can come to learn the Scriptures and worship God. Wouldn't you *expect* to find people there for "religious" purposes? Jesus just looks around in the temple court and leaves for Bethany with the twelve.

I have to tell you a few things about Mark's gospel that are important in understanding some of the passages. This is considered by many to be a very difficult passage of Scripture. Mark is writing to a Gentile audience, in fact, people in Rome. Notice how the passage makes note that the temple is to be a house of prayer for **all** nations. Jesus is standing in the Court of the Gentiles when He quotes this Scripture from Isaiah 56:7. This account is recorded in the other two synoptic gospels as well, but they do not include the phrase "*for all nations*" in their quote.

Matt 21:13 – "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'"

Luke 19:46 – "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

Mark is writing to some of the "*all nations*" crowd in his gospel. This message and example is for them as well as the Jews.

Also, Mark uses some unique literary techniques to emphasize important passages. One technique is to sandwich a portion of text between two fragments of a story (intercalation). I call this the OreosTM technique. People often treat the filling in the middle of the OreosTM cookie with special consideration. Some people take the cookie apart and eat the middle first; some people eat the cookie all together in order to get the mixture of that rich icing in the middle mixed with the chocolate cookie pieces; some people ... well, you get the idea; I'm getting hungry just thinking about it. The point is that the cookie portions are two fragments of one story and are wrapped

around a nugget of text (the cream filling). Mark uses this technique a number of times, and this portion of the gospel fits the bill. The two components are related – the cursing of the fig tree and the clearing of the temple found in the middle. Mark also writes chronologically, so the Triumphal Entry (Palm Sunday) is significant to the setup of this portion of Scripture and gives us the time of year of these events, the time of season (not fig season but rather April), and the time of Jesus life (his last week on earth).

OK – now back to our text. It seems there are some emotions happening in the passage. There is, at least, expectation and disappointment. I would like to look at three points, but first, we need to understand a little something about fig trees and their fruit. It seems that a fig tree (at least in Palestine from what I've read) bears buds before the actual fig fruit begins to show. These buds are edible and peasants were allowed to pick and eat these buds a couple of months before the figs would be ready. In our text we find Jesus seeing a fig tree in leaf at some distance away by the road. There is some significance to this. The tree was not on someone's property, but rather, a lone tree along the way. There are no legal implications to His cursing and destroying this tree. It was up for grabs for peasants and passers by to pick and eat from it. Next, this was right before Passover and not the season for figs, but it would have been the season for the buds to be present. This is why Jesus would have expected to find something there to eat. Also, it had a full array of leaves, which would have been an outward sign of a nice healthy, productive tree. However, if there are no fig buds, there will NOT be any figs later on. So, this tree not only was fruitless at this time, but would have no fruit later either.

OK – so now I have given you more information than you really wanted, as usual. Let's examine a few points in the stories. This is an acted parable rather than a spoken parable. This was the last week of Jesus life. Time was running out and He acts out this warning to the people of Israel – who have been likened to a fruitless fig tree by the O.T. prophets.

First, What did Jesus seek? FRUIT

Jesus was hungry. Hungry? Why? He just left the house of probably Mary and Martha in Bethany and it was the morning. Didn't he eat breakfast with them? Is this just for the illustration? For whatever reason, I think He really was hungry. I think the hunger, expectation, and disappointment were all very real feelings, but they also served as a great symbolic example. He demonstrates human feelings or weaknesses and yet Godly power is also manifested. In the weakness of His hunger, He sought something to eat on this fig tree – most likely those fig buds – since it was not the season for figs. He *expected* to find something there that would represent fruitfulness. He continues to expect fruit from His "branches." Jesus speaks against false prophets in Matthew ...

Matt 7:20 – "Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them." This how we are to be recognized – by our fruit. We are to be examples of Christ-likeness all the time. He expects us to be continuing in our maturing and transforming process into His character and in conduct like His. Are we fruit bearers, or are we – "*Nothing But Leaves.*" What type of fruit should we yield?

Gal 5:22-23 – "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

Second – What did Jesus find? LEAVES

Leaves are a big part of the life of a tree. Leaves are not bad in themselves. They are beneficial for shade, for protection of the tree and its fruit, and they even assist in a life process of the tree called

photosynthesis. However, leaves come with a cost to the tree too. The sap valuable nutrients and energy that is also needed to produce fruit. If you have a garden, you know that sometimes you have to pinch off the leaves and saplings from the plant in order for more life to go into producing fruit. I am not a gardener – in any stretch of the imagination. I could kill dirt, but my wife tends our garden and my dad is practically a farmer. I remember as a kid weeding and cultivating (I hated it). I would watch him fertilize, and inspect the garden, pinching back anything that would take away from the maximum strength going into producing fruit. I asked him why he was pinching off the good leaves. He said, “You want good tomatoes or good leaves?” I didn’t want either; I didn’t like tomatoes anyway! You get the point though, right? Leaves are not usually the desired produce of the plant. It’s either a crop of vegetables, fruit, or flowers, but not leaves. Some leaves are necessary but all leaves and no fruit is useless to the grower. Jesus expected something of the tree; Jesus found – *“Nothing But Leaves.”*

Remember the Oreo™ technique? Look at the “religious people” in the center part of our text sandwich. What did Jesus find in the temple? He found the hustle and bustle of people buying and selling; moneychangers making a profit exchanging foreign currency into money they could use to pay their temple tax. He found leaders more interested in politics and splitting hairs about the Law than they were about teaching the people about God’s love and the coming Messiah. People were so busy being “religious” that they were spiritually dead. What He found was disappointing. What He found caused Him to overturn the tables and clear out the temple of all those hypocrites who were there under the guise of religion, but didn’t know God at all. The temple was to be *“a house of prayer for all nations,”* a place where anyone could come and learn about the God of hope, the God of heaven, the creator and sustainer of all things. What Jesus found was, *“Nothing But Leaves.”*

Even today, there are many who look like fig trees, have leaves like fig trees, but that’s where it ends. Many were born into a religious family or into a denomination and call themselves Christian; many who know about Jesus and may even be able to quote Scripture; many who participate in church services and religious rituals and ceremonies; many who may have even deceived themselves and those around them and blended into the church, but upon close inspection of their branches, they possess only the outward observances of religion without the inward holiness and devotion. They are – *“Nothing But Leaves.”*

Finally – What did Jesus do? CURSED THE TREE

Jesus speaks about the unfruitful trees and how they are not worth keeping.

Matt 7:19 – “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Before we get too carried away here, we need to realize God’s mercy and patience with us. He will never destroy anything that has the potential of being useful for the kingdom. Remember, the tree would not have produced figs even in season. Isaiah says it so well, ***“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” Isa 42:3*** God is not “out to get us.” He is loving and merciful.

2 Peter 3:9 – “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

If a tree is truly unfruitful and will never become fruitful, then, yes, it will be destroyed. However, listen to the spoken parable about the unfruitful fig tree from Luke chapter 13 ...

Luke 13:6-9 – “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now

I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

"'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

What is your tree producing? Fruit or Leaves? If you think, leaves, then inspect further to see if it is ONLY leaves. There may be buds in with the leaves. There may just need to be a little pruning and pinching off of those leaves that are draining your energy for God. Growing leaves in the name of **religious service** can even drain us. We need to be careful how we use our time and examine if there is any fruit in what we are doing (even for God). I know we could all use a little cultivating and fertilizing now and then, but we need to examine our lives against the Word and see if there is fruit. Condemnation is from the enemy, but conviction is from God and meant for our good to cause us to press on in Christ and grow spiritually. Remember Jesus words ...

John 15:4 – “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”

The reality of this story was that in the morning the fig tree was dead, withered from the roots up. Jesus' supernatural power was manifested as a demonstration to His disciples. The same thing was to happen to Israel, because they were not producing any fruit, and there wasn't even buds to show the promise of fruit. They had isolated themselves in their own religious world and missed the coming of the promised One. They neither recognized Him then, nor would they acknowledge Him in the future. The fig tree was cursed and remains cursed to this day. The only hope for them is the only hope *for all nations* and people. ***“Have faith in God” – Mark 11:22.***

Gal 3:10&13 – “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” But – “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”

Jesus redeemed us from the curse pronounced against the unfruitful. He offers a remedy.

Romans 6:23 – “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

God is waiting to restore fruitfulness to all people who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Do we believe this and live like we believe it? Everything we have in God, we have by faith. Even our fruitfulness is by faith in God. Have faith that our prayers are heard and answered; have faith that God is there and able to rescue us even if we can't feel His presence; have faith that Jesus paid the full price so we can be forgiven and live a holy life empowered by the Holy Spirit. Only by faith are we being conformed into His image as we mature in the Lord. Have faith in God that we are and will be fruitful for Him.

When Jesus comes to our tree expecting fruit, will He find fruit, or will He find – *“Nothing But Leaves.”* It's really up to us. How serious do we *want* to be in our relationship with God? We see what He expects from us and how faithful He is to provide what we need to bear fruit in our lives.