

"Withered Trees and Hardened Hearts"

Sermon Series: "The Way of Jesus"

Mark 11:12-24

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Mark 11:12-24 (New International Version)

Jesus Clears the Temple

¹²The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³Seeing 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.

¹⁴Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

¹⁵On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area 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, ¹⁶and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written:

" 'My house will be called

a house of prayer for all nations'^[a]? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'^[b]"

¹⁸The 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. ¹⁹When evening came, they^[c] went out of the city.

The Withered Fig Tree

²⁰In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" ²²"Have^[d] faith in God," Jesus answered. ²³"I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 11:17](#) Isaiah 56:7
- b. [Mark 11:17](#) Jer. 7:11
- c. [Mark 11:19](#) Some early manuscripts he
- d. [Mark 11:22](#) Some early manuscripts If you have

Our scripture today comes from the Gospel of Mark. (Reads Mark 11:12-24.) This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want us to admit it – we feel sad for the fig tree. We think the fig tree has gotten a bum rap. It offends our sensibilities. I mean, we live in Austin, Texas. You can't even cut down a cedar tree without threat of a lawsuit for environmental degradation. Here is this poor fig tree and it was the season for figs. The message of the fig tree is actually the message of the temple that the two passages belong with one another. **In fact, the only way to understand the fig tree is by seeing what happens in the temple.** Then we will understand that Jesus made an object lesson of the fig tree, even if it offends us in Austin, Texas these many years later.

Now, we have to get up to speed in the Gospel of Mark. It is Passion Week and we skipped over one text, "The Triumphal Entry," because we just covered it back over Easter. The time is Passion Week and Jesus has come to Jerusalem, the Hosanna to God in the highest. It has all been sung. They've had Palm Sunday as it were. Jesus is there. He and his disciples are spending the evenings in Bethany and during the day they go into Jerusalem. We know from Mark's text that they've already seen the temple on the day before, but it was late, so they went back to Bethany.



The distance from Bethany to the temple would be something like the low water bridge to the Texas State Capitol building. It is not a bad analogy actually, because the temple was more than a church. The temple represents the seat of power, the seat of the religious life of Israel. It represented the seat of politics as well, for Harod's palace was also part of the temple complex. It was all one thing. The temple was the central religious and national symbol of Israel. Like our State Capitol, it was on a high place and so as you walked from Bethany to the temple or from the low water bridge to the Texas State Capitol, you'd be going uphill most of the way and most of the way you would see the temple. Just like in an early day, you could see our Capitol from anywhere in Austin, but that is no longer the case, is it? The temple would rise ominously, for in Jesus' earthly life and ministry this is the climax. They know they are approaching the end of the story. He has already foretold what will happen this week in Jerusalem.

On their way to the temple from Bethany, they pass by a fig tree. Jesus is hungry. He goes to the tree and finds no fruit and only leaves, of course we know it was not the season for fruit and then Jesus makes this pronouncement, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." Jesus and the disciples then enter the temple and rather than God's fruit they find there a sorry spectacle of unbelief, of rejection of God's ways. The text tells us that Jesus drives out the money changers. The word there is a very strong word, it is *exballo*. In Greek. It is the exact word that Jesus uses when he drives out a demon from a possessed man's life. He *exballo*ed the money changers. Again, to use the analogy of our own Capitol it would be like going into the Texas House and those huge massive mahogany desk to begin kicking them over and watching them crash on the floor and then to take Speaker Straus by one ear and perhaps Lt. Governor Dewhurst by the other and just pull them out of the House of Representatives and show them the door.

What Jesus does in the temple is more like a riot and chaos. It was hard. It wasn't just cleansing the temple. The reason we know that is because the words that Jesus says. He then quotes from Jeremiah, Chapter 7. You could not pick a more damning scripture from the Old Testament to then speak inside of the temple. Jeremiah, Chapter 7, is known as the temple sermon. It comes from that time right before the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar were to invade Israel, to invade Jerusalem, to conquer Jerusalem, to raze the temple to the ground and to haul off its people in exile. It is right before that day that Jeremiah 7 is spoken, the temple sermon.

There God speaks through Jeremiah (7:4) and he says to his people,

⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!"

Because the people in that day thought that since they had this temple, since they had Yahweh's house, that they could never be defeated in war, that they would always be victorious. It didn't matter at the end of the day whether their own hearts were cold toward Yahweh, God, because they had the temple and surely they were safe. But it was not to be so. So when Jesus quotes from Jeremiah, Chapter 7, in the very temple itself, where everyone understood the implications, this was not a cleansing of the temple, this was not even a cleaning house, this was the announcement of the temple's doom – of the end of this way. That is what Jesus is doing as He is in the temple.

Surely, the chief priest and the scribes completely understands Jesus' meaning in what he does and therefore they seek to kill Him. Jesus and His disciples return to Bethany, they it is actually on the way back into Jerusalem the next day that they pass by the fig tree and it is withered. It is obviously dead. Now, I don't know about your yard, but in this past spring, what was the date, February 18, when we had this horrible freeze and our sago palm in our front yard, dead as a doornail. You could look at it not many days later and say to yourself, its dead. The fig tree is now dead and Peter points it out.

See, when you have this happen in the text where you've got the fig tree and then the temple and then the fig tree – then we know that the two stories are connected – **that the tree and the temple interrupt one another and it is through one action that we understand the other.** That hardness of heart, that unbelief, the fig tree with leaves



but no fruit, external appearance without inward reality, religiosity that these do and will cut us off from God and we may bemoan the branches that let us likewise learn the lesson of the fig tree and hear the Lord's rejection of those whose heart is hard against him. The Lord's rejection is merely the final act of a longer trajectory.

Now, in as much as the fig tree and the temple in that day are directed towards God's own people and God's own house, I'd like us to hold up this story as a mirror through which we can understand something about ourselves. What can we hear from God's word today through this text? Now, hardness of heart it is a theme throughout the Gospel of Mark, whether it is in the Pharisees or those who have opposed Jesus and His Kingdom Message. Who is this guy? Isn't he Joseph's son. We know who this is. Hardness of heart is even seen in the disciples. This is the same group that Jesus teaches them on true greatness that the one who would be first must first be the servant of all and days later they are arguing again about who is the greatest and who will have the seats of power on Jesus' left hand and on Jesus' right.

Now, the fig tree and the temple represent a final conclusive rejection in return. But can we understand that unbelief already cuts us off from God and the bearing of God's fruit. That hardness of heart already withers a person's life. Now, those of us whose hearts are hard probably don't need much convincing of that point. We already know it. We know that we've cut ourselves off from God and we know that we are already withering. Just like a husband and wife already know it when they are living as strangers to one another. We may not want to admit it, but it is rather obvious to ourselves.

Now hard heartedness, the term itself is very interesting in Greek – sclera-kardia. Kardia = cardiac, heart. Sclero=medical term today, i.e. multiple sclerosis a hardening of the nerves that cuts off communication between brain and body. Likewise sclera-kardia would be a hardening of the heart that cuts off communication between God and us, resulting in disability and dysfunction.

I'm not asking us today to heap rejection or condemnation on ourselves. Far from it. But I would like us to ask ourselves this question, To what extent is my own heart hardened toward God. Still beating perhaps, but stiff, calcified. To what extent am I going through the motions, but my heart remains distant or disinterested. Do I ache or am I complacent about this estrangement? To what extent does this describe us? To what extent does it describe you today?

Now, as far as I can tell hard heartedness can come from one of two sources. There are two types or two ways that hard heartedness develops. The first one for lack of a better term is just called, sin. You know that thing in the garden that said we would be a gods with Adam & Eve. We want to be as god. Sin, it is independence, the need to control, the desire to call my own shots, the desire to set my own direction and do things my way. Well you know that song from Frank Sinatra or Elvis, "I Did It My Way" is really the definition of sin. That is one place that **hard heartedness can begin** – my way, **sin**. Hard heartedness, can happen through **sadness**. In the same way that we become hard through self-aggrandizement, we become hard through grieving or we can. In the same way that heart heartedness is related to self-determination it can also be related to disappointment. There are two sources for a hardened heart.

Now talking about that first kind – hard hearted through sin, control or independence – this is where we plant our feet and we bow our necks and we say, "God, I really don't want you to impinge upon my life. My business I want to run the way I want to run it. My friendships, well they are my friends. I've got my church friends in a different pocket. My marriage or my parenting or my money or my time or my sexual conduct or misconduct, my, my, my... they are mine. Now that is one type of hard heartedness.

What can we say to another is this is the case? What can we say to this kind of hard heartedness. Now to be sure our veneer is different. Church goer, good guy, do enough to stay in the club, yet our hearts can be hardened by a stranglehold of sin, by an illusion of control, by a vaunted independence. What would we say to ourselves if that was the case? We might say, Why did you become a Christian in the first place? Did you think that salvation is just



about a ticket to heaven when you die? Don't you know that eternal life, the life of God's kingdom is something that starts now as we submit our lives, our present lives to God's leadership and training. So we might say to that person, even if to ourselves, How could you be so dumb?

But this kind of hard heartedness is scary for another reason. Our consciences can become seared as with a hot iron, as Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 4. We know longer recognize sin as sin. Just like the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day and just like those in the temple in Jesus' day – no longer able to recognize sin as sin. Jesus might say these words has he quoted from the Old Testament, "This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." In scripture, whether in Genesis or in the Prophets or in the Gospels or in the Letters or in the Book of Revelation, in scripture that kind of hard heartedness never ends well.

Now the other kind of hard heartedness, the kind that comes through sadness, grieving and loss well it is easier to have more compassion for that isn't? When I first came to the church five years ago I was told I needed to meet this one person that we both had a background in Young Life, even though he is a few years older than I am and I was told to go meet this guy, get to know him, he is a great guy. So I called him up and sure enough we went to lunch together – he took me to Chuy's for my first time and that is my favorite Mexican restaurant in Austin. As we sat at Chuy's we told stories to each other, we talked about our past, we talked about who we were and it was rich and wonderful. Then I asked him, "Tell me how it is going now for you. Tell me what is you are doing now." There was just a heaviness, a flatness that came over this guy's countenance. Basically what he was saying was he really wasn't engaged. He wasn't in the game anymore. His time of ministry had passed or had passed him by. Now he was just around and you could tell that there was a disappointment in his voice as he said it. In terms of his relationship with God, flat as West Texas. His heart was hard through sadness. I began to challenge him and I felt like we had just began to know each other, we had enough of a connection that I could do so. So, I looked him the face and I said, I'll tell you his name, I asked him his permission – it is Mike Douglas, the last person you would think this would be true of. But it was five years ago. Any of us can get a hard heart. So I looked at Mike in the face and said, "Mike, we need you in the game. You can't stay on the sidelines. We need you. We want you. Come with me." Then things changed for Mike. That was enough. No praise to me, praise to God. That was enough that got him unstuck.

So, **hardness of heart through sadness or loss – it can make us stuck in the faith and we've got to let go and to move on.** My gosh, I've known people in this church who have faced so much tragedy in their life, I don't know how their hearts are not hard towards God. I'm amazed at their story and how they continue to draw close to God and I'm proud and I'm impressed and I appreciate their testimony to me. But some of us have had to live through tremendous pain and loss and sadness and yet we draw close to God and our hearts don't get hard.

Now we in the church can be responsible for this kind of hard heartedness, the kind that stems from disappointment, loss or sadness. It starts when we sell Christianity as the easy life, as a life without pain or hardship or challenges – as if Christians somehow now skate above the common problems of human kind in some sort of Pollyanna existence because God must will it to be so. Then these believers having bought our product are then unprepared when they meet loss or hardship or tragedy. But God didn't promise us an easy life – he promised us a better life. Better because we know him. Sometimes that better life is found right in the midst of tragedy. It certainly found in the midst of discipleship of taking up our cross daily and following him. It was C.K. Chesterton in the late 1800's who quipped that, "Christianity has not been tried and found untrue. It has been found difficult and left untried. If repackage Christianity without the cross then we ourselves are responsible when another's heart becomes hard through disappointment."

A bit of review:

- Hard heartedness already cuts us off from God.
- Hard heartedness already withers a person's life.
- We've said that our hearts can become hard through two means:
 - 1) sin/independence; or



- o 2) sadness/disappointment.

The question for us today, what is the state of our heart this morning and this season of our life? When we read a passage like Mark 11, we have to ask ourselves this question. To avoid this question would be to do violence to the text itself. **We must ask ourselves, where is my heart today?**

I would ask us to take a moment and make an honest assessment. Honestly, I am concerned for myself. May of us that after five years, I'm leaving church work. My resignation happens at the end of June. I'm concerned for myself that will my heart become cold when I'm no longer paid to be a Christian. When I'm no longer a professional Christian, will my heart become cold then? I take this text as a word to me to be careful and to guard my heart and make sure my heart is open to the Lord, lest my heart become cold.

Are you willing to ask yourself that question? Are you willing to take stock of where your heart is today? To what extent perhaps your heart is hurt through sin or through sadness. At the end of the service, if you'd like folks pray with you or for you, they will be here at the Chancel. Please come up front. Don't let pride stand in your way of having someone pray with you.

Know this, there is no loss that cannot be redeemed. **There is no tragedy that cannot be turned into, well if not triumph, then at least testimony.** A testimony of God's faithfulness, of God's goodness and of God's provision. So, if that were you, a hardened heart through loss, then even so bring that to the Lord and experience the Lord's grace. It is time to let go and to move on to get unstuck.

Let me close this in prayer.

Father we thank you for this day and we thank you for the power of your Word. We thank you for what it means in our life and we pray that your Spirit would quicken this Word to us and that we would have soft hearts toward you and we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

