



## "The King of Glory and the Withered Tree"

Mark 11:12-21

By: Dr. Peter B. Barnes

April 17, 2011 – Palm Sunday

Mark 11:12-14

(New International Version 1984, ©1984)

### ***Jesus Clears the Temple***

<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.

Mark 11:20-26

### ***The Withered Fig Tree***

<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 <sup>[a]</sup> faith in God," Jesus answered. <sup>23</sup> "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. <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 him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. <sup>[b]</sup>"

#### **Footnotes:**

- a. [Mark 11:22](#) Some early manuscripts *If you have*
- b. [Mark 11:25](#) Some manuscripts *sins. 26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins.*

---

### **Introduction.**

Do you remember Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*? It was a blockbuster hit several years ago, and the film grossed over \$370 million in this country and another \$240 million overseas. It was shown in over 3,000 theaters across the country. I believe part of the reason for the film's success, however, was due to the controversy that surrounded Gibson and his movie. Some people charged that the film and its director were both anti-Semitic, and everybody wanted to see what the fuss was all about.

I saw the film back then, and I read and heard the interviews with Gibson at the time, and I don't agree with this assessment. In the movie there are good Jews and bad Jews, and there are good Romans and bad Romans. No one race is singled out. Even the president of the Anti-defamation League at the time acknowledged that the film wasn't anti-Semitic, but he did express fear that the movie might spark anti-Semitic sentiment and activity on the part of people who lean that way. Gibson's counter-argument was that his film wouldn't produce that kind of reaction any more than viewing *Schindler's List* would result in anti-German sentiment among people because of the awful things the Nazis did during the reign of Hitler.



However, after meeting with representatives from the Jewish community when the film was released, I can appreciate the fear Jews live with. Their history of persecution makes them leery, and the poor track record of Christians through the centuries have stirred their fears and added to their suspicions. Their pain is deep, and the wounds heal slowly.

What are we to make of the strong words Jesus spoke in this passage, and what in the world did Christ mean when He cursed the fig tree? How do we come to terms with what Christians believe was God's judgment on the nation of Israel for its failure to embrace His Messiah, and what can we as we learn from it today? My prayer is that as we study this passage and celebrate Palm Sunday, the Lord will give us insight into these things.

### **I. The Cursing of the Fig Tree.**

The cursing of the fig tree is one of the most confusing actions in all of Jesus' earthly ministry, and in order to understand it, we need to consider the incident in its context. At this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, and the rest of His ministry takes place within the confines of the holy city. The Triumphal Entry, which is recorded in the earlier part of Mark 11, inaugurated the Passion Week, and it was a deliberate effort on the part of Jesus to claim He was the Messiah. You'll recall that Zechariah 9:9 was a prophecy in the OT which foretold that the Messiah would come "*gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*" Jesus intentionally offered Himself to the people of Israel as their Messiah on Palm Sunday, knowing full well that this would provoke the Jewish leaders to take action against Him.

The incident of the cursing of the fig tree occurred the day after Jesus' Triumphal Entry. It happened on the Monday morning as Jesus and His disciples made their way back to Jerusalem from Bethany where they spent the night. It is one of Mark's interrupted accounts, in the middle of which is the record of the cleansing of the temple. Like the cleansing of the temple, the story of the unfruitful fig tree has to do with God's judgment.

In the text we're told that Jesus was hungry, and, noticing a fig tree, He went to see whether it had any fruit on it. Fig trees around Jerusalem usually leaf out in March or April, but they didn't produce figs until June, and this tree was no exception. It was in full leaf, but, as Mark tells us, there were no figs on it because it wasn't the season for figs.

Then Jesus addressed the tree directly, and He performed what scholars call a *miracle of destruction*, and this is the only such miracle attributed to Christ in the gospels. The next morning, on returning to Jerusalem from Bethany once more, Jesus and His disciples passed by the fig tree again. This time Peter remembered what Jesus predicted concerning the tree, and he called Christ's attention to it.

Now why in the world did Jesus do this? What could have been the purpose? I believe the story should be seen as a parable in action. Jesus' hunger provided the occasion for His use of this tree as a teaching device regarding the coming judgment on the nation of Israel. In the mind of Christ, the fig tree represented Israel. On a number of times in the OT Israel is referred to as a vineyard, like in Isaiah 5, or a fig tree, as in Hosea 9 and Nahum 3. In addition, Christ Himself uses the imagery of the vineyard in His parable of the evil tenants in the next chapter in Mark 12. In the parable the parallel to God and the people of Israel was obvious in their treatment of the prophets in the past, as well as how they would later treat Jesus as God's Son.

The implication in all this was that just as the tree was fully leafed out, and in such a state one would normally expect to find fruit, even so, Israel was fully developed, and the Lord



expected to find spiritual fruit in the nation. However, as the events of the following week would reveal, Israel rejected Jesus as the Messiah, and in collusion with the Romans, their leaders sent Christ to the cross for execution.

Jesus predicted judgment on the nation, and judgment did come. Just 40 years later, in 70 AD, the Romans sacked the city and destroyed the temple in order to break a revolt of the Jews against Rome, and 6,000 people died in the battle. The Jewish historian Josephus who lived at the time wrote:

"While the [temple] was burning, neither pity for age nor respect for rank was shown. On the contrary, children and old people, laity and priests alike were massacred. ...The emperor ordered the entire city and temple to be razed to the ground, leaving only the loftiest towers,...and the portion of the wall enclosing the city on the west. ...All the rest... was so completely razed to the ground as to leave future visitors to the spot no reason to believe that the city had ever been inhabited."<sup>i</sup>

These catastrophic events were the result of the rejection of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. The fig tree withered and suffered destruction, and so did the nation. It is a tragedy that would break the heart of Christ Himself. Earlier He stood on the outskirts of the holy city and said, "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing*" (Mt. 23:37).

What can we learn from this? How do these things apply to you and me as followers of Christ today 2000 years later?

## **II. Its Meaning for Today.**

There are several truths I think we can learn from the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple, and I believe the metaphors apply to our lives as Christians in at least three ways.

**First**, the cursing of the fig tree speaks to **the problem of promise without fulfillment**. There was promise of fruit in the leaves, but there was no fruit to be found. The tree gave indication that there might be fruit, but it failed to deliver on the promise. All of the history of the Israel as God's chosen people was a preparation for the coming of the Messiah. God's original intention was that they were to be a light unto the nations, a spiritual beacon in a very dark world, and that when Messiah came, they would be eager to receive Him and usher in the Kingdom of God.

However, when the Messiah did come, that promise was tragically unfulfilled. Some embraced the message of salvation and the call to repentance Jesus offered, but most of the people rejected our Lord and His message of love. Those who were quick to hail Him as king on Palm Sunday quickly turned on Him by the end of the week, and they called for His execution. Even Jesus' most trusted friends abandoned Him in His critical hour of need.

Have you ever known someone who had a great deal of promise, but they never amounted to much? They had all the brains and talent and good looks in the world, but they never did anything with it. There was a guy I went to high school with named Cuyler. He was the president of the class, started on the basketball team, had a wonderful singing voice, and was accepted to Dartmouth for college. He was voted "most likely to succeed" by our classmates.



However, when I saw him later on at one of our high school reunions, he was a picture of insecurity and self-doubt. He had a hard time looking you in the eye, and he was still trying to figure out what he was going to do with himself. Cuyler's life was one of promise without fulfillment.

Christians can be like that, too. A person has the benefit of growing up in a great Christian family with committed parents, a solid spiritual foundation in Sunday School and youth programs in the church, they show signs early on of having a vibrant faith in Christ, but when they go off to college, they wander far from the faith and run down a road that leads to a dead end. They are Christians with spiritual promise but without fulfillment.

Perhaps you're a person God has blessed a great deal? What are you doing with what He has given you? Are you living for Christ as fully as you should? Are you a person of promise but without fulfillment? Maybe this Holy Week will be a season in which you will turn things around and start heading in a different direction.

The **second lesson** we can learn from the cursing of the fig tree is that it was a **problem of profession without practice**. The tree with its leaves professed to offer something that it did not in reality have. Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus said that a person can be known by the fruits of his/her life. *"You will know them by their fruits" (Mt. 7:16). "So bear fruits that befit repentance" (Lk. 3:8).* In other words, you may talk the talk, but do you walk the walk?

All too often, you and I have known people who make a great profession of faith in Christ, they claim to be a follower of Jesus, but their lives don't match their words. Their profession of faith rings hollow because their actions don't align with what they say.

Several years ago, Billy Graham spoke on television when he was in Oklahoma City for a series of meetings. He told the story about a time when he was flying in an airplane, and there was a particular man on the flight who was disturbing everyone. The man was drunk, and he caused quite a ruckus. Finally, a flight attendant sat him back in his seat and said, "Now, sir, you stay here, be quiet, and don't you get out of this seat again." Just then the man noticed Billy who was sitting in the row right behind him. When he recognized the great evangelist, he stuck out his hand and said, "Put er there, Billy. I heard you speak at a crusade 10 years ago, and you changed my life!" Really?

The cursing of the fig tree is a reminder that we must have profession *with* practice. How we live establishes the credibility of our message, and if our walk doesn't match our talk, we run the risk of nullifying any good we might think we are doing. My father said to me on many occasions, "Your actions speak so loud I can't hear what you are saying."

One of the reasons Mel Gibson has been so criticized in recent years is that after making *The Passion of the Christ* and professing his faith so boldly, he's made some very bad decisions and a battle with alcohol has reoccurred in his life. The criticism is justified, because profession without practice is always hollow and it just doesn't ring true.

The **final lesson** we can learn from this passage is that the cleansing of the temple addressed **the problem of exploitation in the name of God**. As Jesus entered the outer enclosure of the temple in Jerusalem, a sorry spectacle greeted His eyes and ears. The temple was being desecrated, and it resembled a Middle-Eastern marketplace. Business was booming. People were selling animals for sacrifice, and at this time of the year, there were many buyers. Passover was close at hand, and people were crowding into the Court from everywhere. There were also money changers in the temple that day, and they overcharged the poor. As Jesus



entered the temple and noticed the hustle and bustle He wondered, "Can this be called a house of worship?"

Exploitation in the name of God is always wrong, and the Christian Church has been guilty of more than its fair share of times when it exploited people in the name of the Lord. Racism, classism, materialism, and exploitation of the poor will be judged no less harshly today by God than it was 2000 years ago. God is on the side of the poor, and we should be too. Christianity in America has grown very affluent, and we need to make sure we use our abundance to be a blessing to those who are less fortunate than us. Otherwise judgment will come our way, too.

### **Conclusion/Application.**

One question that was asked of Mel Gibson during an interview back when the film first came out was very intriguing to me. ABC's Diane Sawyer asked him, "Who killed Jesus? The Jews? The Romans?" Gibson's answer surprised Diane. He said, "I did. I'm the one who sent Him to the cross. It was my sin that nailed Him there. I did it."

In the film the left hand that holds the nail to be driven into the hand of Christ is Gibson's own hand. It is a cameo appearance that demonstrates how we are all to blame for the death of Christ. Our sin, every single one of us, put Jesus there. We are the ones who are responsible for His death.

O I did it. Convicted here I stand.  
I might as well held the nail  
that pierced His blessed hand.

O I did it. I can hear that hammer pound.  
I might as well have held the cross  
And dropped it in the ground.

O I did it. I watched Him as He died.  
I might as well have held the spear  
That pierced His blessed side.

I did it, and I'm sorry.  
I'm the dirt upon the ground.  
Listen, sweet Jesus,  
I want to lay this hammer down.<sup>ii</sup>

May God grant us grace to respond in faith and humility for the sacrifice of the Savior, so that when our Lord comes again, we will not fear His judgment but rather find His open arms of love and forgiveness. That's what He extends to you and me today if only we respond in faith. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Josephus, *History of the Jewish War*, books VI.271, VII.1-3.

<sup>ii</sup> Song by Pat Terry.

