

March 19/20, 2005

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

Lessons From a Fig Tree

Mark 11:1-26

Pastor Bryan Clark

There are a couple of things I want to make you aware of. One is a card in your bulletin about North Pointe Community Church. If you believe God is calling you to be part of our north church plant, make sure you fill out a card and drop it in one of the boxes at the Information Center. As Andy mentioned last week, we have a goal of starting the north church with 200 adults. As of last weekend there are 80 signed up for sure, so we think that's a great start. We want you to continue to pray about that.

Secondly, over the last couple of months there has been a book that has received a significant amount of attention in our community. It's called *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*, and we felt like it was necessary to do a response to this. There were two long articles in the *Lincoln Journal-Star*, basically promoting this theology. The authors had about an hour and a half on the KFOR radio station to talk about their theology.

It's likely the people you work with, your neighbors, or maybe you yourself have some questions. So we have put together a biblical response, which has been written by Mark Mathewson and Mike Vlach. They have done a great job of responding to this biblically and telling us why this message simply is not true. If you are interested in reading their paper, you can pick up a copy at the Publications Center. It's also posted on our website, so you can print it off from there. The likelihood of somebody you work with or a neighbor raising questions, I think, is pretty high, and this will give you a resource for processing it yourself. We're not selling the book; several have asked about that. We aren't even recommending you read it. But just go through the response so you have some idea of what the issues are and how to respond to them.

There once was a man who lived in a country that had no fruit trees. This man was a scholar and spent a great deal of time reading. In his readings he often came across references to fruit. The descriptions of fruit were so enticing that he decided to undertake a journey to experience fruit for himself.

He went to the market and asked everyone he met if they knew where he could find fruit. After much searching he located a man who knew the directions to the country and place where he could find fruit. The man drew out elaborate directions for the scholar to follow.

With his map in hand, the scholar carefully followed all the directions. He was very careful to make all the right turns and to check out all of the landmarks that he was supposed to observe. Finally, he came to the end of the directions and found himself at the entrance to a large apple orchard. It was springtime and the apple trees were in blossom.

The scholar entered the orchard and proceeded immediately to take one of the blossoms and taste it. He liked neither the texture of the flower nor the taste. He went on to another tree and sampled another blossom, and then another blossom, and another. Each blossom, though quite beautiful, was distasteful to him. He left the orchard and

returned to his home country, reporting to his fellow villagers that fruit was a much overrated food.

Being unable to recognize the difference between the spring blossom and the summer fruit, the scholar never realized that he had not experienced what he was looking for.

- from *Halcolm's Evaluation Parables*, as quoted by Michael Patton in *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, Second Edition, Sage Publications, 1990, p. 9.

In my mind, that parable is an accurate description of what will transpire over this next week. Easter is one of the most religious times of year in our culture. There are many people who know there is something missing in their lives and they're seeking after God. And on Easter Sunday they will decide to go to church. They will go to church and they will experience something that leaves them dissatisfied. They will walk away being convinced that God does not satisfy, and they will seek other things to satisfy that longing—not knowing that what they experienced was not God at all, but just empty religion.

The reality is there is a significant difference between tasting religion and experiencing the life of Jesus. Over the last several months we've been talking a lot about religion, which might raise the question: Why is that? The reason is because when God became flesh and walked on this earth, He did not enter into a secular culture. He entered into a highly religious culture. And it would be fair to say that religion and religious activity was one of the greatest barriers to people receiving and recognizing Jesus as the Messiah.

We might ask the question today: How does Jesus feel about all this religion? Well, that's not a difficult question to answer as we look at Mark chapter 11. There are several narrative events (what we would call them) in Mark 11 that might be tempting to take individually. But we don't really get the theology that Mark intends unless we take them together as a unit.

We're going to talk about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, often referred to as the Triumphal Entry of Palm Sunday, which then moves to an event related to a fig tree, then the cleansing of the temple, back to the fig tree, and then Jesus wraps it all up. So with that in mind, we pick it up in Mark chapter 11, verse 1:

As they approached Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples, and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' you say, 'The Lord has need of it'; and immediately he will send it back here."

They went away and found a colt tied at the door, outside in the street; and they untied it. Some of the bystanders were saying to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission. They brought the colt to Jesus and put their coats on it; and He sat on it. And many spread their coats in the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. Those who went in front and those who followed were shouting:

"Hosanna!

BLESS IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD;

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David;

Hosanna in the highest!"

Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late. (vs. 1-11, *NASB)

There are many details in these stories that we could spend a lot of time on. But I'm afraid if we do that, we'd lose the point in the details. So for some of you that like to analyze every single jot and tittle of the text, we're going to frustrate you a little bit because we're going to try to stay on the point.

Jesus is entering Jerusalem; He's on the east side. He's coming through a little village by the name of Bethphage and a little village called Bethany, where He recently raised Lazarus from the dead. And He's going to work His way into Jerusalem. We're now about a week out from the cross, and Jesus is putting together the final plan for His entrance into Jerusalem.

Jesus sends two of His disciples to one of the villages in order to secure a colt, a donkey, upon which He will ride into Jerusalem. Now there's discussion about whether or not Jesus had preplanned this or whether He was exercising His sovereignty. I tend to think it's more the latter; I think this was a demonstration of His sovereignty. But you could take it either way. The point Mark wants to make is that Jesus is executing His plan.

It's very important in this last Passion week of Jesus that we understand this is according to His plan and purpose. This is not a spur-of-the-moment decision. This is not a plan that has gone bad. This is not everything coming unraveled. Jesus has told His disciples several times, "I'm going to go to Jerusalem. I'm going to be arrested; I'm going to be tried; I'm going to be convicted. I'm going to be crucified. I will be buried. I will rise again."

So Mark is trying to say that Jesus has a plan and this is the beginning of the plan. And it will be executed flawlessly, just as He intended. That's a good thing to keep in mind through the next several chapters that we study together.

The disciples go and they get the colt. Everything goes just as planned, and Jesus rides into Jerusalem. This is not a case where Jesus suddenly got tired and said, "Men, I'm too tired to walk the rest of the way; you're going to have to go get Me a donkey to ride on." Throughout the ministry of Jesus, He always walked. So what's happening here is very intentional; it's very calculated. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at Passover time was His statement that He was coming to Jerusalem as a King.

We do not think of a donkey as a noble animal, but in the first century they believed it was. And kings entered into cities on donkeys. The whole idea of it being a donkey no one else has ever ridden is the idea of His exalted position, His sovereignty. He's going to enter the city declaring Himself to be King.

Several times in the Book of Mark, the people have wanted to celebrate Jesus as the King, and He has quieted them down. Jesus knows the moment that the crowd really is allowed to celebrate Him as King, it will be the beginning of the end. And He knows when He declares Himself to be King on Sunday, that by Friday He'll be on a cross. But this is His declaration. The people understand that. They're responding by throwing their coats on the donkey and on the path, which is their submission or surrender to Him.

They begin to cry out, "Hosanna!"—which is a word that means "Save us!" or "Save now!" But what they mean when they're saying that is *not* "Save us from our sins"; but rather, "Save us

from Rome.” They have waited for hundreds of years for the king to come that would deliver them from the tyranny of Rome. They have in mind their own agenda. They have in mind what they want from Jesus. And they believe Jesus is about to fulfill their agenda, so they’re very excited about that.

That’s one of the common characteristics of religion: We convince ourselves that God is really there to fulfill our agenda, to do what we want Him to do. And as long as we think God is on that page, we’re pretty excited about Him.

None of these people had a clue what would unfold in the next several days. For many of these people, this excitement would turn to disappointment. And for some of them, that disappointment would turn to anger—because Jesus had not done for them what they thought He was going to do.

They also cry out, “BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD,” which is a statement from Psalm 118. It actually was commonly called out during the Passover feast. This is the annual Passover, which meant that thousands upon thousands of people converged into Jerusalem. Jerusalem would grow by three to four times its normal population. We’re talking about hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people.

And when these people would enter the city, they would often shout, “BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD”—although on this particular occasion they are understanding there is a deeper meaning with Jesus. That becomes evident by the following statement: “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.” They understand Jesus is coming as the promised Davidic king, the king in the line of David. And they’re identifying Jesus as that king.

Mark tells us that Jesus enters Jerusalem and comes into the temple. He looks around; He checks it out; He leaves. It’s late, and they go back to Bethany in order to spend the night. I think that’s Mark’s way of saying that what is to follow is still part of the same story—that the temple thing is a continuation of this entry into Jerusalem.

On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” And His disciples were listening. (vs. 12-14)

Now there is a lot of discussion on what exactly was going on here. Some commentators take the position that Jesus was hungry and went to the fig tree, and because there was no fruit Jesus kind of had a little temper tantrum and cursed the tree. As a matter of fact, some people even feel sorry for the tree, because Mark says it wasn’t even the season for figs. It wasn’t the tree’s fault! You know, the poor tree.

But obviously that isn’t what’s going on. Jesus never used His power that way, never responded that way. There’s no reason to think that’s the case here. As a matter of fact, when Mark says the disciples were listening, it’s Mark’s way of saying that Jesus was teaching them something. There was a living parable going on here that the disciples needed to learn.

There are a couple of possibilities for what was happening here. This was March-April. Figs were not ripe until June, and that’s what Mark is referring to. But there were certain occasions, under certain conditions, where a tree could ripen its figs much earlier than that. If you looked at

the tree and it had a certain maturity level, you might assume there was fruit. And it's possible that's what Jesus was seeing: The tree gave every appearance of having early fruit; but when He got there, there was no fruit to be eaten.

The other possibility is that before even the leaves budded out, there was a green pod that came out on the tree. And while it's not terribly tasteful, the people did eat that pod. Then the leaves would come out, and then eventually that would become the fig. But if Jesus went to the tree and there wasn't even a pod there, it would mean that even in June there would be no figs—this would be a fruitless fruit tree.

Whichever way you want to take it, the point Mark is trying to make is that Jesus was hungry and the tree gave the appearance of fruit. It gave the appearance of health, of life. But when the tree was inspected closer, it was evident there was no fruit. Jesus' conclusion is: "If a fruit tree bears no fruit, what's the point? What good is it? It might as well be eliminated." That's what happens here, and the disciples are listening to that—in a sense, just filing it away.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. (vs. 15-16)

Let me tell you what's going on here. There was an outer court that was called the Court of the Gentiles. It was before you actually entered into the temple proper. It was a huge area, about three football fields long and about three football fields wide. This was called the Court of the Gentiles. It was meant to be a very sacred place—where Gentiles from any nation could come into this court and could pursue the God of the Hebrews and enter into some sort of an experience with God. So it was meant to be a very sacred place.

Remember that the temple, for the Hebrew people, represented the very dwelling place of God Himself—that God dwelt in their midst in the temple. So not only did the temple house the presence of God, but the furniture, the activities, everything in the temple was meant to point to the Messiah. It was really a reminder of the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 15, that God Himself would become flesh and shed His blood to atone for their sins. Everything in the temple was supposed to point to that.

The Passover was the big season for the temple. The Passover season was to the temple what Christmas is to the mall. It was the time when everybody converged and packed this place. In the Court of the Gentiles they would set up this carnival-like atmosphere, this marketplace. People came to pay their temple tax, but they could not pay in the currency from their region—because their money often had, for example, the picture of the Caesar on it, or a king—and the Jews believed that to be idolatrous. So you had to bring your currency and exchange it for some Jewish currency so you could offer it to the temple.

Well, they would do that with a considerable profit. It wasn't reasonable that you could bring your animal for sacrifice hundreds of miles. So you would purchase one there when you arrived. Some people estimate there were hundreds of thousands of animals purchased and sacrificed in this time period. So it was big business. And whether it was a lamb or whether it was a dove, there were multiple animals for sale there.

The other thing that Mark mentions is that it was possible to take a shortcut across the Court of the Gentiles to cut across Jerusalem. So people would take their merchandise and they would

simply take a shortcut through the court. Put all that together and it was just a zoo. It was a carnival atmosphere. There was no possibility of these people coming into this court and actually pursuing God.

So Jesus is responding to that. Jesus is cleaning house. And of course, the people respond to His behavior.

And He began to teach and say 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 ROBBERS’ DEN.” The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching. (vs. 17-18)

I would guess that there wasn't one person, including the disciples, who celebrated Palm Sunday that anticipated this behavior in the least. They probably imagined that Jesus might go to the temple and rally the troops or something, But He was just absolutely causing chaos. He was flipping over the money changers and chasing out the animals. And the religious leaders were, of course, quite upset with this. As I mentioned, this was like Christmas to a retailer. This was their big season. So all they would think about was, *We have got to get rid of this guy—He's upsetting everything!*

But even the crowd, we're told, was astonished. That doesn't mean they agreed; that doesn't mean they disagreed. It means they stood there with their mouths hanging open—not sure what to even make of this. These people who the day before had celebrated Jesus, were now astonished at His behavior. They didn't see this coming. *What is He doing?*

If you would have asked the average person on the street, “What is the condition of the temple?” they would have told you it was thriving. They would say, “This is the busy season and the temple is thriving. It's full of activity; it is full of people; there's a lot going on. Everything is great with the temple!” That's how they would have responded, because they had mistaken religious activity for experiencing God.

The reality is there is a significant difference between religious activity and experiencing life with the God of the universe. Have you ever heard a conversation like this, where someone will say, “Hey, what's the deal with such and such a church? Is anything going on there?” “I don't know, but there are always cars in the parking lot.” Well, what does that mean? Just because there's a lot of activity doesn't mean people's lives are being transformed.

The relevant point at Berean is *not*: How many people can we fit into the building? How many services can we have? How many cars are in the parking lot? If there are no lives being changed, then what's the point?

Jesus looked at that fig tree which gave every indication of life, of fruit, of something that could satisfy His hunger. But upon closer inspection, there was no fruit. And if a fruit tree does not produce fruit, what's the point?

And that is exactly what Jesus, then, was demonstrating in the temple. This was a place filled with religious activity. But upon closer inspection, no one was experiencing God. No lives were being transformed. And if that isn't happening, then what's the point?

So Mark continues:

When evening came, they would go out of the city. [*So that's Monday night; we pick up now on Tuesday morning.*] **As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered."** (vs. 19-21)

Tuesday morning they're headed back to town. Peter looks over and there's the fig tree, and it is dead. It hasn't lost a few leaves; it doesn't look like it has got a little bit of a problem—it is dead from the roots up. It is history! And Peter remembers Jesus' little talk with the tree the morning before. He says, "Jesus, that tree that You had a little talk with is dead from the roots up." Jesus responds to that:

And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive your transgressions. [But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.]" (vs. 22-26)

You'll notice verse 26 is in brackets; some translations have it as a footnote—which means there was some question as to whether or not this verse was in the original documents or not. What's happening here is Jesus is identifying the religious activity in the life of the Hebrew people—and specifically in the temple—to be like the fig tree. It appears to be thriving; it appears to be growing; everything appears to be great. But upon closer inspection, there is no fruit that can satisfy a spiritual hunger.

If the fruit tree bears no fruit, then what good is it? It needs to be eliminated. So when Peter sees the fig tree shriveled up, that's a picture of what's coming for the temple—that Jesus is about to replace it. He is the fulfillment of everything that they had been looking for.

It is worth noting that everything in the temple was meant to point to the Messiah, and yet it had actually become a replacement for the Messiah—to the extent that when Jesus stood in their midst, they did not recognize Him.

So the question is raised, "Then what's the alternative? Jesus, if You're going to do away with all this religious stuff, then what is the alternative?" And Jesus tells them, "Men, have faith in God—that God can do the impossible." This has been a theme for Jesus in many, many chapters in the Gospel of Mark: that you have to believe; you have to have faith that God can do for you what you cannot do for yourself.

Go back to chapter 9. You remember when the disciples were trying to cast a demon out and they couldn't. And Jesus came along in verse 23 and said, "All things are possible to him who believes." In other words, there is no such thing as impossible with Jesus. What religion cannot do, Jesus can do.

Go to chapter 10. You remember the discussion with the rich young ruler. The rich young ruler had settled into his methodology: "What must I *do* to be saved?" He was convinced that enough religious activity would eventually make him right before God. Jesus said to His disciples, "The

chance of this man doing enough religious activity to make himself right before God is the same chance of taking a camel and putting him through the eye of a needle.”

The disciples responded by saying, “That’s impossible!” And Jesus said, “You’re right. With man it’s impossible. But with God it is possible.” He was saying, “God will do for you what you cannot do for yourself.” What no amount of religious activity can accomplish, *God* will accomplish.

And then Jesus goes right into His discussion: that He will be arrested; He will be crucified for the sins of the world; He will be buried; and He will rise again. The reason He came to give His life as a ransom for many is because religion cannot make us right before God.

When Jesus says, “If God needs this mountain moved and put in the sea, that’s not a problem; God has the power to do anything,” what He’s referring to is the greatest miracle of all. He is not saying, “If you go outside and you concentrate hard enough and have faith, you can move buildings around.”

The point is that the greatest miracle of all is how a sinful person can be declared righteous before a holy God. That’s the greatest miracle of all, and He’s already said this is what God can do. What is impossible for you to accomplish for yourself is possible through the person and power of Jesus Christ.

If you believe that, then in faith you pray and you ask Jesus to be your Savior. God does the impossible, and we believe it by faith. He takes a sinful person, and on the basis of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, declares that person to be righteous before God both now and forever.

The essence of that life, then, is prayer—which is a dependence upon God—to believe that not in religious activity, but in the person of Jesus there is life-transforming power that can meet whatever need you have today. That power can change your life and can meet your needs in a way religion can never meet your needs.

He talks about experiencing the forgiveness of God by forgiving others. It’s only when we feel the pain of what it costs us to forgive others that we start to understand what it means to be forgiven by God.

I think we would all acknowledge that religious activity is much easier than forgiveness. Jesus is getting to the heart of the issue: “Trust Me; believe in Me; believe I can do the impossible in your life. I can meet your needs. I can transform you. You can experience My forgiveness.” That is the essence of what it means to be a Christ-follower.

I am sure in a crowd this size here in the auditorium or in the upper room, that there are people who have walked through these doors who are up to their eyebrows in religious activity. In all sincerity, you have been involved in one religious activity after another. But deep in your heart you still know you’re hungry. There is something missing; there’s something that still isn’t satisfied.

You need to know that no amount of religious activity can ever satisfy. Religion has the appearance of life. It has the appearance of God. It all looks good until you inspect it closer and you begin to find out there is no fruit. There is no true life change. It never really satisfies that hunger.

The satisfaction of that hunger can only be found in a personal, living, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. You need to understand that today. No matter what your background or your history or your failures, if you are willing to believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, was buried and rose again, and you just believe by faith that God has done for you what you could never do for yourself, then God is willing to forgive your sins and declare you righteous before a holy God both now and forever. And today you can experience the life-transforming power of Jesus.

It's hard for me to imagine a more meaningful Easter season than to separate ourselves from all of the religious activity and to enter into a real, dynamic, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That's the essence, that's the heartbeat, of what it means to celebrate Easter.

Our Father, we are thankful that You are a faithful God. But Lord, how ridiculous of us to think that some amount of religious activity could somehow make us righteous before a holy God. Lord, help us to understand that while religion may look green and fresh and growing, upon closer inspection there simply is no fruit; there is no life change; there is no food that satisfies the spiritual hunger. Lord, help us to understand that if religion could satisfy—if the temple could satisfy—there was no need for God to become flesh and go to a cross. Lord, three days before the cross, Jesus was intensely explaining to His disciples that the whole reason He came was to go to a cross, because religion has no ability to save.

Lord, the same is true 2000 years later. The only reason we celebrate the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus is because we understand it is the only way of salvation. Lord, I pray for those who maybe have been involved over and over again in religious activity, but they know in their heart something is still missing: they've never really entered into a relationship with Jesus. Lord, speak to their heart. May this be the hour of their salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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March 19/20, 2005

Study Questions
The Good News About Jesus According to Mark
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Mark 11:1-26
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Opening Discussion

1. Is busyness an indication of progress? Why or why not?
2. Respond to the following: “Beware of the barrenness of a busy life.”

Is this a legitimate concern? Why or why not?
3. Is religious activity an indication of spiritual growth or of being a Christ-follower? Why or why not?

Bible Study

1. What were the main lessons of Mark 10? List them.
2. Read Mark 11:1-26.
3. Why did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on an unbroken colt? What statement was He making?

What were the people celebrating?

What did the people think Jesus was about to do?
4. The cleansing of the temple is sandwiched between the story of the fig tree. This is a technique of Mark’s to make sure we interpret the two events together. In what way might the fruitless fig tree be a picture of what was happening at the temple?

In what way does the fig tree picture religious activity today?
5. Why did Jesus curse the tree? Was there a deeper meaning that He wanted to communicate to His disciples?

How is this related to what He was about to do on the cross?
6. What is the alternative to the fruitless tree and the empty religious activity according to Mark 11:22-26?

7. Review Mark 10:17-11:26. What does it really mean to be a Christ-follower?

What is the difference between sincere religious activity and truly following Christ and receiving Him as Savior and King?

Application

1. What is one key thing from Mark 10-11 that you must keep in mind to truly be a Christ-follower?
2. What are three practical things you can do to avoid slipping into meaningless religious activity?
3. List some of the “fruit” that should be evident in the lives of those who are truly following Jesus.