

Misleading Leaves

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[0 : 0 0] If you have your Bibles with you, I want you to open up to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 11. Last week we covered the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem, and so this week we're going to continue in chapter 11.

We're going to pick up in verse 12, and I'm going to read all the way down through verse 21. So I want you to follow closely with me, and if you would, I want to ask you all to stand as we read from God's Word together.

Mark writes in verse 12, On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry, and seeing in the distance a fig tree and leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it.

When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, May no one ever eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard it.

And they came to Jerusalem, and he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple. And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

[1 : 0 0] And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying 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 den of robbers.

And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came, they went out of the city.

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered.

Father, by your spirit, take your word now and give us understanding and shape our hearts according to it. We ask in Christ's name. Amen. Y'all take a seat.

The Apostle Peter writes in one of his letters about the Apostle Paul's letters. And he says that there are some things in Paul's writings that are difficult to understand.

[2 : 0 2] And then he goes on to say, In which the ignorant and the unstable, that is, those who do not possess the truth and who are unstable in their thinking, they twist the scriptures, they twist Paul's writings in particular, and he says, to their own destruction.

So every time I come across a difficult passage in one of Paul's letters, I feel like I'm in pretty good company if the Apostle Peter says that some of the things in them are difficult. I mean, there are passages in the Bible that are difficult for us to understand.

There are those kinds of passages. And then there are other passages in the Bible that are just weird. They're just sort of, when you initially read them, they strike you as strange.

And you think, what's happening in these verses? What's going on here? And I think that this here is a case in which we find that. Especially the first few verses and the last few verses that deal with this issue of Jesus cursing a fig tree.

It seems out of place. It seems odd. In fact, this is really the only sort of negative miracle that Jesus does in the Gospel of Mark. Everywhere else, He's healing people and casting out demons.

[3 : 1 2] But here, rather than bringing life, Jesus brings death to a fig tree. And we read it and we think, what? What are you talking about here, Jesus?

What is this? What's the point? What's happening? And so what I want to do this morning is I want to first just walk you through the passage and point out some of the details that you might miss.

And some background information that's helpful for us in understanding it. And then I want to move from there. I want to take a step back and I want to try to show you what all of these verses taken together.

From 12 all the way down through verse 21. What they mean. What is Jesus trying to teach us? And what is Mark, in recording these events in the way that He records them, what is Mark trying to show us?

What is He trying to teach us? And then finally, lastly, I want to try to connect this to our everyday lives and show how this has some bearing upon us. But first, let's just walk through the passage because there are some interesting things in here that we need to talk about.

[4 : 13] We know from reading the Gospel accounts that at this point in time, Jesus and His disciples have come to the area around Jerusalem. And so have many, many thousands of pilgrims to celebrate the Passover.

And we also know that Jesus and His disciples were staying in the village of Bethany, which is roughly about two miles outside the city. We might call it a suburb of Jerusalem.

So that every morning, they would get up and come into the city so that Jesus could teach and interact with the people. And then later in the afternoon or the evening, they would go back to Bethany where they would spend the night.

And then get up the next morning and sort of repeat that over again. And that's exactly what we find them doing here in the opening verses. Verse 12 says that on the following day, so the day after Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem.

On the following day, when they came from Bethany. So the day before, Jesus had ridden into the city to the acclaim of the people on the back of a donkey's colt. But He apparently left the city that evening after that because the next morning now, they're in Bethany.

[5 : 17] And they're coming from Bethany towards Jerusalem. They're going along the road. And we're told that Jesus was hungry. I don't know why Jesus was hungry. Apparently, He skipped breakfast for some reason.

I don't know if it was because they decided to get up early and get to the city earlier than usual. So that all Jesus and all of His disciples had skipped that early morning meal. Or perhaps it was because Jesus, as was often His custom, got up early to go out and pray and missed breakfast. I don't know what happened. All I know and all that we know from Mark is that Jesus was hungry as they were on their way into the city early in the morning. And we're told that in the distance, He saw a fig tree in leaf.

And He went to see if He could find anything on it. Now, I don't know how many of you know very much about fig trees in Palestine. All right? Honestly, I knew absolutely nothing until about four or five days ago.

But understanding fig trees in Palestine is very important. At this point in time in the spring, we're in late March. At this point in time in the spring, most of the fig trees would already be in leaf.

[6 : 23] So they would have leaves growing on them. And not only would they have leaves, but they would have small buds that would eventually blossom into figs later on in the fall. Mark tells us here in this passage that it was not the time for figs.

And that's absolutely right. The harvesting time for figs would have been in the early fall, later in the year. And so there's no reason for Jesus to expect that there would actually be full-grown figs on this tree.

But there would be these buds on the tree. There should have been. And these would have not tasted really good. They would have been kind of bitter. But it was not all that uncommon, especially for people traveling.

If they saw a wild fig tree at this time of year to go and pick some of these buds as sort of as a snack to hold you over as you went down the road. That wouldn't have been a strange thing for a traveler to do, especially for a wild fig tree growing on the side of the road like that.

Then that's exactly what Jesus does. In fact, Mark does not tell us that Jesus was looking for fruit on the tree. He says that Jesus was looking for something on the tree. He specifically avoids the word fruit.

[7 : 29] He's not looking for fruit. He's not looking for figs. He's looking for something. He's looking for these small little buds that he might have a snack on his way into town.

It would have been normal. He would have expected that. Most of the trees would have had these buds on there by this time. And in fact, if a tree has not budded by this time, then it's not going to bear fruit in the fall.

It's just not going to have any figs at all in the fall. And so that's the situation. As Jesus sees this fig tree, he sees leaves on it in the distance. He has a reasonable expectation, not of finding full grown fruit on the tree, but of finding something to eat that will hold him over until they get into the city. And so he approaches the tree expecting to find something, some of those buds on it. And he found nothing but leaves, we are told. That's all he found.

So that these leaves were misleading. These leaves would have led anyone who was thinking rationally to think that there was something on the tree that would have been edible, not good, but edible.

[8 : 29] They were misleading leaves. And so when Jesus comes to the tree and he sees it and he sees that there's nothing on it to eat, Jesus pronounces a curse. He says in verse 14, May no one ever eat fruit from you again.

And his disciples heard him say that. Then if you move down to the end of the passage, we sort of finish the story about the figs beginning in verse 20. It's the next day. So they've gone into the city. They've gone back out to Bethany. Now the next morning they're on the same path, headed back into the city, and they pass by the same tree again. But this time the fig tree, it says, is withered away to its roots.

Now a fig tree is not a small tree, at least compared to the trees that they had in that region of the world. A fig tree would have on average probably been about 20 feet wide and about 20 feet tall. They're fairly large trees, especially to see one on the side of the road. They're big trees. And so when the disciples see it and are able to tell that it is withered even down to the roots, this is a tree that the day before had been green is now completely dead.

[9 : 36] This is not a minor thing. You all know if a tree dies, even if a tree is dead in your yard for quite a while, it can sometimes take a few years for all the green to grow to go out of a tree.

It can take a long time for a tree to rot and fall down. And yet here is this tree withered even down into the roots. It's completely dead and completely barren. And the disciples take notice of it.

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered.

It's completely dead. Now that is a strange story about the fig tree. It is a strange story. And yet Mark breaks this story into two parts.

And in the middle of it, he has another story, another event that happened during those days that can help us to understand what the fig tree is all about. In fact, I think that this is the original sequence of events.

[10 : 37] I think Jesus cursed it, goes into the city, cleanses the temple, and then they see the tree the next day. But Matthew doesn't tell the story like that. Matthew, because he's not concerned with writing a fully chronological account of all the events, hardly any of the gospel writers are concerned with putting everything in a chronological order.

Matthew keeps the whole story about the fig tree together. He doesn't break it up, and he puts it after Jesus cleanses the temple. But Mark wants to put it in its original sequence because he wants us to understand the lesson that Jesus was teaching his disciples.

But you can't understand the lesson of the fig tree unless you understand what happens in the middle of that day. So take a look at verse 15. We need to see what's going on here. It says in verse 15, that they, that is Jesus and his disciples, came to Jerusalem, and Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple.

And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. Now, you've got to kind of have a mental image of the temple and where Jesus is to understand what's happening.

As a kid, I remember hearing this story, and I pictured Jesus chasing everybody out of the temple. Jesus is on a mad rampage, and he's just running everyone out. And that's not at all the case.

[12 : 00] In fact, that would be virtually impossible. Because these events would have taken place in what's known as the Court of the Gentiles. If you recall, the temple is sort of rectangular in shape, and it has these different walls, different barriers, so that you know, even from the Old Testament, that the center of the temple is the Holy of Holies, where only the high priests can enter.

And then outside the Holy of Holies is what we would call the temple proper, where all the priests could enter, and various sacrifices took place in that area of the temple. But then outside even that area, you have what's called the Court of the Jews, where Jewish men were allowed to enter.

Not into the center of the temple, but they could enter to bring their sacrifices to the priests that the priests could offer them. And then outside the Court of the Jews was the Court of Women, where Jewish women could enter.

They couldn't quite make it to the priests to bring sacrifices, but they could accompany their husbands, and they would frequently go to the Court of Women to pray. You find women in the New Testament praying in this particular part of the temple.

But outside the Court of Women would have been the Court of Gentiles. This is the outermost portion and the largest section of the temple. It was massive, the size of several football fields.

[13:12] It's a very large area. And this would have been the area for two reasons. Number one, the word that Jesus uses for temple here is not the word used to refer to the temple proper at the center of it all.

But number two, and even more importantly, there would not have been people buying and selling animals inside the actual central temple complex. This buying and selling of animals would have taken place in this outer courtyard, the Court of the Gentiles, which is, as I said, a very large area. So probably what happens here is Jesus enters the temple and he sees these people and he begins in one section, perhaps in one corner of the temple, or perhaps along one wall, Jesus begins to tell these people that they need to get out of the temple.

He turns over their tables. He pushes these men out. But by no means is he driving out all the money changers. By no means is he driving out all of those selling animals. He would have had to walk the entire temple complex.

It would have taken a long time. And he would have alerted the Roman authorities very quickly. And things would not have gone down as they go down here in the Gospels. So this is sort of what you might call a limited, small demonstration that Jesus is giving in one area of the temple, in one section of the Court of the Gentiles.

[14:31] And then it says in verse 16 that he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. So he's preventing people, as he's driving these out, he's preventing others from bringing their goods through the temple.

Because it would have been common back then for people to use the temple as a sort of shortcut. Remember, when you're considering the entire temple complex, it's a very large building.

And so people would often, in order to take a shortcut from one side of town to the other, they would just pass through the Court of Gentiles, no big deal, carrying their goods. And so here Jesus is in one area of the temple, driving out the money changers, turning over the tables, and then people, as they are coming in, carrying their everyday goods, Jesus is saying, you cannot come here, through here, with these sorts of things.

The temple is not for this kind of everyday business. That's not what it's for. It's not designed for that. And then in verse 17, Jesus gives us the clue, I think, to understanding this entire passage. It says that he was teaching them and saying 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 den of robbers.

[15:44] The first part of that, my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, is a quotation from the book of Isaiah. So I want you to hold your place there in Mark chapter 11, and I want you to turn all the way back to the Old Testament, to Isaiah chapter 56.

In Isaiah chapter 56, the prophet Isaiah is preaching to the nation at a time when they are facing imminent destruction. The Jewish people at this point in time are facing sure and certain destruction at the hands of their enemies in the future.

And Isaiah is prophesying and he's predicting a time to come in which there will be both destruction for the Jewish nation and good news for the Gentile nations.

I want to begin all the way in verse 1 because I want you to see the full context here. It says, Thus says the Lord, Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed.

Blessed is the man who does this and the Son of Man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil. And now notice, verse 3, Let the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, The Lord will surely separate me from his people and let not the eunuchs say, Behold, I am a dry tree.

[17:07] For thus says the Lord, To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it and holds fast my covenant, these will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the people. The Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.

Now did you see the quotation that Jesus cites in the middle of that? Verse 7, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Now I want you to notice the change there because Isaiah says for all peoples and Jesus in Mark says for all the nations or for all the Gentiles.

[18:23] Now is that a big deal, that slight change? Does that, I mean should that register anything with us? I think that it should because I think that I think that Mark is helping us to see something in Isaiah that we might otherwise miss.

In Isaiah, the word that's used as translated people is often used to describe the nation of Israel. So God speaks of my people over and over throughout the Old Testament almost exclusively in reference to the nation of Israel.

And now here God says it through Isaiah that I'm going to gather foreigners, all the peoples to myself. Now most of the time in the Old Testament the word that is used to refer to Gentile nations is the word Gentile or nations.

But Isaiah chooses to use the word people, a word usually reserved for God's people to describe the Gentile nations. Because God is making it clear through the prophet Isaiah that there is coming a time in the future when my people will not be composed merely of Jewish people or of Israelites. My people will be composed of foreigners, of anyone who keeps my covenant. That is, anyone who trusts in me and calls upon me, people from all nations will be a part of my people.

[19:48] I will call all the peoples to be part of my people. But that's not all that we learn in Isaiah. Because in verse 9 of chapter 56 God begins to address the leaders of Israel.

He says, All you beasts of the field come to devour. All you beasts in the forest. His watchmen are blind. They are all without knowledge.

They are all silent dogs that cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. The dogs have a mighty appetite. They never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding.

They have all turned to their own way. Each to his own gain. One and all. So in Isaiah 56 this is a prophecy in which the prophet looks forward and predicts a time in which God will draw nations to become a part of his people and yet at the same time God will look at the leaders of Israel and say you are shepherds and yet you are dogs.

An insult if ever there was one for a Jew. The shepherds of my people are dogs but the beasts come in and devour them. Judgment is coming.

[21:03] So at one and the same time Isaiah says God will draw in the nations and he will judge the leaders of his people. So that Mark when he cites this passage and he says that my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the Gentiles all the nations.

He is drawing our attention to this distinction between Jew and Gentile and Jesus is saying that the house of God is for all the nations.

It is for the Gentiles. It is for those whom Isaiah said one day would become a part of God's people. Jesus is saying that day has come.

It has arrived. Because notice what happens next. Verse 18 says that the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him for they feared him because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

Just as Isaiah said the people the nations Christ is reaching out toward and yet the leaders of the nation of Israel are seeking to destroy him.

[22:18] It is a perfect fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. As God reaches out to the nations the nation the people reject their Messiah.

So we ask the question what has the fig tree to do with all of this? The fig tree is a kind of acted out parable to help us to understand Jesus' attitude toward these religious leaders.

Because outwardly like the fig tree outwardly things seem to be what they ought to be. Just as the fig tree is in leaf the temple system is in operation. Everything is working as it should.

Everything is working as it's prescribed to work. Everything externally looks fine. In fact even the presence of people buying and selling animals in the temple that in itself there is nothing wrong with that.

The law lays out regulations for providing animals for the poor who cannot bring their own animals with them into Jerusalem. And so these people buying and selling in the temple they are providing a needed service for those who come to offer sacrifice.

[23 : 31] They are providing them with animals. Not only are they providing them with animals but they are providing them with currency that they would find acceptable. They would not in the temple area they would not find Roman currency with the image of the emperor acceptable.

So there are money changers there in the temple helping to serve the people who come. Offering them money that they would find acceptable for use in purchasing an animal to then take in and sacrifice.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the buying and selling of these animals and the changing of money in the court of Gentiles. What is wrong Jesus says is everything beneath the surface.

So those buying and selling are not merely buying and selling they are robbing people. Their motives are all out of place. Overcharging taking too much for what they are selling and when you arrive you have no choice but to pay what is asked and Jesus says they have become thieves. But at the root of the problem is the chief priests and the scribes. Everything externally looks good. Everything is operating externally as it should.

[24 : 41] Sacrifices are being made. It is Passover time. Everything looks the way it ought to look just as from a distance the fig tree looked the way it ought to look. Yet when Jesus approached it expecting to find signs of future fruit he finds nothing.

And so Jesus pronounces a curse of death upon the tree. Now Jesus approaches the temple seeing all the signs of spiritual life evident.

And yet as he draws near he sees no sign of future fruit bearing in the temple system. So Jesus like the fig tree pronounces a curse upon it.

The temple system will not stand. Much longer. If you move forward a few chapters in the gospel of Mark to chapter 13 Jesus begins to speak of the future destruction of this very temple.

Because its days are numbered. And just as surely as the fig tree was withered on the next day because Jesus pronounced a curse on it. Just as surely the temple system with its sacrifices and everything else that surrounds it will fall and will crumble because they have rejected the Messiah.

[26 : 00] All of these things are just as the prophet Isaiah foretold that they would be. The question becomes for us living 2,000 years later how is this good news for us?

How does this have anything to do with me and my everyday life? What does this what bearing does Jesus cursing a fig tree and what bearing does Jesus teaching about the destruction of the temple and the fruitlessness of the leaders of the temple system?

What bearing does that have upon me? It has every bearing upon me. I want you to hold your place in Mark and turn over to Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

In Ephesians chapter 2 verse 11 the apostle Paul says this. He says remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision which is made in the flesh by hands remember that you were at that time separated from Christ alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ for he himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross thereby killing the hostility.

[27 : 40] The apostle Paul says at one time or what time prior to the coming of Christ prior to the pronouncement of this woe in Mark chapter 11 and then again in Mark chapter 13 prior to that time the apostle Paul says you Gentiles were separated you were cut off from the covenant promises you could receive none of the benefits and yet now in Christ he has abolished he has torn down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile and he has made access available to all peoples all nations.

we must understand that apart from what Christ accomplishes beginning here in chapter 11 and ending with his death as the temple curtain is torn in two apart from what Christ has

accomplished we remain cut off from the covenant promises.

But because of all that Jesus has done for us because he has he has gone before us and he has become our sacrifice. He has become our Passover lamb because of all that he has done for us and in our place he has now made a way for us to become the people of God.

We are no longer cut off and separated if of course we are those that Isaiah predicted who would keep the covenant. But how do you keep the covenant in the days when there is no temple? you trust in the one true temple. How do you keep the covenant when there is no sacrificial system in place? You trust in the one who is the final ultimate sacrifice.

[29 : 26] How do you keep covenant in this age? You keep covenant in this age and in every age by trusting in the one who has kept the covenant in your place.

everything in this passage, everything in this passage relates intimately to you and I and whether or not we can approach God through Jesus.

Jesus says the days of coming through this old sacrificial system are over because the reality to which it pointed has arrived and I am here now.

So the way to respond to a passage like this is to respond in rejoicing. It is to respond by faith in Christ who has made a way for us Gentiles who were cut off, who were separated from the covenant promises to rejoice and trust in him who has made a way for us.

But there is more than that. If you turn over to 1 Corinthians I want you to read something that I believe stands as a powerful warning for us who live under the new covenant.

[30 : 37] Paul writes about Old Testament believers in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 and he says this in verse 1. He says I want you to know brothers that our fathers were all under the cloud, all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ.

nevertheless he says with most of them God was not pleased for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

And then move down to verse 9. He says we must not put Christ to the test as some did and were destroyed by serpents nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example but they were written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come.

We are the people upon whom the end of the ages has come. Everyone who has lived from the first coming of Christ to the second coming of Christ lives in the age upon which the ends of the ages have come.

We are in the new covenant era. We are in the church age. And Paul says all the things that happened to God's people before this age happened and were recorded as examples for us.

[32 : 10] Because just like them we can have all the outward signs of spiritual life and yet in the end prove to be spiritually dead.

Just like them we can enjoy all the external benefits of being a member of Christ's body and yet at the end prove that we were never true members and be destroyed.

These things happened as examples for us. So that we so that we may not be destroyed as they were. So that we may not be drawn to evil as they were.

So I would urge you to first consider what Christ's Christ has done. Consider what he has done in enabling you to come before his father without temple sacrificial system, without priests, but with one mediator who is Christ, the God man.

Consider that. And then consider the great danger of presuming that you have fully trusted in him. If there is no fruit in your life.

[33 : 22] Look at yourself. Examine yourself. Do you have leaves? Do you have greenery and yet have no evidence of God working future fruit in your life?

These things happened as an example the Apostle Paul says. It is it is not a small thing. It's not a small thing to be called to test ourselves.

And it's not a thing that we do occasionally, but we continually examine and look to see. Are there only misleading leaves? Or is there sign of real spiritual life within us?

Let's pray.