

Fruitless Religion

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[0 : 00] My name's Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us.

We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word.

We are continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark, and we've come to this point. We started last Sunday or two Sundays ago with the triumphal entry. Jesus makes His way on a Sunday into Jerusalem, and He has no longer keeping the secret about His identity.

In fact, His conflict with the religious establishment is coming to a head. We saw that last time with the fact that He was being praised as the King coming into Jerusalem, and He'll continue that conflict this week with the famous passage of Him clearing the temple as He has this confrontation with the religious establishment.

We're not only going to see that famous passage, though, we're also going to look at the strange passage, often misunderstood part about the fig tree that Jesus curses.

[1 : 29] And we're going to understand Jesus is using that as an illustration to deal with religion that has an outer ritual but no inner substance, religion that exploits people rather than healing them.

That's the flashpoint of Jesus' confrontation with the rulers of the temple. And so it's with that, I invite you to turn with me in the Gospel of Mark. We're in chapter 11, starting with verse 12. You can turn with me in your Bible. You can turn in your phone. You can turn in your worship guide. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word. In Proverbs chapter 30, verse 5, tells us that every word of God proves true.

He's a shield to those who take refuge in Him. And so that's why we read now, starting at verse 12. Verse 15.

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.

[2 : 58] 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. Verse 18. 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. I invite you to join me in prayer as we come to this portion of God's Word. Our Father in Heaven, we thank You again for giving us Your Word, for speaking to us, for not leaving us alone to figure out things by ourselves.

And we ask that You would do that this morning. You'd show us Jesus and His passion, His heart, His zeal, for us to have access and intimacy with God, that You would grow our love and affection and our reverence and our awe for Him.

We ask all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. We continue the story of Holy Week this morning with a little bit of a strange incident with Jesus encountering this fig tree that He seems so frustrated with.

[4 : 28] And it's actually not just the tree that we need to focus on, but in fact, the whole situation. All the little details in this story matter for us. And so, track closely with me as we go.

Remember here that Jesus is commuting into Jerusalem from Bethany. Bethany is this suburb that's to the east. And so, they're traveling in every day along with all these other pilgrims. And it turns out as He's coming in here on Monday, verse 12, Jesus must not have eaten breakfast. So, Bethany was not apparently a bed and breakfast, but instead Jesus encounters this fig tree. Verse 13, he's hungry and he sees this chance for him to be able to eat. It's important for us to note that he sees this tree in the distance.

It looks like this tree is exactly what he needs. It looks like this tree is going to offer Jesus what it desires.

[5 : 29] It is going to fill him up where he's empty. It's going to make him full where he's hungry. Why? Same verse, because Jesus sees that it is in leaf.

In other words, everything looks great and attractive from a distance. And yet, Jesus is in for a great disappointment. Again, verse 13, He found nothing but leaves.

And the point is this, that the tree is involved in false advertising. The tree is offering from a distance what it cannot deliver.

We might say that the tree is all sizzle, no steak. The tree is all foam, no beer. The tree is all hat, no cattle.

The tree is all leaves, no figs. The tree offers one thing, but the reality is very, very different.

[6 : 39] Now, some people are frustrated with verse 13 because it tells us it was not the season for figs. And so they believe that Jesus here with this tree is somehow being stupid or unfair. Yes, Jesus knows it's not the season for figs.

Jesus is not an idiot. That is not, in fact, the point. Jesus is acting out an illustration for his disciples in the same way that an Old Testament prophet would act something out before God's people to help it cut home to their hearts.

Jesus is trying to tell them the temple looks good, verse 13, from a distance. It looks good if you're far enough away.

If you get up close, it cannot, it will not feed you. And in fact, that's the point. Verse 14, his disciples heard it. The point of all of this is that he can demonstrate and teach his disciples what is actually going on with the temple.

And so what's been foreshadowed with this first episode now happens as he comes to the temple in verses 12 through 19. Jesus is prepping his disciples for the same point.

[7 : 53] The temple is involved in false advertising. The temple offers something that it cannot deliver.

If you're familiar with the Old Testament, you know fundamentally the temple is about God's presence with his people. As Israel was traveling in the desert, they had the tabernacle, the precursor to the temple.

And the tabernacle was in the center of God's people, and they would be camped all around it to make this point clearly for them that God's presence was in the very center of their community.

The temple continues that same point as the tabernacle, but instead, this time, it is not temporary, but permanent. It's not a tent that can be moved, but a building that cannot.

And so this is the place where they're supposed to meet with God and have their spiritual needs filled. This is the place for forgiveness and healing and meaning and belonging and significance.

[8 : 52] This is the place that God's people are coming to be with him. This is the place where their spiritual needs are supposed to be met.

And yet Jesus here encounters something very different in verse 15. He's already done his recon, by the way. You may remember from last time, verse 11, the very end of Sunday, Jesus went to take a look around the temple.

So when he comes to this fig tree, he already knows what he's setting up. He's already seen these vendors. He already knows the temple courts are being abused. And so it's not a surprise here when he comes, verse 15, and finds that there are those who are selling and buying.

And he drives them out. He overturns the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. Now, many of these things that are going on in the temple are actually necessary in some way.

Jesus has traveled to Jerusalem over the last few passages, much as Jews would do from around the world. This was the high holy day of Passover. And so it's actually a convenience that they're offering here.

[10:03] It would be great as someone coming to Jerusalem to know that you don't have to bring your pigeon with you. You can bring your money. You can buy it on the way. It's great to be able to exchange money because the temple tax would have to be paid with a Tyrian coin, which is different than Roman money.

And so what they're offering here is actually in some ways necessary and important for God's people as they travel to Jerusalem. The problem is not what they're doing. The problem is the location.

They have camped out the outer portion of the temple, which had one purpose.

This outer portion was the only place that Gentiles, that non-Jews, could come to experience God's presence. If they were a Gentile, they could not proceed into the inner portions of the temple.

And so this was a precious and sacred space for them, for it to be filled up with these folks who are selling and changing money. For those who are using it as a furrow fair is to say, we don't care about the Gentiles.

[11:14] We're not actually concerned with whether people can have access and fellowship and communion with God. That is not something we are worried about.

And so they've lost the meaning, the importance of the entire event. Verse 16, there's something even worse going on. It's not just that these folks are selling in the space where people are supposed to access God, but they're actually using it as a traffic point.

You know, sometimes when you enter a neighborhood, there'll be a sign telling you there is no outlet. You can't get anywhere from here. And yet you'll see drivers often trying to find a shortcut. Someone comes to a stoplight next to a gas station, and they'll pull into the gas station and pull around so they can make a right turn, skipping the traffic light. That's the same thing that's going on here.

People are using this outer court, this place that's sacred for Gentiles to access God's presence and experience communion with him as a shortcut for their traffic.

[12:16] As a way to get from point A to point B much faster. And so that's why Jesus comes down so hard. That's why he's flipping over tables and driving people out.

Because verse 17, he gets to the heart of the matter. Is it not written, my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? Those who are running the temple have missed two important fundamental things.

First of all, they've missed the very purpose of the temple. They've missed the fact that it is there for relationship with God.

They've missed the fact that it's there for God's people to experience God's presence. They've missed the point that it is for God's people to worship him and hear from him.

And so they have all the show, they have all the trappings and none of the substance. But they've missed something else as well. They haven't just missed its purpose, they've missed God's heart.

[13:26] A house of prayer for all nations. They've missed what we've been told throughout the entire Old Testament, which is that the promise that was made to the Jews is ultimately meant for all the nations.

They don't care about the Gentiles. They don't care about non-Jews having intimacy with God. And so ultimately they end up serving greed rather than God.

They like the appearance. They don't care about the substance. They are fascinated by the outside. They are uninterested in the heart.

And so we can understand Jesus' anger here. What could be worse than to treat God's presence, his love for his people, as nothing more than a commodity?

What could be worse than treating access to God, fellowship with God, as a sporting event?

[14:43] They are vendors here to make a buck rather than those who care about God's people. Now we still have a little bit more to unpack with this fig tree.

Why is it so important? Why is Jesus so offended? Why is he so frustrated by the fact that this tree has no fruit to offer him? It's very simple.

It's because Jesus is hungry. Jesus is making a point here. The fig tree refuses to meet Jesus' physical needs, his physical hunger.

But how much worse is it that the temple refuses to meet God's people's spiritual needs, their spiritual hunger?

In other words, Jesus is filled with anger because the temple has left his people to starve.

[15 : 55] This is the place where they have communion with God, and it is blocked by vendors. The temple is supposed to be a place where people are restored and not exploited.

It's supposed to be a place of reconciliation and healing and forgiveness. And here they're given a counterfeit. God's people are robbed. They take not just their money, but their opportunity for relationship with God.

Remember that the Passover is the celebration of God's great deliverance of his people from Egypt. It was him bringing them out of slavery and giving them freedom. It was their first step on the way to the promised land.

And so that's why pilgrims are coming from all over to be at Jerusalem for this celebration. And so we understand how bad our things are when this celebration of God's deliverance has become simply an economic event.

It's one thing to withhold figs from a hungry person. It's quite another thing to withhold the very presence of God.

[17 : 00] Now, we don't have to look far in our own culture to find holidays that can become about profit rather than healing. So think with me for a minute about Valentine's Day.

By the way, I'm a big fan of Valentine's Day. I have nothing against it. It's this holiday that's meant to be about expressing love and vulnerability and intimacy and self-sacrifice. And it can become just another economic extravaganza.

It can become just another hallmark holiday meant to build the bottom line. And so you can imagine Jesus coming home, right? Maybe imagine him as a spouse coming to this dead and lifeless marriage.

And the home is filled with roses. It's full of wonderful, expensive roses. And Jesus comes in and throws them all in the trash.

And he says, look, I don't want your roses. I want your heart. This can't make up for what's lacking in this relationship.

[18 : 10] In fact, it's a slap in the face that you think you can buy your way out of the troubles of this marriage. And that's what's going on in this passage.

You won't give what's truly important. You won't give your time and energy and investment. All you're willing to give is your money. You give many flowers, but your heart is somewhere else. We could say, all roses know love. That is why Jesus is so frustrated in this passage.

That is why he set the stage with the illustration of the fig tree to point out how empty and fruitless and exploitative and damaging the system has become.

And so as we understand all of those things, as we get a sense of Jesus' frustration and his anger, there's two things simply that I want us to take from this passage.

[19 : 15] And the first is this, that it is possible to completely miss the point. It is possible to engage in ritual with no heart and not to even realize it.

This is the father who is proud of the Bible studies he attends and the doctrine he knows. But he has no compassion or grace towards his spouse or children.

Loves the ritual, misses the heart. It's the congregant who is proud of her service in the church and at the same time lacks the fruit of the spirit.

She's busy, but there's no love, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, or self-control. Loves the appearance, misses the heart.

It's the church that's proud of its ministries and its activities. And it burns through people rather than taking part in their healing.

[20 : 21] Loves the appearance, misses the heart. It's the leader who uses the manipulative tactics of the world and justifies it because he's doing God's work.

Loves the appearance, misses the heart. And so the question for us in all of that is this, in all of the busyness, in all of the religious activity that we take part in, are we actually bringing others to know God?

Or are we simply getting in the way? In the busyness and activity of religion, are we actually showing fruit? Are we growing in love, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control?

Or are we all hat and no cattle? All leaves, no figs. Jesus here is giving us a warning and a reminder that it is possible, it is easy to have fruitless religion.

It is easy and possible to be full of activity and also to simply follow the desires of our own hearts. Fruitless religion is a real and present danger.

[21 : 54] Now I told you there were two things that I want us to take from our passage. That is the first. The second is this. None of what I have said this morning matters unless we see Jesus.

What is Jesus' heart and his passion here? What is it that gets Jesus fired up? What is it that drives him to turn over tables and get people out?

Jesus' passion here is that you would access his presence. Jesus' anger is because his people are being starved.

Jesus' action here is because God's people are hungry for God's presence and his healing and that there are men who are getting in the way. And so more than anything else we have to see Jesus' love here for these people.

His love for the Gentiles. His love for those who are being blocked from God. His love for you.

[23 : 09] Jesus is passionate that his people would experience the healing and forgiveness and reconciliation the purpose and the significance that comes and only comes from his presence.

He is angry on behalf of someone else. He is angry on behalf of his people. He's angry on behalf of you. Jesus' passion is that his house would be a house of prayer for all nations.

What makes Jesus upset? Jesus is upset when you are blocked from him. Jesus is upset when rote and ritual religion get in the way of you experiencing the beauty and the glory of knowing his love and his forgiveness for you.

He is upset when people miss out on the glory of worshiping him, singing to him and hearing from him words of life. that is what gets Jesus going.

He's upset when you're kept from forgiveness and healing and meaning and wisdom and belonging. And so the same question that we've been looking at for a few weeks comes to us.

[24 : 37] Hast thou seen him, heard him, known him? is not thine a captured heart? Captivated by his beauty worthy tribute haste to bring, let his peerless worth constrain you, crown him now unrivalled king.

Yes, be careful about fruitless religion. Yes, be careful about blocking people from God's presence. Yes, watch out for the way in which religion becomes about the appearance rather than the substance and, most of all, more than anything else, see Jesus' heart.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem so that he can die. Jesus has come to Jerusalem so that any barrier between people and him would be broken down.

Jesus has come so the temple and its sacrificial system would not be needed anymore. Jesus has come so that we every year are not making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to be in his presence, but we can be in his presence now fully and finally because of the work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus came so that his people could be in his presence. I can tell you all sorts of things about the abuse of religious systems and none of it matters if we don't see this Jesus and grow in our love for him.

[26 : 13] Captivated by his beauty. See the beauty of Jesus in his love. See the beauty of Jesus in his anger.

There are stories that have been told of folks who have experienced horrific things and there's many things that are upsetting about that, many things that are haunting and traumatic.

One of the things that haunts people in those situations is this. No one was angry for me. No one was upset for me.

My parents or my spouse or my friends didn't fight for me in that. More than anything else in this passage, I want you to see this.

Jesus angry for you. Jesus angry for anything that blocks you from his presence.

[27 : 18] Jesus angry for those who keep you from him. that is his beauty and his glory. Now Jesus gives a curse here in verse 14.

It's a curse that's for the tree. Remember I told you all the details matter and there's a parallel for the temple as well. The temple in a sense is a lame duck at this point.

It is almost obsolete because the temple is doing a performing a function that will no longer be needed after Jesus' death. When we get to Mark chapter 14 and Jesus dies, one of the things we're going to see is that the inner curtain within the temple that protects people from the very greatest

and intense point of God's presence is going to be ripped from top to bottom in half because there is no longer a need for the temple to mediate God's presence with his people because Jesus has come to be Emmanuel, God with us.

Jesus is God's presence, not the temple. Jesus is going to make it no longer necessary. What he does in part here in clearing out this narthex for God's people to access him, he's going to do in full in the cross because when he's on the cross he is going to die the death that we deserve even though he lived the life that we should have.

He's going to take the punishment we deserve on him so that we can have access to God. Not as pilgrims making our way to Jerusalem but as those who can pray anytime, anywhere.

[29 : 03] Jesus is so passionate that you have fellowship with him, that you have access to him that he dies. That is his ultimate clearing of the temple.

In John chapter 4 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman. There's lots of things that happen there and they talk about but one of the things they talk about is this, she asks him to resolve this debate for her about where the appropriate place of worship is.

Are we supposed to worship in Jerusalem or are we supposed to worship here in Samaria? And Jesus says, look, that's not going to be even an issue soon. The time is coming when you're not going to worship here or there, you're going to worship in spirit and in truth.

Meaning that this system is coming to the end, the temple is obsolete because of me and my work, you will come to God in my name wherever and whenever you need to.

Mark chapter 11 verse 17 my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.

[30 : 25] And now we look not to the temple but to Jesus himself who is God's presence. That's why we pray in Jesus name.

And so let's do that now. Our Father in heaven, we