

# Mark - Fruitless Tree and Prayerless Temple

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of true spirituality, honesty, and consistency in our lives, and warns against hypocrisy and spiritual bankruptcy.*

**Duration:** 38:13

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Matthew 25:31-46, Mark 11:1-17

**Topics:** "Fruitless"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker challenges the congregation to examine their lives and minds to see if they are truly bearing fruit for God. He emphasizes that it is not enough to simply profess faith or be involved in church activities, but rather, our lives should reflect grace, faith, love, obedience, dedication, righteousness, morality, and godliness. The speaker uses the analogy of a fruitless tree that Jesus encountered, which appeared to have figs but had none. He warns that if our lives are fruitless, God will judge us just as Jesus judged the fruitless tree. The message calls for honesty, consistency, and a genuine display of fruit that matches our profession of faith.

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## Transcript

Will you kindly turn with me to Mark chapter 11, and I want to read verses 12 to 17, which brings together two incidents in the life of our Lord as he made his way to the city of Jerusalem on the Monday following the triumphal entry, as we read of it, in the previous verses of Mark chapter 11. Let me read then, beginning with verse 12. The next day, as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.

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 of figs. Then he said to the tree, may no one ever eat fruit from you again.

And his disciples heard him say it. On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.

And as he talked to them, he said, it is written, my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. May God bless his word to us. Fruitless tree and prayerless temple.

There is much in these verses, verses 1 to 19 of this chapter, that is symbolic. Much that has the nature of an acted parable. Our Lord's riding into Jerusalem, for example, falls into this category.

It was not a mere case of horse riding. Jesus was not out joyriding. This was fulfillment of prophecy.

It was something done in figure and in parable, which had a far deeper significance than might appear on the surface. He was coming as the Messiah King, to offer himself to the people whom God had prepared over the centuries. And they rejected and crucified him.

Now in the two passages before us today, the King rejects the nation that had first rejected him. He symbolically, or if you like, parabolically, shows that he rejects his rejectors. And the episodes relating to both the fig tree and the temple, symbolically speak of some of the calamitous consequences of the rejection of the one whom God anointed to be Messiah and to be King.

Now as we proceed therefore, we need to remember this aspect of things. We must see beyond the evident factors that appear here. We must see the significance, the meaning, the picture of the whole truth as intended by the inspired writer, and as we need to know it for our own profit and our the application to ourselves.

Two things then appear here, and I shall try and summarize what could well take us some time. First of all, we are going to look at the King and the fruitless tree. This incident took place on the Monday following the Sunday when Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem, as Mark records in verses 1 to 11.

On his way to the cross, ere the week was through, Jesus would unmask the nation that appears to be so religious, to be doing the will of God, to be the champions of orthodoxy and the purveyors of truth. And Jesus is determined that he must now, at long last, do that most terrible thing that anyone is ever asked to do. It is to tear the mask away from a hypocrite.

The nation has been masquerading as the voice of God, but now their heart is so hard and moved so utterly away from the will of God, Jesus must tear the mask away and say the truth about the very people whom God had nursed so tenderly through his prophets and his servants. The procession of the previous day, when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, you may remember, actually ended in the temple itself, in verse 11. But when Jesus got into the temple on the previous day, he did nothing save this.

He looked around on everything. It's quite a startling picture. It's very simply put in the Gospels, but it's evident from the language that is used here that it had its own significance.

He came into the temple, he said nothing, but he looked around as if he were to eye everything that he could see, and look through things and people. But he said nothing. On the contrary, he and his disciples retreated, and they went out again in towards the direction of Bethany, where they stayed the night.

The following morning, this was the Monday of the week, they come back again into the city, and this episode of the fig tree took place then. First thing I want you to notice concerning it is the acute disappointment which it caused. The fig tree became an object of attention from the distance.

Look at verse 15. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. It is important to notice that the fig tree in our text actually stood out as being singular, quite unique.

It was the only fig tree that apparently had leaves, and suggested by having leaves that it also had fruit. Now William Hendrickson comments in this way, and it's a very important comment for us to understand what went on there. In the region referred to here in Mark, the early or smaller figs growing from the sprouts of the previous year begin to appear at the end of March, and are ripe in May and June.

And my good friend Ernie Palnock, who will be preaching here tonight and who knows much about the Middle East, was telling me that this is precisely so. The later and much larger figs that develop on the new or spring shoots are gathered from August to October. It is important to point out that the earlier figs, with which we are here concerned, begin to appear simultaneously with the leaves, and sometimes, in fact, they even precede the leaves.

Now then, it was not yet the time for the larger fruit, the proper figs, the crop for this year. But here was a tree that was unusual. It professed by its foliage that it was in fruit.

It stood out in contrast to all the other trees, and it appeared to say to everybody that came that way, look at me, I'm already in fruit. There's something to be gathered under my bowel. That fig tree aroused expectations in the very heart of the hungry King Jesus.

I can't explain to you why. He comes from Bethany, and generally our Lord Jesus Christ fared very well in Bethany. But he was hungry on this particular day when he came from Bethany.

I don't know why, I can't answer the question. Was it that he and his disciples had slept out under the open sky and they'd had no breakfast? Well, I cannot tell you. Your imagination, your guess is as good as mine, but the fact is he was hungry.

And when he saw this promise on the fig tree, he thought, well, here is the answer to my need. I can gather figs, early figs, from this tree, even though it's not the season of fruit. I wouldn't normally have expected it, but here it is.

And he comes to the tree, but that expectation was to be denied its realization when he reached it. Oh, my good friends, let us listen to this. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season of figs.

In other words, it was not the season of figs, and Jesus would not normally have expected figs on this tree, but it professed to have figs by its foliage, and they came together. But as we have already pointed out, that tree, having professed it with its luxuriant foliage, was, as a matter of fact, hypocritical, if we may so speak, of a tree. Now, it hardly needs to be explained that that is an accurate description of the Jewish nation of our Lord's day, professing to be ahead of all the nations and the knowledge of God and in the service of God.

That very nation, that ancient people, so much blessed, heirs of the covenants and of the promises and so forth, that very nation, the nation of Israel, was nevertheless, in reality, bare of fruit that God required. It had no faith in His Son, the promised Messiah. It could not understand the scriptures that spoke of Him.

The nation was blind and dead, and would crucify the very Lord of glory. Nothing but leaves. She was utterly divorced from the purposes of God, and so evidently out of fellowship with God the Father as to crucify God the Son.

My friend, what about you and me this morning? Could your life and mine by any stretch of imagination be described as nothing but leaves? We profess, we claim, we testify, we witness by the singing of the hymns, by our relationship to the church, by the words of our lips in other respects. But I ask you as we come to the table of our Lord this morning, is there any fruit under the leaves? Does your life and mine satisfy the hunger of the King of kings this morning for grace, for faith, for love, for obedience, for dedication, for righteousness, for morality, for God-likeness? This tree elicited the righteous judgment of the King. You see, He is acting as King, even though they've rejected Him only yesterday.

But He is still King. Oh I want you to see that. They said no, He says I'm still King, and I'm acting as King.

And so He judicially passed sentence on that fig tree, and said to it in effect, look treating it in a personal way now, but all this was symbolically of course. All right, you choose to act like this, remain like that forever. No man ever eat fruit of you forever.

Not of course, let me repeat, that we are to understand the passage as saying that our Lord was actually angry with the tree itself. In this acted parable, His real anger was against the reality symbolized or represented in the parable, namely against Israel. The profusion of foliage that created expectations in his mind and heart, even from a distance, from a distance, now proves to be nothing but a mirage.

Can I remind you my friends that our Jesus Christ was always angry with hypocrisy. He was far more angered against hypocrisy than he was against the open sin of sex or many other kinds of evil. Hypocrisy stirred his soul to an antipathy that was raging.

May I remind you that barrenness in spiritual things brought forth the sternest words from the Son of God. You read, you read again Matthew chapter 25, failure to feed the hungry, refresh the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the needy, visit the sick and the imprisoned. These are so serious, such serious omissions in the sight of our Lord that they lead, as he tells us, to eternal punishment.

And he ends the passage by saying, inasmuch as you did it not to the least of these, my brethren, you did it not unto me. You professed to be, and I expected it from you, but you did it not. You were clustered with leaves, but there was no fruit.

He says exactly the same thing in the parable of the talents. Do you remember that man that hid the one talent that he got? And he brought it to his Lord at last, and he says, Lord, here's the talent. I've kept it intact.

I've lost nothing. Here it is. I knew that you were a hard master.

You reap where you do not sow and so forth. Yes, here it is. You remember what our Lord said? He said, take him away and cast him into outer darkness.

Professing faith, he was actually a doubter, and he had evil thoughts about his Lord which were unjustified. All leaves, no real life in the soul. Are we not to understand that the sin of the rich man who ultimately found himself in hell, according to Luke chapter 16, are we not to understand that the sin of that rich man, according to the parable, was that whereas he fared sumptuously every day, he did nothing to alleviate the sores and the sufferings of Lazarus who sat every day at his gate.

He did nothing. He had the means. He made the profession with all leaves, no love, no life.

Simply to bear a crop of leaves when we pretend to have eternal life in our souls, my good friends, is just not good enough for our God. Our Lord is looking for honesty and consistency, and today He is looking in my heart and in your heart for fruit that matches the profession we make, a king and a fruitless tree. If your life is a fruitless life this morning, professor of faith in Christ, the King will act with you in precisely the same way.

Hurriedly let us turn to the second, the King and the spiritually fruitless temple. I like the way our Lord repeats Himself because He's saying virtually the same thing again only in another situation altogether. The whole imagery is different.

We've moved forward into Jerusalem and we're in the temple, the holy place. Not the holy place, but in the temple. You will notice that the passage in Mark moves on naturally and without any sense of break from the reference to the fig tree to that concerning the temple, giving the impression that Mark was consciously proceeding to expound the same subject and the same theme.

They're not separate despite the change in the data. The tree and the temple are here employed in order to claim the same message. Now, just briefly, first of all, I want you to notice the apparently religious activity of the temple.

Never was there a busier place than the Jerusalem temple. One modern commentator who is very much appreciated by some people tells us that there were attached to the temple as many as over, hold your breath, 20,000 priests and as many Levites. Obviously, they could not all serve at the one and the same time.

They were therefore divided into 26 courses and served in rotation. But there were so many of them they lived as far afield as Jericho when they were not on duty. Now, with a staff like that, what can you do? You can imagine the kind of activity that must have been going on week in, week out, day in, day out.

Oh, they were busy in the temple court all day long, all week long, all through the year, year after year. The temple was therefore the hive of activity of one kind or another with the main ingredients being, of course, the offering of the prescribed sacrifices and prayers, the reading of the scriptures and the attendant tasks which are referred to here. You must bring the requisite sacrifice, the beast or the pigeon, whatever it is, and you must pay the necessary dues.

And in order to help folk do that, some, you might say, religiously inclined people, you might even say some zealous, God-fearing Jews had thought of a scheme to say, if people bring their own animals for sacrifice, let's provide animals for them on the temple premises. Well, that might have been very good especially for pilgrims coming abroad, but it also had the advantage for pilgrims from close at hand because, you see, in order to offer a sacrifice, the sacrifice had to be clean. And the priests had already scrutinized these sacrifices that were in the temple and they would be sure to be accepted.

Whereas if you brought, if you brought a lamb from your own homestead, from your own farm, it might not be acceptable. And you might ostensibly be tempted to say, this is a marvelous service. So when you came anywhere near the temple premises, you had the stench of a marketplace and the noise of a fair and much else.

Then there was this. You had to pay your temple dues in the temple coinage. Pilgrims coming from abroad couldn't pay in the currency that was theirs and so they needed to exchange.

Well, here were some God-fearing people, it might seem, you might be, you might be tempted to think, who set up a business and said, come on, come and exchange your currencies and we'll give you temple coins instead, but at a price. In this matter, as in the trading of animals, there was endless scope for sheer profiteering and for the fleecing of the helpless worshippers so that, as Jesus says later, these people, under the blessing of the high priests of the day, as we know from history, these people had turned the house of God into a den of thieves. Behind that apparent spiritual activity there lay hidden an almost total spiritual bankruptcy and even antipathy to the purposes of God.

So our Lord takes action. You see, he's the king. He was the king in relation to the tree, the natural.

He is the king in relation to the temple, the spiritual order. And he takes control and single-handed, as he had done at the very outset of his ministry, to warn the nation of problems and difficulties and judgment if they did not amend their ways. He now does it at the end of his ministry.

The rejected king assumes regal power in his father's house, and he begins to cast out, to excommunicate those who are there transforming what should have been a house of prayer into a den of thieves. And then, of course, our Lord is very gracious and not only gracious to those people but gracious to us very especially in giving us the explanation of all this, lest we should misunderstand it. Our Lord didn't simply cast them out and say, you sinners, you don't deserve a place in the house of God.

He didn't do that. But he goes on to explain. He teaches.

And so we read in verse 17, and as he taught them, he would teach even these people, these robbers in the temple. As he taught them, he said, it is written, my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers. Jesus, as in so many other instances where men violated his father's will in one way or another, took these people as he took others on other occasions right back to the purpose of God.

What was the purpose of God for the temple? You see, we need always to get back to the beginnings and to the initial, the original, the eternal purpose of God for life, for physical life, for home, for marriage, for everything. What was the purpose of God? We cannot understand the things before us in contemporary life unless we really take them back to their roots and always ask this question, what is the purpose, what was the plan of God for this, if it's in the plan of God at all? Jesus does it here, and he explains the plan of God for the temple was this, not just to have a marvelous structure, it was a symbolic structure in itself, but fundamentally it was that the temple should be a house of prayer, a place where by the symbolism of the sacrifices and the reading of the scriptures and the God-fearing leadership of a God-fearing clergy, they should be inspired to pray. And if the temple ministry does not bring people to pray, they might as well shut shop.

And it doesn't stop there, says Jesus, my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations. God has always been a missionary God from the very beginning. He found it very difficult to get this across to his people.

In ancient days, as in our days, there are always somebody we don't want to go to, and we want to cut them out of the kingdom, or we forget about them, or we become so absorbed in our own little things that we forget them and exclude them. God says, my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations. Now, you have only momentarily to place such a statement alongside the facts that here obtained in order to see the immensity of the tragedy that had developed.

Of course, there were prayers of a kind said in the temple, but they were prayers of a kind that was far, far removed from the temple being a house of prayer. And certainly for all nations, it had become a marketplace and a marketplace where unscrupulous men took advantage of the religious convictions of their fellows in order to enrich themselves. Neither is that all.

The tragedy that was confined, was not even confined to that. The degeneracy that had set in had become so far that they did not simply confine themselves to not making the temple a house of prayer and not seeking to bring the nations within the reach of the house of God and the throne of God. This is what we have here is a missionary process in reverse.

The Jews are keeping the nations away from God. By the kind of thing they are allowing in the temple, they are blockading the way to God. They're blocking the way.

They're getting so absorbed with things which are wrong and evil and iniquitous that they're turning the Gentiles away and indeed many other Jews. You see what's happening? It isn't simply that they were not being missionary minded. The whole missionary thing is in reverse.

They're blockading the way to God. They're standing in the way. They are the hindrances.

Imagine a Gentile coming to the temple and smelling the stench that was there. I'm sorry, I must speak frankly. And hearing the noise and seeing these people profiteering from their fellows.

What are they going to do? Is this the worship of the one true God? It cannot be. Rather than draw people to a knowledge of God, the whole life and ministry of the temple put men and women off. Now can you see the total picture? And I'm through.

The fig tree professed fruit when no one else professed fruit. No other tree made such a profession, but this one did. And Jesus used it to symbolize the profession of the Jewish people.

And maybe this morning to symbolize somebody here who's making a very big profession. You think of yourself as a super saint, a man or a woman of God. This is your heart picture of yourself who is always superior to others.

Doctrinally you can put everybody in their place. Spiritually you do this and you do that. And your own self-image is such that you are it.

But I want to say to you, my friend, that though you may appear like that from the distance, the King comes near to see what's under the leaves. And this morning he's hungry for fruit, holiness, righteousness, love, obedience. And he's come to feed at the table.

As you take the symbols of his body and his blood, he asks of you the fruit of what you profess. Don't bring the leaves. He's asking for the life.

The temple was organized as if it were fulfilling the very plan and purpose of God, whereas as a matter of fact that temple was robbing God of everything. It stole his glory. It stood in his way.

And even the very Lamb of God whom the sacrifices symbolized and the sacrifices were meaningless without him, even the Lamb of God himself, they crucified and said, we don't want you. You see, they've become satisfied with the symbolical and the ritual and have made themselves into robbers of God. Before the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us boldly face ourselves, brothers and sisters in Christ.

I may be sounding harsh from this pulpit this morning. I don't mean to. I can only tell you that this has shaken my soul this week, and I can only tell you that it doesn't leave me comfortable.

What if this congregation to which we belong can be said in any measure to be standing in God's way, not a bridge to prayer, but a blockade and a stumbling block? What if the larger church to which we belong can be designated in the same way? Or if your life and mine has any share in that? I am glad that we are coming to the cross today. The elements speak of the crucified Lord, and so does the Word. And it is here and here alone that I dare face my failures and my sins.

Will you do that with me? Bring it all out. Show him what's under the leaves, the bareness, the fruitlessness. Tell him that there are many activities in your life which have an apparently religious veneer, which are no more religious than the action of a robber.

For self rather than the Savior is the goal. Thank God that we can be honest at the cross. Thank God that we can confess our sins to our Lord, for he has said, if we confess our sins, he, the all-holy and just incarnate Son, he and the Father in him and through him, he is faithful to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Acknowledging our sins and appealing for his mercy and trusting in his grace, this is the spirit that should bring every one of us this morning to the table where heavenly food is offered for our weak and vacillating spirits. Let us pray. O Lord God most high and holy, hear the secret sighs and prayers of our hearts, the acknowledgement of wrongs, the profession of things that are not at all true of us, the activities that have been mere expression of self-seeking rather than an attempt to bring men to prayer and a relationship of fellowship with yourself.

Stand, O Lord, in mercy, even if it be in judgment, and speak peace to every acknowledgement of the realities of the case, and pardon us through your precious blood. Amen.

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