



Sermon Title: Cursing the Tree

Mark 11:1-25

Speaker: Anthony Ballard

Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.

Good morning, everybody.

Good morning, those of you online. Good to be here with you today. Yeah, we have a word today that's going to be very interesting because up to this point what we've heard about Jesus has all been very nice guy things. We've been reading up to Mark and he's been feeding people who are hungry. He's been associating and speaking with women who in that time it was not okay to talk with women and to even honor them and to elevate them at a level of honor was different. He treated them in this way. And just last week we learned that he welcomed children up to him and he laid his hands on them and he honored the children as well. And he said, "If you want to enter into his kingdom, us adults need to be like the children."

No one was doing that in his time and he's being this really nice guy. Again, he's feeding people, he's nice, he's compassionate, and all this stuff. And his approval ratings was at an all time high at this point because just a few verses before what I'm going to read, he's welcomed into Jerusalem as king and the people are praising him and they're waving these palm branches in the air and they're saying, "Hosanna! Hosanna! You are the king, Jesus!" He's just loved. He's an all around cool guy. He's a nice guy. Jesus is our friend, guys. But now we need to read Mark chapter 11, starting at verse 12. And let's see what it has to say.

"The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance of fig tree and leaf, he went out to find if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves because it was not the season yet for 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 courts 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 taught them, he said, 'Is it not written my house will be a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers.' The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard him say this and they began to look for a way to kill him for they feared him because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city, and in the morning as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, look, the fig tree you cursed has withered.'"

So what is going on here? On the surface, to me when I read this, on the surface it looks like Jesus is being mean, to be honest, because Mark makes it very clear that this tree that he cursed, it was not yet its time to bear fruit. To me, the fig tree was innocent. It's just sitting there, not bearing fruit because it's not time. And then bam, Jesus curses it and it dies. And if I can make it even more intense, in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew writes that Jesus cursed the tree and immediately right then and there the tree withered and died. We see Jesus then also driving out people from the temples who were selling things and who were making money turning the church into a marketplace. And he does not kindly ask them to, "Everyone stand up. Take your things and leave." He doesn't do that.

John actually says that he tied cords together, he made a whip, and then drove them out of the church. And if you think about it that way, that means somebody got hit on the way out by that whip. That's why they were all running. And it makes me think, is Jesus allowed to do this? He's not supposed to do that. He's supposed to be the one who lays his hands on kids and welcomes people and is tolerant and loving. When I first read this verse, I realized, I was like, man, why did I switch preaching weeks with Pastor Rich when he asked me? I said yes and then I read it and I was like, what have I done? This is not easy to preach. But my job today, my task today is to ask us to learn how to hold two images together, the image of Jesus feeding, feeding people, loving kids, kind and tolerant Jesus.

And then we also have to hold onto us the one who has whips in his hands who flips tables and pronounces judgment. We have to hold both. And so he is this gentle, kind, and loving and patient rabbi, and he's also a king who pronounces judgment. And this may be hard for some of us, U.S. Americans, to hear this and to accept this image, but there's places in the global church around the world where this image is something that is familiar and even needed in their context. So we can't skip this important part of our faith. We can't skip this chapter. We have to read it, we have to sit with it, and we can't even explain it away. Because if we do that, we end up with a watered down version of Christianity that has no power when times of turbulence, times of trial and challenge come our way.

So today, Bel Press, we have to learn to hold both things in our hands. So about that fig tree, let me walk off really quick. That fig tree that was there, Jesus walks up to it and remember it said he's hungry. He was hungry. And so he comes up to this fig tree and he inspects it closer and he looks at it and there's no fruit there. It's not doing its job. This is a fig tree, as you can probably guess, and there is no fruit. There's no figs on this tree. It is not doing its purpose and useless. I'm not going to curse this tree, just so you know. No demonstration in that way. But again, it said that Jesus was hungry. He was expecting something from this tree. And to me it reminds me of, when I was a kid, we would have family pizza nights and stuff on a Friday and we would have some leftovers.

And so the next morning I would go to the kitchen early Saturday morning about to watch some Saturday morning cartoons and I would open the pizza box and there was only crust there because my siblings had eaten all the pizza. You can imagine how disappointing and tragic of a story that is. This is real. This really happened to me, guys. I just had to throw it in the sermon for you to know. But Mark again makes it clear that it was not the season for figs. It wasn't his fault, but the tree had began to bloom early. The tree had began to show signs of liveliness, signs that it was doing something, but in reality there was nothing but shell. There was no figs. It was all shell.

And this fig tree in this story is not about the tree, actually. The tree, the fig tree is a symbol. It's a symbol for Israel because throughout the Scriptures, Israel was called, referred to as a vineyard, God's vineyard, or in some cases, actually referred to as a fig tree. And Israel, they were to be the people of God that were supposed to represent God to the nations. And so people were supposed to look at Israel and see that they were a blessed people and then they would want to turn to their God and praise and worship him. And when they failed to bear this fruit, they would then face the consequences. Instead of being a blessing to the nations, they would end up being conquered by the nations and then sent into exile and captivity.

And if you've been in church any amount of time in your life, you probably know that it's easy for a person to come to church, to know all the words, to all the songs, to carry their Bible and read it all the time, but upon closer inspection, if Jesus were to look at their life, he may find nothing there but leaves. And so two things can very much be true that we have to understand. Last week, Pastor Andy told us that, before we do anything, Jesus has loved us. And even if we do nothing, Jesus loves us. And that is the truth, full stop. And, and not but, but and, Jesus did not create us to do nothing. Then if we do nothing, then we're like a fig tree with leaves, but no fruit. We may look cute and beautiful, but the reality, there's nothing of substance really there.

And so Jesus comes upon us as the Lord of the Vineyard ready to eat the fruit that he owns and he finds nothing. He loves us as we are, but we're not supposed to stay that way. And so this is what we call idleness. That means you're doing nothing, there's no action and activity happening. But the other sign that's just as bad is the potential for bad

fruit to grow, rotten fruit that leads to evil and rotten actions. Jesus' entire life is prophesied in the Old Testament of the Bible. You can look through and find some glimpse of Jesus there. And as I said, Israel, the fig tree is the symbol for Israel. And the prophet Micah talks about this and he says, "What misery is mine. I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard. There is no cluster of grapes to eat. None of the early figs that I crave."

And Micah goes on to say, "The faithful have been swept from the land. Not one upright person remains. Everyone lies in wait to shed blood. They hunt each other with nets. Both hands are skilled in doing evil. The ruler demands gifts. The judge accepts bribes. The powerful dictate what they desire, and they all conspire together." Micah is showing us that sin and corruption and evil come from bad fruit. So it's not just merely Jesus being frustrated with the tree or frustrated that there's no fruit there. He knows that if fruitlessness remains, it leaves way for evil to flourish. So it's better for the whole tree to be cursed and killed and thrown out than for it to corrupt others around it. And the prophet Micah again laments us because Israel was to be God's representatives to the nations. What they did and what they would show people is how the nations would view God, their father.

And so they were to have one God, they were to be people of justice and people of fairness, but instead they were people whose both hands were skilled in doing evil. The rulers were demanding gifts. The judge was accepting bribes. The powerful dictated what they desired and they all conspired together. And this is the problem with being a Christian who does not bear fruit. Fruitlessness and discipleship makes way for evil to flourish. Just as Jesus was frustrated with the religious leaders in Israel, today we just as easily can be guilty of this. We can engage in all kinds of church activity, attend all kinds of events and things, and this can give the illusion of life and fruit. But upon closer inspection, will Jesus actually find anything there?

And we might say, "How is this even possible to live this way?" Well, in the verses one through 11 before this, we saw that Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem as king. They were waving palm branches in the air and they were saying, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" which means save us. And they were saying that he was their king. They were worshiping him, in other words. Yet this is also what we call Palm Sunday, one of the most well-attended services of the whole year in any church, and yet these same people that were saying Hosanna a few days later will be some of the same people saying, "Crucify him! Crucify! Crucify!" They had leaves but there was no fruit in their lives. And so Jesus is not fooled by this.

That is why Mark intentionally writes the story where it's the people who are worshiping Jesus. Then he shows the fig tree, and then it's the driving out people from the temple. And then it's the fig tree story again. It's to illustrate for us that this fig tree is a representation of everything else that's happening around it. "What misery is mine," the prophet Micah prophesies for Jesus. "None of the early figs I crave are available to eat."

And know that this side of Jesus that we're talking about today, he does not take joy in cursing trees and flipping tables. He doesn't like this. Just if you're getting that image, he doesn't like it. It's misery for him, as it says, misery. And so this lack of fruit can be represented in two ways. It can be idleness, which is just for show Christianity, flashy stuff, but no substance, or evil actions, bad fruit that corrupts us and corrupts everything around us.

And maybe it's easier for you to remember the old saying that says, "Idle hands are the devil's playthings." Simple as that. Rather than being used by the Lord Jesus, we might end up being used by our enemy, the devil. And if you're hearing this today and maybe you're feeling something inside you, this should concern you. This should concern all of us, myself included, those of you online. It should concern you, but you should not be frightened by this because, while he does pronounce judgments, he is still a merciful rabbi who teaches us. And that is why in the Old Testament it says that God says he will replant his vineyards so that we will yield fruit again. He has determined that his chosen people bear fruit in his name. And we as a church, we're trying to do this. We are trying to help ourselves and all of us be people who bear fruit for Jesus and not just be people with flashy leaves who attend church every week.

The past year, we've been trying to do some things like reading the Bible together through the Reading Plan, practicing Sabbath, practicing prayer and fasting for 24 hours. Not just activity, but trying to get us to be people who bear fruit outside of Sunday. And in my opinion, I feel that this Mark Reading Plan is a peak moment for us and shifting from just hearing sermons to actually learning how to practice what we're learning. And the reason for that is most churches our size that are big like this, when summertime comes, it's off-season time. We don't try to do anything too special, too important because we know everyone's on vacation, and so we can't get too serious right now. It's off season. But we need to be people who bear fruit and who are being disciples even in the off season, during the summertime. And that's why we have this Mark Reading Plan. For us to stay connected, to stay practicing even when we're not here in church. Maybe some of you online are like that.

And so it's not so that we can be busy doing stuff, but so that we can bear fruit no matter where we might be. There's a young adult in our church. Her name is Abby, and I think Abby's here somewhere. Yeah, there she goes. And she is reading through the Mark Reading Plan, and she sent us a message letting us know how it's going. And here's what she said. "I was on an eight-day backpacking trip recently and brought along my Kindle with the Bible on it so I can keep up with the Reading Plan. I was really worried about not having enough food because it was in an area that required food to be kept in a bear can, and I couldn't fit eight days worth of food in a beer can."

"However, I read that the Jesus feeds the 5,000 and Jesus feeds the 4,000 stories during this time and brought them up as a reminder to God to not let me run out of food."

Miraculously, well, maybe not in the technical sense, but it felt very fortunate, not only did I have enough food, but we ran into someone who had too much food and was giving some away. So I even had some left over." Isn't that amazing? Two things I love about this story. One is that she took her Bible on this trip, and it was an eight-day trip so that means she didn't come to church. That's not a shade. She didn't come to church, but she was living. The second thing is that she was using living for Jesus on the other days when she wasn't here, because it's not about this campus or being in this room, it's about what happens outside of this time that shows the fruit that we're bearing.

This summer, I was in Rwanda with the team and I got to preach there and I got to preach at Pastor Lexis' church, his home church, which the lead Pastor there is Pastor Daniel, and they welcomed us into this church. And when I got up to preach, guess what he said to me, something you guys would never probably hear here. He said, "You have an hour." And guys, I preached for an hour up there. No manuscript, just notes. It was crazy. It was an amazing time. I loved it. But when I got up there, I shared about some things that's happening here in this church, and I share with them that we did prayer and fasting for 24 hours recently. And you know what happened? Everyone applauded and burst into applause at that moment. And the reason why is because this is a church that practices fasting every quarter for seven days, every quarter. They do this regularly.

And when they heard that for some of us here we practiced fasting for the first time in our lives, they were so thrilled to know that this was happening because they know the fruit that's going to come out of it. In this church, when we got a tour, when Pastor Daniel gave us a tour of the church, he showed us a room, and this is a prayer room. We have a prayer room, but this prayer room has a shower and a toilet in it because they book it out for three days for people to stay and live in it for three days to pray and fast continually. That's why they were so thrilled when we had 24 hours, just a day. They were so thrilled to hear what we were doing because they know the fruit of what happens when you do that. And the thing is, we also got to witness some of what God's doing in them, that they were able to purchase land next to their property and they're able to use it. They're going to be building new ministry opportunities and other activities for the community to engage in there.

And that Sunday, and this was a random Sunday where two people got baptized in the morning, several young people joined the church becoming members, and two people accepted Jesus as their savior that morning, and he told us that they're gaining a good name in the community. The local community is beginning to hear about them and actually want to come and learn more about Jesus because of the work that they're doing there. They are a fig tree with many figs, and that's something that I hope will we continually learn how to be, that we continually learn how to be a church that not with great attendance, not with good music or good preaching, but with fruit that comes from all of us here.

The life of Jesus makes it easy for us to see what it looks like to be people who bear fruit and the Bible actually teaches it all throughout it. It's pretty simple if you find it. It's not easy. It's simple though, if you find it. In John 15, Jesus says, "I am the true vine and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of me that bears no fruit. While every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes it so that it'll be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to. You remain in me and I in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." Jesus gives us his Holy Spirit. He's like, "It's not going to happen on your own. You have to have the spirit. You have to have me with you." So he gives us his Holy Spirit freely so that we cannot fail to live this out.

The Bible also teaches us about the fruit of the spirit and the works of the flesh. It compares them together saying how you should not live and how you should live. And it says, the acts of the flesh are obvious, sexual morality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions, and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. All of these things are the rotten fruit that must be removed. It cannot just stay and be washed out. It has to be removed out so that it won't corrupt everything around it. But then the Bible also tells us that we can experience the fruit of the spirit, which is love, joy, peace, forbearance or patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things, there is no law. Since we live by the spirit, let us keep in step with the spirit.

So no matter if you're a student, if you're a senior adult, anywhere in between that, we all, even those of you online, we all have an opportunity to live this out this year. How? This is probably the best time actually to try to practice this. We are in election year, and it's an election year unlike any that I've seen since I've been old enough to care about elections and stuff. I haven't seen some of this stuff happening. We have an opportunity to show people what being a follower of Jesus looks like on our social channels, in our conversations at home, wherever we might find ourselves to be. Because when we publicly bear this fruit, it gives God a good name and the people want to know more about this God say. His people, the people who call themselves Christians, they live a little different than anything else I'm seeing out there. That's our opportunity.

And guess what? It ain't going to be easy. That's why we have a spirit though. It's called the fruit of the spirit, not the fruit of Anthony or the fruit of Steve. It's not that. It's the fruit of the spirit because he gives it to us. And so I won't speak for every church in America or even every church in Bellevue, but for this church here, Bel Press, we must be people this year who bear fruit. It is a non-negotiable. The times are too dark. The stakes are too high. We have to bear fruit this year. We have to be people of love, joy, and peace and patience. We must. We have the choice, dissension or goodness, factions or faithfulness? Those are our options. And so if you need help with this, we have prayer ministers and

pastors who would love to pray with you. And don't be embarrassed about coming to get prayer for these things because it's hard.

Everywhere around you, everyone gets to be however they want and have fits of rage, but us somehow have to live differently than that. So if you need prayer, we have people here who would love to pray with you. And then to close out, I'll end with just this small thing that Jesus says. He says, "This is my father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." Let's pray. Lord Jesus, help us to bear fruit. God, it is not easy, not when everything around us tells us to do the opposite of what you call us to, but help us to be people, not with leaves, but people with fruit, fruit that you can eat, fruit that the surrounding people who don't know you can see in our lives and want to experience. God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, will you help us to do that? We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How does reading a chapter like this make you feel about Jesus? Cursing the fig tree, and drive people out of the temple with whips. Does it make you feel safe, fearful, reverence, or something else?
- Living pretty lives on the outside but fruitless lives on the inside causes us to be at odds with Jesus, what one step can you take to be more fruitful in your discipleship?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.