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Sermon Summary #33

Figs, Fakery, and Faith **Mark 11:11-14, 20-25**

Criticizing the Church and Christians is fast becoming a national pastime here in the U.S., some of which is deserved, a lot of which isn't. One hears things like: "You guys are all in it for the money!" Or, "You're a bunch of anti women, anti gay, judgmental, close-minded religious phonies." Or perhaps you've heard something like: "You Christians are just another religious club that exists solely for the sake of its own members. Where are you when people are hurting and the world is in crisis?"

I have to say, however, that among all the many criticisms one hears about Christianity and the Church, none is heard so often as the charge of **hypocrisy**. There are a lot of reasons why non-Christians justify maintaining their distance from the church, but first and foremost is the accusation that Christians are a bunch of people who don't possess what they profess. They are flashy on the outside but hollow on the inside. They make great claims but back it up with very little conduct. They profess to be full but are in fact empty. They put on a façade of righteousness all the while living in sin. It is the distinct **absence of authenticity**, so the critics say, that most plagues the church.

You've probably heard the somewhat smarty-pants response whenever someone says they'll never attend a church because of the presence of hypocrites: "Hey, that's no problem, we're always happy to make room for one more." That's probably not the most helpful way to deal with the problem. May I suggest another approach?

First, tell people that a confession of hypocrisy is actually a **requirement** for involvement in the local church. No one, not even the most mature of Christians, is ever entirely free of hypocrisy. Before you can ever be a part of the body of Christ you have to acknowledge up front that you are a sinner in need of salvation, and one of the common elements in all sinners is hypocrisy. So, my advice is this: If you are **not** a hypocrite, please don't come to Bridgeway. *We have nothing to offer people who are perfectly genuine.*

Second, yes, we acknowledge the presence of hypocrisy in the church, but understand that it is never condoned. Hypocrisy is simply one of many sins, along with lust and envy and pride and greed and dishonesty, that we believe the grace of God and the power of the Spirit can both forgive and overcome.

Third, it's important to remember that God is far more upset about hypocrisy in the church than we are. If there is hypocrisy in the church, and there is, it wasn't God's idea. It was ours. And trust, me, he will not let us get away with it for very long.

Fourth, every religion, philosophy, in every arena of life, has its hypocrites. There are Hindu hypocrites, Buddhist hypocrites, even atheistic hypocrites. No people group or club or gathering or political party or religious sect is devoid of people who fail to live up consistently to what they profess to believe as true.

Fifth, perhaps the best response to this charge is to remind people who are concerned about hypocrisy that **we are not inviting them to Christians. We are inviting them to Christ!** We as Christians are far from perfect. Only Christ is, and it is he whom we offer in the gospel. *He is the only one whose life we hold up as exemplary and worthy of being imitated.*

Now, why did I start out talking about hypocrisy? It's not a very pleasant topic and probably not the best way to gain the attention of a congregation of people. The reason I brought it up, quite simply, is because that's what this story in Mark 11 is all about, or at least in large measure is about.

Our Lord's encounter with the fig tree is largely about the way in which it illustrates the spiritual condition of those who had corrupted the Temple as well as the way in which God brings judgment against them.

There is a very important reason why Mark first describes our Lord's encounter with the fig tree, only then to tell us of his violent purging of the Temple, and then return once again to the fig tree and the lessons we are supposed to learn from it. In other words, what Jesus did in cursing the fig tree was an object lesson of what God will ultimately do with the hypocrisy and the hypocrites who populated and had corrupted the Temple and its purposes.

But why start with v. 11? After all, it looks as if it belongs with vv. 1-10 and the story of the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. But in fact what Mark wants us to understand is that Jesus first visited the Temple so that he might see for himself, in advance, what was happening there. This provided him the **opportunity to plan for the next day**. In other words, what happens next, as Jesus explodes in righteous rage against the money-changers and merchants, was **not a spontaneous act of outrage but a planned demonstration**. Jesus no doubt spent the night praying and planning about what he would do when he entered the Temple the next day.

Jesus has performed several so-called "nature" miracles: on two occasions he miraculously transformed a few fish and loaves of bread into enough food to feed multiple thousands of people; with a spoken word he reduced the stormy wind and waves on the Sea of Galilee to a perfect calm; and of course he appeared to his disciples walking on the water.

Here now we come to yet another "nature" miracle, but the difference is that this one is entirely **destructive**. On the surface it appears to achieve **no purpose**. It doesn't appear to help anyone or provide food or bring healing. It strikes us as spontaneous and spiteful, an angry outburst by Jesus as a result of his disappointment in not finding any figs on the tree. Many have looked at this and find it hard to understand why Jesus would have misused his miraculous power in such a petty way. Students of Mark's gospel still wonder why Mark would even bother to record it for us. Needless to say, **environmentalists** today would not take kindly to our Lord's action. How dare he destroy an innocent tree in a fit of anger.

All through Mark's gospel we have been asking the question: **"Who is Jesus?"** For some, the answer provided by this story is not a nice one. "Jesus," some critics have argued, "is a petty hot-head who got bent out of shape over something as insignificant as a fig tree that failed to grow figs." The bottom line is that many are **embarrassed** by what Jesus did to the fig tree. From a distance Jesus can see that the tree is **"in leaf,"** that is to say, the leaves on the tree suggest that there are figs, and he's hungry. But upon closer inspection he discovers that there are only leaves and no figs, and it triggers in Jesus a violent reaction.

As I was studying this short story in Mark's gospel earlier this week it reminded me of what happened a few weeks ago in the rivalry between Auburn University and the University of Alabama. If you are not a sports fan you probably didn't hear about it. A few weeks ago police on the campus of Auburn University arrested a 62-year-old man for intentionally poisoning the 130-year-old oak trees at Toomer's Corner. Since the early 1960's, Auburn fans have gathered at the intersection of Magnolia Avenue and College Street to drape the branches of the trees with rolls of toilet paper, not as an act of vandalism but in celebration of victory!

Harvey Updyke of Dadeville, Alabama, was arrested and charged with felony criminal mischief. Updyke, an Alabama fan, is accused of applying a lethal dose of herbicide into the soil surrounding the trees. Updyke was then dumb enough to call a national sports radio program and confess on the air to the crime! If convicted, he faces up to 10 years in prison.

Officials at Auburn are trying everything they can do to save the trees. They have saturated the soil surrounding the trees with liquid charcoal in an attempt to absorb the herbicide, but experts say there is little hope. The poison could remain in the soil for as long as five years. It may take quite some time for the trees to eventually die, but die they will.

In the case of Jesus and the fig tree, it withered and died instantly following the action of Jesus. The death of the fig tree was evidently instantaneous ("and the fig tree withered at once" Mt. 21:19). This was a display of supernatural and miraculous power. Healthy, full-grown trees do not wither up and die in a mere twenty-four hours. The point is that the tree died because of the powerful, spoken word of Jesus. Our Lord employed verbal herbicide!

We may be inclined to laugh about this, but a lot of people have been highly offended. **Bertrand Russell**, in

his book *Why I Am Not a Christian*, accused Jesus of “vindictive fury” for blaming the tree for not producing figs out of season. The entire episode tarnished the character of Jesus in Russell’s thinking. “I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history” (17-19).

I’m not well read in **horticulture**, but if we are going to make sense of what is happening here we need to understand something about both the religious significance of fig trees as well as their physical characteristics.

The promised land of Canaan was described in Deut. 8:7-8 – “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and **fig trees** and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.” You may also recall that Moses sent spies into the land of Canaan to determine what sort of country this was that God had promised to his people. When they returned with proof of the many blessings and treasures in the land, figs were among them (Numbers 13:23ff.). According to 1 Kings 4:25, a common picture of peace and prosperity was a man sitting underneath his own fig tree. And then there is Psalm 105:33, among other texts, which describes the day of divine judgment as one in which the fig trees are smitten and destroyed. Clearly the fig tree bore religious significance in the ancient world.

But our concern is primarily with its physical features. Fig trees, like the one Jesus cursed, were often 3 ft. thick in the trunk and would grow to a height of 15-20 ft. The spread of its branches could be upwards of 25-30 ft. **It yields two crops, the first in June and the second in September.** But this incident in Mark 11 was during Passover week, which means it happened in April. No fig tree bore edible fruit that early. In fact, Mark tells us explicitly in v. 13 that **“it was not the season for figs.”**

But if that is true, why then did Jesus react so harshly when he found no figs on it? Why would Jesus curse a tree for not providing what everyone in ancient Palestine knew it couldn’t provide? The tree was incapable of bearing fruit in the second week of April and yet Jesus destroys it for not doing that very thing!

One possible explanation is that what Jesus was hoping to find on the tree were *paggim*. These were small green figs (knops) that often formed in advance of the regular harvest. They don’t taste nearly as good as the regular, fully ripe figs that would appear several months later. Perhaps Jesus, upon seeing the tree in leaf, was expecting at least to find these tiny *paggim* to alleviate his hunger.

Another explanation is that this tree simply wasn’t functioning as it was supposed to. The presence of leaves was an indication of the presence of fruit. But in this instance the tree was, in effect, **promising something it didn’t deliver.** The leaves said, “I’m ripe, the fruit is here. Come and eat.” But upon closer inspection Jesus discovers that **the tree was, in a manner of speaking, hypocritical.** The abnormal presence of leaves said, “I have fruit.” It made a promise it couldn’t fulfill. It put on an appearance of fruit but was utterly barren. The tree is **deceptive.** It is a tree that gives a public sign of fruit but does not deliver.

Clearly, Jesus has decided to use the fig tree as an object lesson for his disciples and for us. He chose that particular tree precisely because it was advertising itself as bearing fruit but in fact was barren. It was a perfect physical illustration of the spiritual condition of Israel which he saw on display in the Temple. Jesus didn’t curse the fig tree because he was disgruntled and frustrated at not having his hunger satisfied. Nor did he curse it because he lacked concern for the environment.

The fig tree was cursed because it was a **symbol of the outward and visible religiosity of the Jewish people who lacked the inward and invisible reality.** The fig tree was not condemned for being fruitless but for being false.

This was precisely what Jesus encountered over and over again throughout Israel and now, preeminently, in the Temple. The Jewish people of his day, and in particular the religious leaders, put on a good religious show. **All their rituals and religious activities and public displays of piety were like the leaves on that fig tree.** But they bore no fruit. This is what has upset Jesus so deeply. There was a lot of promise, but no performance. In a word: hypocrisy!

The cursing of the fig tree, therefore, was an acted parable. Jesus was looking for the fruit of true righteousness, but all he found were the dry leaves of sterile formalism and religion, and he judges it. That is to say, he not

only judges the people, but the Temple as well, as seen in his action on the next day.

But the story of Jesus cursing and killing the fig tree has two lessons. It's not just about the ugliness of hypocrisy and God's judgment of it. It is also about the power of believing prayer! The next day Peter points out (v. 21) the withered tree and Jesus responds by urging his followers to exercise faith in God, the sort of faith that moves mountains. By the way, moving or casting a mountain into the sea was **proverbial** in those days for the miraculous. After all, why would any Christian want to make a mountain fall into the sea? The point of our Lord is to highlight the fact that otherwise humanly impossible things, things that require supernatural and miraculous power, can occur when prayer is filled with faith.

The instantaneous and miraculous destruction of the fig tree serves as an object lesson to the disciples of what can be achieved by faith in God's power. It is as if Jesus says to Peter: "Pete, your comment tells me that you are amazed by the sudden and supernatural withering of the fig tree. But if you have faith in God, all things are possible through prayer." **So, the withered fig tree is used by Jesus not only to teach us about the dangers of hypocrisy but also about the power of prayer!**

Several things must be considered if we are to make sense of what Jesus says.

(1) We must recognize that the "belief" or "faith" here is ***not a case of a Christian forcing himself to believe what he does not really believe***. It is not a wrenching of one's brain, a coercing of one's will, a contorting of one's expectations to embrace as real and true something that one's heartfelt conviction says otherwise. He is exhorting us to faith, not make believe or spiritual pretending.

(2) On the other hand, ***we are responsible to take steps that will facilitate the deepening of faith in our hearts***. We can do things, by God's grace, that will expand our confidence in God's goodness and his greatness and help diminish if not drive out our doubts. As I read and study and meditate on the character of God, my confidence in what he can do increases. As I reflect and ponder the grace and kindness of God, my confidence in his goodness grows and intensifies.

(3) Clearly there are ***other factors*** that have to be taken into consideration when we ask God for things in prayer. Faith is not the sole condition for answered prayer. Therefore, the absence of faith is not the sole explanation for unanswered prayer.

a) We have to ask him with the **right motives** (cf. Js. 4:1ff.).

b) We have to be **treating our wives** with gentleness and kindness and understanding (1 Pt. 3:7).

c) We have to **clean the slate**, so to speak, in our relationships with others. This is the point of v. 25. If you harbor unforgiveness in your heart toward others, it isn't likely that God will answer your prayer, no matter how much alleged faith you think you have. See Mt. 6:14-15.

d) And we have to ask **in accordance with God's will**. It doesn't matter if I am somehow able to banish all doubt from my mind and convince myself that I've already received what I asked for, if what I'm asking isn't consistent with the will and character of God, the answer will be No.

e) No amount of faith will force God's hand to do something that is **contrary to our welfare**.

f) Sometimes God says No to prayers that are offered up in faith because he has something even **better** in store for us that he plans on giving at a more appropriate and suitable time.

It is irresponsible and insensitive to suggest, on the basis of this passage, that if someone doesn't receive from God what they asked for it is because they are at fault in failing to have enough faith. The absence of faith may well be a factor, but it is not the only factor. There are other things that may more readily account for unanswered prayer.

(4) ***The only way anyone can fulfill the condition set forth by Jesus is if God himself chooses to impart to us the faith he requires***. Faith, ultimately, is a gift from God. When God wants to bless us with a miraculous answer to our prayer, he will take the initiative to cultivate and build into our hearts the fulfillment of the

condition he requires. See Phil. 2:12-13; Hebrews 13:20-21.