**Jesus Curses the Tree and Cleanses the Temple**

Zechariah 9:9-12; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-21; Psalm 118:19-29 4.14.19

Summary: Jesus demonstrates through two action parables that He came to restore us to right relationship with God and with each other.

**INTRO:** When the emergency room staff at a Rhode Island hospital viewed the scans of an 86-year-old man, they discovered a blood clot, a hematoma, in his brain. So they immediately paged the on-duty surgeon. The surgeon came and he was about to operate when a nurse interrupted him and said his medical form is not properly filled out. We don’t know where the blood clot—the hematoma—is. And the surgeon said, “Well, I remember seeing those films. The blood clot is on the right side of his brain.” And he was about to operate and the nurse said, “Well, maybe we should just confirm that on the computer.” So she walked over the computer to confirm that, and the surgeon shouted out, “We don’t have time to do that. We need to save his life.” So the nurse came back, along with other medical staff, and the surgeon proceeded to cut off a piece of this guy’s head from the right part of his skull. When he opened up that part of his head, everyone gasped and someone said, “Oh my God.” Because there was no blood clot there. And the surgeon said, “Quick, turn him over on his other side.” And he cut off part of the left side of his head, and sure enough, there was the blood clot. He vacuumed out the blood. But as a result of that medical error, that surgery which should have taken just 30 minutes ended up taking an hour. They were also delayed in evacuating this guy, and this man never regained consciousness. In fact, two weeks later, he died. Now, it was impossible to determine the precise cause of the man’s death, but his family argued that the medical error which caused the surgeon to make not one but two cuts in this man’s head, plus the fact that because of the medical mishap the surgery ended up taking twice as long as necessary, and because there was a delay in evacuating this man—the family argued that this trauma pushed this already fragile man over the edge and if it wasn’t for these mistakes, he might be alive, and the family ended up winning a large settlement.

According to *New York Times* columnist Charles Duhigg, this kind of grievous error was inevitable at the Rhode Island hospital because the culture had become so DYSFUNCTIONAL where doctors in many cases would simply ignore the warnings of the nurses and the staff.

Now, when a hospital’s culture becomes so DYSFUNCTIONAL that there is a high likelihood of a patient becoming even sicker in that hospital or dying prematurely, then some kind of protest is in order. And when the temple of God becomes so DYSFUNCTIONAL that people no longer are able to seek God, then some kind of protest is in order.

We are going to look at some of Jesus’ hard words in the temple in Jerusalem. We are going to look at some of his hard actions. But before we do this, let me take a moment to set up the context. Jesus has come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. As he has done so, the people have lined the streets and they have laid down palm branches, and they have shouted, “Hosanna,” which means God saves—*“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!”* And then later that day, Jesus goes out to the temple courts in Jerusalem, but it’s now getting late so He doesn’t stay for very long. He returns to Bethany, which is about two miles away, to stay the night with some of His disciples.

**The Rowdy Temple**

So why does Jesus make this intense, violent protest, in the temple? Let’s set up the context a little bit by looking at some of the original purposes of the temple. The temple was intended to be a gift from God to people. And as we look back in the Scriptures at 1 Kings 8, when the temple was being dedicated by King Solomon, we see him praying. And in his prayer, we see that King Solomon acknowledges that no temple, no matter how grand, no building, no matter how great, is able to contain the immensity of God. Solomon freely acknowledges that. And yet as he prays, he asks the living God that when people kneel to pray in the temple or even when they kneel toward the temple and pray toward it—even if they’re not in it—Solomon asks that God would pay special attention to those prayers. So while God is everywhere, there is a special sense in which God’s presence was located in the temple, and in particular in the inner sanctum called the Holy of Holies.

But God’s gift of the temple wasn’t intended only for the Israelite people. It was really for the whole world. Because, as Jesus quotes here, the temple was meant to be a house of prayer for ALL NATIONS. Jesus here is quoting the prophet Isaiah. So when Jesus comes into the temple courts, and as He sees the money changers and the people selling animals, and as He turns over the table of the money changers, and as He kicks over the tables of those selling and buying animals, He is SYMBOLICALLY ENACTING GOD’S JUDGMENT against the temple. And we know this because as He does this, He cites the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah by saying, “*Is not my Father’s house to be a house of prayer for all nations?*” That’s Isaiah. “*But you have made it a den of robbers*,” quoting the prophet Jeremiah. And the word translated *robbers* can also be translated from the Aramaic *brigands* or *bandits* or *outlaws* of a particular gang.

So what’s going on here? Why is Jesus enacting God’s judgment in this way in the temple of Jerusalem? Well, I want you to picture this: When Jesus walks into the temple courts in Jerusalem, He is going to see literally thousands of people in the court of the Gentiles, which is the place set apart for the Gentiles, those people who are not Jewish, to seek God and pray. There are thousands of people in this area of the temple courts, and among the thousands there are literally hundreds of people that are there to exchange currencies, money—because people are coming from all over the world, they need a temple coin to buy animals to sacrifice. And there are also hundreds of merchants selling animals—doves, sheep, goats, etc.—so that people can make their sacrifices. Now, that is not an exaggerated number because according to the historian of the Jewish people, Josephus, during one Passover week alone, it was recorded that merchants sold 255,000 lambs. Can you imagine that, in one week alone merchants sold 255,000? That’s a lot of lambs; it’s a lot of sheep to count. So this place, the Court of the Gentiles, which was supposed to be the place where the non-Jewish people were to pray and worship and seek the Living God, was so congested, so busy that it resembled the New York Stock Exchange at the heaviest trading hour more than some sanctuary that would encourage people to pray. That is the primary reason, I believe, for Jesus’ violent protestation.

Some people point out that the reason that Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and those selling animals was because He was against any business happening in the house of God. I don’t think that’s what Jesus was getting at here, and here’s why. In order for people to sacrifice to the Living God at the temple, they obviously needed animals, and people were coming from around the world during Passover week to offer sacrifices to God. Even if you came from relatively nearby Nazareth,—remember this is on foot—and they were trying to transport, say, a lamb or a goat, there was a high likelihood that that lamb or goat would become maimed or injured along the way, and therefore couldn’t be offered as a sacrifice. Therefore, it was necessary for there to be money changers to convert currencies into the temple coin, and people to sell animals that were appropriate for sacrifice in the temple courts or somewhere near the temple. So that was just a practical necessity.

Other people have pointed out that Jesus became really angry in the temple courts because the money changers and the people selling animals were charging rates that were way above market price, that they were charging exorbitant fees and making incredible profits at the expense of the people. Certainly some money changers or merchants were doing that, and Jesus would have been indignant with that. But with hundreds of money changers and hundreds of people selling animals, some would have been selling those animals and doing those money exchanges at fair market prices. Just like today, there are people in the marketplace that are ripping folks off, and others that are charging fair price for a good or a service.

The primary reason, I believe, that Jesus is incensed at what is going on in the temple is the fact that thousands of people are in the court of the Gentiles changing money, selling animals, and the commotion is so loud that it’s IMPOSSIBLE for the Gentiles to really pray and worship the living God. And Jesus says, as He is making this violent protest, *“My Father’s house was meant to be a place of prayer for ALL NATIONS, but you’ve made it a den of thieves.”* So one reason that Jesus protested what was going on in the temple is because there was such a commotion, there is so much busyness, so many people that it was virtually IMPOSSIBLE TO PRAY AND SEEK GOD IN THE COURT OF THE GENTILES.

A second reason for his protest, according to the verses that He is quoting, is because the temple has become this EXCLUSIONARY place. Remember that Jesus quotes Isaiah and says, *“My house was meant to be a house of prayer for people of ALL NATIONS, but you have made it a den of robbers.*” Now, according to the Scriptures, the high priest was called by God to enter into the inner sanctum of the temple, the most holy place, called the Holy of Holies, once a year to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. So that was something stipulated by God in Scripture. But according to the Talmud, which is a kind of rabbinic commentary on the first five books of the Bible, the Gentiles were relegated to these OUTER courts. If you were a Jewish man, you could come into this inner court, if you were a priest you could come even further for practical reasons, to make sacrifices. But if you were a Jewish woman, you were in this court further away from the actual temple itself. Or if you were a Jewish person with some kind of disability, or if you were unable to walk, you were also relegated to this court that was further away from the temple. So in a superficial sense, the temple was inclusive; it included Gentiles, women, those who were disabled, men. But if you looked at it more closely, you see how if you were a woman, if you were disabled, if you were a Gentile, you were basically PUSHED to the margins of the temple.

The word *thief* that Jesus uses when He talks about how the temple has become a den of thieves, can be translated *brigands*, or bandits or members of an outlawed gang. In the first century, we know that there were these extreme Jewish nationalists, what we might call extremist fundamentalists who were hiding in the temple. They had this very EXCLUSIVE, NARROW vision for the nation of Israel. Part of that vision included a Messiah who would clear the temple of the Gentiles and then overthrow Rome and make the Jewish people more powerful in ascendancy in the Roman Empire. But here is the irony … Jesus, when He came as the Messiah, did not clear the Gentile courts **OF** the Gentiles as the fundamentalists were hoping. He cleared these courts **FOR** the Gentiles. And second of all, when Jesus was in the temple, He healed people that couldn’t walk, He healed people who were blind, people that had been pushed to the margins of the temple, and by doing so He was symbolically saying that EVEN IF you’re blind, EVEN IF you cannot walk, God WELCOMES you into His presence. And Jesus, in His protest, was saying, “My house—the house of the Living God—was meant to be a place of prayer for people of ALL NATIONS, and it was also meant to be a place of welcome for PEOPLE of all nations.” And we know that His protest as He knocked over the moneychangers’ tables, and as He kicked over the tables where people were selling doves and goats and sheep, we know that this protest wasn’t driven just by the fact that Jesus was having a bad day or that He was becoming extremely stressed out in His ministry because He is quoting Scripture as He makes His protest.

**The Barren Fig Tree**

And a second reason we know that His protest is not a personal vendetta is because of what happens just before and just after He enters the temple and does this cleansing. And now we turn to this peculiar scene of Jesus’ encounter with the fig tree. What’s going on here? This is a rather odd thing that happens here. Jesus is leaving Bethany and He is about to go back to the temple in Jerusalem, and according to our text, He sees in the distance a fig tree in leaf. He is hungry, and He goes to see if there are any figs on that tree. There are none, and He ends up cursing the fig tree, saying, “*May you never bear fruit again*.” It sounds really mean and makes Jesus look really bad. But what Jesus is doing here is HIGHLY SYMBOLIC.

First of all, a fig tree in the Scriptures is a SYMBOL of the nation of Israel and in particular the nation of Israel’s SPIRITUAL HEALTH. And when Jesus approaches this particular fig tree looking for figs to eat, all He finds are leaves but no ripe figs because it’s not quite the season for figs to be ripe. It’s April and the figs will be ripe in late May. But here’s the thing: If leaves have come out on this tree as they have, there should be baby figs on the tree like this. Once the leaves start coming out on your fig tree, these baby figs also come out at the same time. These figs are edible. They are not as sweet obviously as ripe figs, but they are fruits that you can snack on. If the leaves come out but the baby figs don’t, it’s a sign that you won’t have any harvest that year. And fig trees have two harvests per year. If no figs come out with the first leaves, it means you’ll have no harvest at all that year. And in fact, leaves without figs is a sign that the fig tree itself is decaying from the inside. Jesus approaches a fig tree with leaves but no figs. Something is wrong with this fig tree. He curses it and says, “*May you never bear fruit again.”*

What He is doing in this action is HIGHLY SYMBOLIC. It is what Biblical scholars call an ACTED PARABLE. Now, biblical teachers talk about spoken parables and you can probably infer what that means even if you haven’t heard that expression before. Spoken parable is a parable that you speak. Jesus used many of these. He talked about a farmer who sowed seeds as a way to teach about the various conditions of our hearts, some being hard and rocky, others being fertile and receptive. Jesus also used ACTED PARABLES, where He would do something to teach something. He opened the eyes of the blind to enable them to see physically but also to show people that as the Messiah He had come to open the eyes of the spiritually blind. He once walked on water. Not to show off but to demonstrate that with God nothing is impossible, no circumstance is too great that God can’t overcome it. And as He curses the fig tree, this is an ACTED PARABLE, something that is very SYMBOLIC. And by cursing the fig tree, He is saying that the people of Israel, and in particular as their life has been expressed through the temple, THEY HAVE FAILED TO BEAR THE FRUIT OF GOD’S CHARACTER. We know that His encounter with the fig tree reflects on what He does in the temple because His experience in the temple is actually bookended by His experience with the fig tree. Before He goes into the temple, He encounters the fig tree, curses it, He goes into the temple, clears the temple, cleanses it, comes out, and the fig tree is now withered. So we know that this interaction with the fig tree is HIGHLY SYMBOLIC; it’s an ACTED PARABLE.

**Where is the fruit in our lives?**

So what is the takeaway from this, from both scenes of the temple and of Jesus’ cursing the fig tree? Well, it’s not to leave here today and to go Raley’s (or Smith’s, or Safeway), and to discover that they don’t have the apples that you really like. And then you’re not to go to the clerk and say, “Hey, you don’t have Gala apples. May you never sell Gala apples again.” That’s not the point. The application is not to cuss out the folks who work at the grocery store.

WE are the trees, and Jesus is asking us, “Where is the fruit in your life, in my life, where are the temples?” And that’s not some kind of fanciful interpretive jump. When Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins, in fact precisely the moment He died, the temple curtain which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was actually rent in two from top to bottom, symbolizing that now through Jesus’ sacrificial death for our sins on the cross the way has been opened for us to enter into the most holy presence of God, and for God’s most holy presence to enter into us. And therefore, according to the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 3, you and I, if we have given our lives to God, are the temple of God. We are the temple of God. And Jesus is asking us where is the fruit in our lives? Sometimes we say, “God, I’m having trouble believing in you. Give me a sign.” And Jesus sometimes says to us, “Give me a sign that you really know me. Give me a sign.”

In John 15, Jesus said, *“If you abide in me, and if my words, my presence, my Holy Spirit abides in you, you will bear much fruit”—*meaning much fruit in character—“as you become more like me.” And earlier in that passage, in John 15, Jesus said, “*I am the true vine*”— speaking metaphorically here—“*and my Father [God] is the gardener. Every branch in me that bears no fruit He cuts off, but every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”* How do we become more fruitful? How do we become people who bear more of the character of Jesus Christ? How do we become more prayerful and more inclusive? Part of the way is by allowing Jesus to prune us. Even as He pruned the temple of things that were in and of themselves good and necessary. The moneychangers and the people selling animals for sacrifice. Sometimes our lives become so crowded, so busy, so cluttered that Jesus calls us to prune away things that are good in and of themselves so that we have more space for God, so that we have more capacity to pay attention to Jesus Christ and more ability to respond to His transforming work in us.

We are in a season of Lent, and one of the beautiful things about Lent is that it invites us to give things up that are good in and of themselves so that we have more space for God in our lives. Many people during the season of Lent fast from food for periods of time to create more space for God. Some people give up food for Lent or during parts of the year to focus more on God. Other people give up media or they cut back on their computer time or Facebook time

If you’re like me and are really into your work and can be a workaholic either with your work you might set some boundaries on your work so that you have more space for God and for what is most important in your life. How’s that going? How is the fruit of Jesus’ character being seen in the tree of your life? If you are an anxious person, are you becoming more peace-filled? If you’re an angry person by nature, are you becoming less reactive? If you’re impatient, are you growing in patience? If you’re insecure, are you becoming more confident? If you’re proud, are you becoming more humble? If you tend to associate only with people just like you, are you becoming more truly inclusive? Are you being changed? Is the fruit of Christ’s character being born in the tree of your life?

And then second, as the text that Jesus cites implies, Jesus not only calls us to be prayerful and create space for God in our life that we might bear the fruit of His character; He also calls us to be inclusive, to be welcoming people of all different backgrounds as the temple of His Holy Spirit.

**Conclusion**

Let me return to the temple one last time as an image. There were TWO reasons why the temple was ultimately judged as being obsolete, no longer needed. One was because as we pointed out in our text today, it had become DYSFUNCTIONAL. It was supposed to be a house of prayer for ALL NATIONS but now it was simply this den of brigands, and therefore it was being judged as obsolete. But there was also a SECOND reason the temple would soon become obsolete. According to the Book of Hebrews, the blood of bulls and goats and sheep and doves could NEVER actually wash away people’s sins. That’s why, according to Hebrews, the priests had to offer sacrifices year after year after year for the people, because none of the sacrifices could really atone for anyone’s sins. But when Jesus Christ died on the cross as the perfect sacrificial lamb, He atoned for our sins once and for all. And because of that, the sacrificial aspect of the temple, the part of the temple life that required sacrifices for people’s sins, was no longer necessary. The temple was OBSOLETE. And just as Jesus predicted in the year 70 AD, the temple was actually destroyed physically.

That first Christmas, the Living God became a human being, a baby, in Jesus Christ. That is what Christmas is all about. If you read Jesus’ genealogy in the Book of Matthew, you will see that when Jesus became a human being, God orchestrated into His bloodstream not only the blood of the Hebrew people but also the blood of the so-called despised nations of their world. The blood of the Canaanites through people like RAHAB. The blood of the Hittites through people like BATHSHEBA. The blood of the Moabites through people like RUTH. And Jesus Christ literally bore in his bloodstream the blood of the world. And then on the cross, He would shed His blood for the world. He bore the blood of the world, and then He shed His blood for the world. And when He died, as we’ve said, the temple curtain separating us from the Holy of Holies was torn in two, showing that now human beings like you and me, sinners like us, could be forgiven and enter into the holiest presence of God, and that God’s holiest presence could enter into us. And as that happens and as we are filled, we become like Jesus, people who pray and worship the Living God with all of our hearts, and people who extend God’s INCLUSIVE LOVE to people all around us, even to people who are much different than we are.

As you can see, the cross has TWO BEAMS. It has a VERTICAL BEAM which symbolizes how Jesus Christ connects us upward to God in prayer and in worship. But there is also a HORIZONTAL BEAM, which symbolizes how Jesus Christ connects us to one another, enables us to embrace people that are very different from ourselves. And this is the reason we celebrate Good Friday, this is the reason we celebrate Easter, because Good Friday and Easter tell us that through Jesus Christ, we can be made NEW people. New in relation to God, and new in relationship to each other.

**PRAYER:**  Lord God, help us to grow more pure like Jesus every day and grow in right relationship with You and with one another. In Jesus’ name. Amen.