

Jesus' Judgment on the Unfruitful Temple

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Date: 16 November 2025

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[0 : 00] So do keep that passage open in front of you, Mark chapter 11.! Let me pray and then we'll think through these scriptures together.

! Father, we come before you now to your words and pray that you would speak to us, that we would hear these words of Jesus afresh and that your spirit would apply them to our lives and this church here.

In Jesus' name. Amen. One of you remember the quiz show, Question of Sport. I think it's still going on. I'm not quite sure.

They used to have a round called What Happened Next? It's one of my favourite parts of the show. A clip would be shown to the teams of some sport in action and then it would be stopped.

And the team had to work out what happened next. As sometimes it was a dog running onto the pitch and stealing the ball. Sometimes the referee would fall over. That's always funny. Sometimes all the lights would go out. Whatever it was, it was bound to be amusing and definitely unexpected.

[1 : 12] As we work our way through these chapters in Mark's Gospel, this is one of those What Happened Next moments. But it is no laughing matter. Last week we had Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding into the city on a donkey to huge crowds, waving their palm branches, singing songs of deliverance and praise.

But then Jesus went into the temple. But rather than doing anything, he just had a look round before leaving to spend the night in a village in the hills.

But today we find what happened next. But it is not amusing. In fact, it's not funny in any sense of the word. Because this week and next week are about as serious as Jesus gets in the Gospels. And although you and I aren't the original recipients of Jesus' words, we need to take this message seriously. So what happens on that next day?

Well, it all starts out rather benign, doesn't it? As they leave Bethany in the morning, where Jesus has spent the night, they start to walk towards Jerusalem.

[2 : 21] Now, maybe they had got up early enough to avoid breakfast or maybe nothing had been provided. Because verse 12 tells us that Jesus was hungry. You love those little details in the Gospels that point to something about Jesus like that.

Just reminds us again, doesn't it? Just that he was utterly, fully human. I get hungry. You get hungry. Jesus got hungry. But a little distance down the road, Jesus spots a fig tree by the side. And it's a tree that's in full leaf. Now, we're told a bit later on that it wasn't the season for figs. That is those fully ripe fruits that I quite enjoy on my breakfast cereal from time to time.

But by this part of the year, because we are in Holy Week now, we're in the spring, early summer. The fig trees that were going to have a good harvest of figs would already be showing it.

And they would have had fresh buds on them that would then grow into the figs. And even those buds would have been edible and tasty. But when Jesus gets to this fig tree, there is none of that.

[3 : 26] There are lots of leaves. It looks wonderfully healthy. It looks wonderfully full of life. But there was no fruit. And there was no prospect of any fruit. And that explains to us why Jesus says those words in verse 14.

May no one ever eat fruit from you again. Now, before you get rather cross with Jesus and try and sign up for membership of the UPPS. That's the Unfruitful Plant Preservation Society.

Honestly, it will be out there on the internet somewhere. You just know it will. Remember that everything Jesus does has a purpose. His miracles act as signs.

His parables act as judgments. And these harsh words for the fig tree mirror, as we'll soon see, exactly what Jesus feels about the temple.

What's more, what will happen to the fig tree is a sign of what will one day happen to the temple in Jerusalem. On reaching the temple, Jesus goes into the temple courts.

[4 : 30] Now, we are talking a vast area, some 35 acres. Huge. And what Jesus sees there is not a surprise, is it? Because he's been there the night before. So there's no sense that Jesus is acting on the spur of the moment or flying off the handle in some fit of rage of what he sees.

Jesus' actions here and the righteous anger he obviously felt were, for all their ferocity, a very much a calm, measured, just response to what he saw going on.

And what was that? Well, there in the courts of the Gentiles, this part of the temple where people from other nations could come and worship the one true God, was a bustling market.

Money changes there. Taking the general use Roman coins, turning them into the temple coinage. No doubt taking a cut for themselves in the process.

People there selling animals and doves to be used as sacrifices, again at inflated prices. And as we see in verse 16, the people were using the temple court as a cut through.

[5 : 38] Imagine this huge area, you're one side, you want to get to the other. Well, you don't want to go all the way around, do you? It's much quicker to take whatever you're going to sell in the other part of the city just straight through the temple.

So they were bringing who knows what into the temple courts. And Jesus, unsurprisingly, was angry. His father's house was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations.

But there was no way anyone could pray quietly in that situation. No way anyone could draw close to God with all that noise and bustle of commerce going on. And things are worse than that.

Because God's people as a whole, and the priest in particular, were supposed to practice justice. To deal honestly and fairly with all people, to exploit no one, especially the poor.

And yet there in the temple of God, pilgrims and worshippers were being ripped off. By the businesses who were making a fast buck for themselves. And no doubt slipping a percentage into the pockets of the priests.

[6 : 42] One ancient source writing about the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Explained things like this. We know that they, that's the priests and people of Jesus' day.

Devoted themselves to the Torah, God's laws. That they were meticulous about tithes. So on what account did they go into exile? On what account did God judge the city in this way?

Here was their answer. Because they loved money and hated one another. Wow. What a scathing indictment of what was going on in God's temple.

They loved money and hated one another. No wonder Jesus was angry. No wonder he turned over the tables and drove the stallholders out.

No wonder he refused to let people use the courts of God as a shortcut. This was holy ground. Sacred ground. Prayerful ground. A place for all people to gather in worship.

[7 : 46] To draw close to God. But those in charge should allow it to become a den of robbers. Where prayer was hindered. And true worship was in short supply.

Jesus' words and actions show the seriousness of what's going on, don't they? He's quoting from Isaiah 56, Jeremiah 7. He reminds the people of the purpose of the temple.

Speaks God's judgment upon them. You've turned this place that should be a house of prayer for all nations into a den of robbers. As Mark explains it in verse 17, it seems that after this temple clearing, table turning activity, Jesus continued to teach them.

So rather than just doing one thing and then clearing off, Jesus made this huge demonstration of what was wrong and then sat down and taught them. And he seemed to teach them right throughout the day because verse 19 tells us that Jesus didn't leave for home until the evening.

So the whole day for them had been an object lesson. Followed by a deep theological reflection and teaching. I don't know about you, but I wish I could have heard the rest of the talk.

[8 : 58] But Mark doesn't tell us. We just get the headlines. Whatever Jesus said, the people who heard it were amazed at his teaching, verse 18. All of them, of course, except for the chief priests and teachers of the law.

What do we hear about them? They heard what Jesus said and began looking for a way to kill him. So much for godly leadership. Once again, Jesus had taken a stand against their organized,

money-making, Gentile-excluding, looks-good-on-the-outside false religion.

And the religious elites behind it all were not at all pleased. See, like the fig tree, everything in the temple that was going on looked wonderful.

A casual observer might have remarked how wonderful it was to see so much activity in the temple courts. How incredible that so many people are coming. How wise that you've got money changers here.

And people selling animals for the sacrifices. Doesn't that make worship so much more straightforward? You don't need to prepare. You just, you know, just rock up and do everything while you're here.

[10:08] Reports would have been written to say how easy it was now to come and do your duty to God. TripAdvisor, I'm sure, will have had details of the wonderful new robes and the improvements to the building.

All funded through these new innovations. Wasn't it all fantastic? It's how it looks. What was Jesus' verdict? Sick and dying.

A place that had lost its purpose and lost its way. A place that had no fruit. And that had no prospect. Of producing any fruit.

Words of Jesus here point out that awful truth. That the God for whom this temple. I mean it was a stunning building. The God for whom this amazing temple had been built.

For whose glory it was built. For this God would soon come in judgment. And destroy it once and for all. We see that in the event of the next day.

[11:09] As the disciples noticed that the fig tree that Jesus had cursed was now dead. Withered from the roots up. No fruit. No prospect of fruits.

No purpose. No life. The withered fig tree pointed out the future of the temple. Now for the Jews, for the disciples and all of God's people then.

That would have been a huge shock. Because they had grown up thinking that it was the temple.

Was the only place where you could come to be made right with God again. By that purpose.

That age was coming to a close. Something greater was coming. Because someone greater had already come. I'm going to leave the last few verses.

And pass over those for today. We're going to have a series on prayer during Lent. Where we'll talk about issues like this. But just for now. Let me just say this. Jesus is not in any way endorsing a name it and claim it kind of prayer.

[12:11] Name it. Believe it enough. And it will be yours. It's not what he's saying. The true worshipper is never focused on prayers for greater riches and comfort.

Nor even, I would say, if you look at the prayers in the scriptures. For relief from our illnesses and physical ailments. That so often dominate our own prayer times. The context here points us to a faith and a focus for our prayers.

That are not rooted in the physical. But in the God who rules the world. One that has eyes and heart on God. For his glory and greater holiness. We'll come back to that topic in the next few months.

But for the rest of my time this morning. I want us to reflect a little on what Jesus might be saying to us. See in one sense it's quite hard to make a direct comparison. Because the function of the temple has now been taken over once and for all by the Lord Jesus.

His final sacrifice on the cross did away with any need for any other sacrifice. What's more God's presence is no longer focused just in one place.

[13:17] Because after Pentecost we know that God's spirit is given to all who trust in Jesus. Doesn't mean that places like this don't have a special significance.

Or that gathered congregations aren't vital to God's economy. They are on both counts. But you and I now are the temple of God. Individually, collectively.

But I think that means two things. It means that we need to try and apply Jesus' teaching here to us as individuals. But also to us corporately. There's a church meeting here at St Paul's.

And perhaps for us as a wider parish as well. Well let's start with the easy one, shall we? Think about our buildings and how they're used. Are they used in a way that shows they have a special role as places where God's word is taught?

The sacraments rightly administered where God's people gather to meet and worship him? Well I think as your rector, and maybe you can, if you don't agree with me, you can come and talk to me afterwards.

[14:20] But I think we do okay on that score. We're happy for various groups to come and use our church buildings and halls from time to time. But we are careful who we rent them out to and for what purpose.

So we're not going to have any raves in the nave. As a number of cathedrals have done. To try and raise lots of money. And we'd never rent our halls out to those whose values contradict or conflict with the gospel.

So actually we regularly turn down requests for yoga classes to be held in the halls. What's more, we're investing time and a good deal of money as well to make our buildings fit for God's purposes and for the building of his kingdom in this age.

So no one can find a silly reason not to come. But of course the building in the New Testament terms is not a physical place. It is the church.

It's us. We are the church. And we would be the church whether we're meeting in the hall as God willing we may have to be at some point next year when this part of the building gets a renovation. [15:24] Or whether we all go down to the park and meet together out there. We're still the church. But I wonder if you and I then are behaving in ways that hinder true worship.

Or put others off from coming to consider Jesus. In the early chapters of the book of Revelation you'll know that the apostle John hears a message from Jesus.

Giving seven letters to seven of the key churches of the day. In five of them Jesus points out things that are wrong with how they're running. Things that hinder their witness to the glory of God.

We haven't got time to go through them all in detail now. But rather than me picking out things randomly that might be wrong in our churches. I think it's always wise to come to the words of Jesus. And hear his criticisms for the church more widely.

And see if they apply to us. So let me pick out a few of these for us to consider. The church in Sardis was very much like the temple in Jerusalem. It was a busy church.

[16:30] Doing all kinds of different things through the week. But whilst like the temple in Jerusalem they had a reputation for being a lively place. In Revelation chapter 3 Jesus says that like the fig tree they were dead.

Look good. Very busy. No reality. We are a busy parish. Five churches. Numerous services. Different styles. Got a growing number of outreach activities. There are more and more home groups. Two weeks on Tuesday we'll be running our Christmas journey for 260 children from nine different schools.

In January we'll have three mission partners. And through the year we do all kinds of extra events. But busyness doesn't equal life. Doesn't equal true life.

Not in Christ. And that's true as individuals. Whether we're busy doing things. And it's true in churches as well. So is it all for show? In our own lives or together?

[17:37] Or is it a response to God's love and mercy for us? We need to keep working on that. As Jesus looked at the church in Ephesus he saw something more personal.

That the hearts of the people had grown cold. There was a commitment to church. People were still serving on the rotors and doing various things. But there was no burning love for Jesus and his glory.

That's a more personal challenge isn't it? So I wonder if your hearts are rather dry today. If your Sunday worship, your practical service, your daily times of prayer and scripture feel as if you're just going through the motions.

It's just a habit. What if so? Hear the words of scripture this morning where God says, draw near to me and I will draw near to you. Spend time with him.

Deal with that cold heart. That's what you know you have. The church in Pergamon had compromised with the world. Some amongst the church family were living a double life.

[18:46] Behaving one way on a Sunday but a completely different person the rest of the week. Again, this is a personal challenge isn't it? What do our families and friends see in us when they spend time with us Monday to Saturday?

Are we fully committed to Christ? Or do we look as if we're not Christians at all? The church in Thyatira had moral failings and they were proud of it.

What a terrible place to be. They were active in so many good ways, doing lots of good social action. But there was no holiness. Many in Thyatira, many of their sins were of a sexual nature.

But personal holiness goes wider than that, doesn't it? We're called to be gentle and patient. We're told not to be gossips.

To be encouraging, not critical. To be humble, not proud. We've had our time of confession already this morning. And as we think about that time of confession and the standard God calls us to, we're

reminded that we're called to follow God in all our ways.

[19 : 57] And that when we fail, we're not to say, oh, well, it doesn't matter. We're to repent, to turn from those and seek God's help to change. I wonder if those times of repentance are just something we do on a Sunday.

Or do they echo through the week? Well, the last church out of the five that gets a rebuke from Jesus is the church of Laodicea. It had plenty of money.

It would have been well-staffed, well-equipped and incredibly proud. But again, as Jesus looked at all its five-star review ratings, he saw the truth. They thought they were rich, but spiritually they were bankrupt.

They thought they looked terrific. But Jesus says you are naked and blind. Largely because of the generosity of Christians from decades or centuries ago, we have been able to invest lots of money in the moment in our buildings.

That's happened at Ogwell this year and at High Week. And God willing, that will soon be true here and in Abbotsbury over the next 12 months as well. And when all that work is done, we will have five buildings that are beautiful and well-equipped for worship for the decades to come.

[21 : 11] And that is great. But that will count for nothing unless the people worshipping in those buildings are being refurbished at the same time. Unless we're being changed more into the likeness of Christ.

Into those humble, contrite, thankful, faithful, generous, God-glorifying, Christ-sharing, people-serving believers that Jesus calls us to be.

If not, then all the building changes are a complete waste of time. How did Jesus' words to Laodicea challenge us? I wonder. See, there is a real challenge for churches today in this land.

Over the last 10 years, some 3,500 churches up and down the country have closed. 3,500. Some of them are now nightclubs.

Some of them are carpet warehouses, offices. Some of them are homes. Some of them have been turned into mosques, believe it or not. Here in Newton Abbott, the once vibrant Baptist church is now a series of flats.

[22 : 18] A church down the roads, the congregational church that in living memory had people queuing up to hear the powerful gospel preaching is now a solicitor's office.

And the church hall belongs to the Jehovah's Witnesses. What a tragedy that is. And just because some of our churches have been here for 600 or 700 years doesn't mean that they will necessarily be here in another 600 or 700.

Or in 60 or 70. Of course, most of us won't be here in 100 years. Some of you might be. I don't think I will. So there's a limit, isn't there, to what we can do to ensure that things are healthy and flourishing 100 years from now.

But what we can do is serve God in our day. What we can do is proclaim his gospel clearly now. Serve Christ wholeheartedly now.

Pray that our efforts will leave behind a vibrant worshipping community that will then pass on that torch of Jesus to the next generation and to the generations after that.

[23 : 27] Being busy and showy won't do it. Compromising with the world won't do it. Having the best music or great coffee or seating or warm, beautiful churches won't do it.

Seeking to be obedient servants of Christ, bearing fruit will. We need to do that on our own. Making sure our own love for God is active and strong.

But we need to be doing that together as God's people. Because if we fail, then the lamp of Christian witness will surely go out.

Because if that could happen in the temple in Jerusalem, if it could happen in those three and a half thousand churches across our land, then it can happen here.

And I hope you'll agree with me that we don't want that to be the case. We don't want that, do we? Of course we don't. So let's listen to the voice of Jesus.

[24 : 26] Let's seek out his words of challenge and rebuke. Let's do what we can to repent of our lukewarm hearts, our pride, our conceit, our rebellious ways. Let's recall the price Jesus paid for us and commit ourselves once again to that call to obedience, living and working for his praise and glory.

And doing that not just in the church, but out in the world. Because as we serve him like that, as we seek to walk in his ways, he will make us a fruitful people.

And that lamp of gospel witness will get passed on throughout the generations and for many generations to come. May God be at work in us and in his church across our town.
Amen.