

Mark 11:1-33 (PM)

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[0:00] So we are in Mark chapter 11. Lots of wonderful lessons in this passage, but I want to zoom in on a particular theme here. And I think in this passage there is an implicit warning. There's a warning against putting on a good religious show when actually our hearts are indifferent or fickle or corrupt. It's a bit like when I watch American sports with my wife. I can, like Super Bowl Sunday for example. I can watch that with my wife's family and I can say all the right things like, what do you say? It's sports. Go team go. Go team go. Ref, you're blind. No, what was better than that?

Come on ref, open your eyes. Open your eyes. That's better. Open your eyes. Like I can say stuff, but I don't really care to be honest. You know, I don't really care what I'm watching. So that's what we're talking about. How's that sound? A bit serious, isn't it? That's okay. We're going to crack on. So what we'll do is we'll walk through the story. We've prayed that, you know, God would speak to us. So let's be expectant of that. Mark chapter 11. Good to have your Bibles open probably, I would think. Jesus has arrived just at the outskirts of Jerusalem. He's about to enter.

So this is the big city. This is the religious headquarters of Israel and it's Passover. Would have been a huge, that's a big feast time. It's a big festival. So it would have been just a bonkers amount of people. Thousands and thousands, lots of noise, lots of excitement. And Jesus decides to make a really big entry, which is something he hasn't done before. And he decides to enter Jerusalem riding a donkey, which for us doesn't make, it doesn't, it's funny for our ears. It sounds odd to us because this is the king of the universe. And his big entry, his big play is riding a little horse.

I mean, not a stallion, not one of those chairs with like, you know, the poles that people carry in. And he rides a little horse. And he does, he rides a little horse, not because it's the only option he had, because we read about, he's organized, this is all sort of organized. He's got a guy in a place, go get the, go get the horse from the guy on the place. Like it's all organized. This was the, what he chose to ride in on. And remember, Jesus is a pretty big deal at this point.

Lots of people excited about him. They're watching what he's doing. He knows when he enter, when he enters Jerusalem, it's going to cause a bit of a drama. So why enter on a donkey? Well, he's trying to communicate something, isn't he? He's trying to tell us something about himself.

[2:40] And almost certainly, he's referring to Zechariah 9, 9. 500 years before this, Zechariah wrote, rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious as he, humble and riding on a colt. So this is a prophetic picture of a king who's come from some huge victory, but riding a little horse. It's this picture of strength and humility. And Jesus knew this text, and he knew that eventually others would make the connection.

And it's Jesus communicating this. Yes, I'm the king, and I'm going to lead, and I'm going to rescue, but I'm going to rescue through weakness. And there's a lot more we could say about that, but I want to move on to the crowd. So you have this crowd around Jesus, this great throng of people, and they're shouting, Hosanna in the highest, et cetera. Jesus rides in to those shouts.

Here's the thing. Those things they were shouting, they're actually like standard, shouty things to say at Passover. So we can look at their meaning, and we can unpack it, and we can see deeper meaning to it. But the crowd are saying, kind of just the things you say at Passover. And they're saying them in Jesus' direction, because he's kind of like the guy of the moment. He's done cool stuff. He's said some pretty cool things. But they're saying just kind of standard things, Passover things. So just hold that thought for a moment. I want you to notice the deliberate climax between verses 10 and 11. Let me remind you of them. Verse 10. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David. Hosanna in the highest.

Next verse. And he entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. You know, all the scholarship on this is like, what happened to the crowd? They all just disappeared.

They're just gone. And Jesus enters the temple alone. So they're all very shouty, saying great stuff. But then they just disappeared. They went home. They had to walk the dog.

[5 : 05] Super Bowl Sunday. You know, the mask singer was on. Whatever. Like, they just went. They left them. They said the right things. But they didn't really, obviously, believe Jesus was the Messiah.

Seems to me that Jesus is one, that Mark is warning us here against mistaking enthusiasm for faith. They could put on a good show of faith, but there was no substance to it. It was just, it was fickle. So I'll say this quite plainly, because I think this is an important point. We can say right things. And we can appear to have gusto at times.

But we can still have quite a shallow faith. A faith that's built on kind of a few positive brushes with Jesus. But then life just grabs us and sort of just redirects our attention.

See, what we need is a faith built on a deep conviction of who Jesus is. We need a faith built on a deep conviction of who Jesus is.

[6 : 15] And if you're not sure about that, if you feel a bit wobbly about that, come and talk to me about it. I'd love to talk to you about that. Okay, we're going to keep going. Before moving on to the fig tree, though, just another look at verse 11.

Jesus entered Jerusalem, went into the temple, and looked around. What's that all about? What's that there for?

I mean, it's not, you know, sort of seeing the sights. It's not a touristy thing. He's sizing up the temple, isn't he? He's seeing if the temple is fulfilling God's purpose for it.

So that the next day, when Jesus goes into the temple and starts flipping tables over, we know that's not a spontaneous act. It's planned. It's a premeditated judgment.

Okay, now, fig tree. Let's get to the fig tree. Because that's very interesting, isn't it? And often misunderstood, I think. So, let's go big picture for a moment in terms of our reading.

[7 : 13] So, if you think about the story, if here's the story here, you have Jesus curses the fig tree. And then you have the temple thing flipping over tables.

And then you have, we're back to the fig tree again. We're back to the disciples talking about the fig tree. And just a reminder, even though this, you know, this passage was written 2,000 years ago, it's sophisticated literature.

Like, it's written like that on purpose. It's an ancient literary device called a chiasm. And what it is, another word for it is a sandwich.

So you put a thing here, and then you put the same thing here, and then the thing in the middle of the sandwich is the main point. Does that make sense? So you've got fig tree, temple fig tree.

So that whole incident is trying to direct our attention to the temple and the thing at the start, and the end, help us understand the thing in the middle. So it's not random. So let's have a look at it.

[8 : 16] The fig tree incident. Jesus is walking along. He sees a fig tree. It's in leaf. He goes over. Doesn't have figs to eat. It wasn't fig season. But at that time of the year, it should have had these little pre-fig nodules, which travelers would eat that are edible and they like.

It didn't have it, so he curses it, saying, may no one ever eat fruit from you again. It's a reverse miracle. It's a miracle of destruction. This is a story that's troubled people for centuries because it makes Jesus look petty.

It sounds like Jesus just lost his temper over a silly thing and used his powers carelessly. I talked about this this morning.

Sometimes I lose my temper with my children and I yell at them over really dumb things. But in that moment, I can make the wildest of threats, like the wildest of threats.

I'd be like, son, put on your socks or I will throw that PlayStation out the window. So I swear to you, I will throw that thing out the window. Or it sucks.

[9 : 29] Anyway. Son, if you don't put your clothes on, I've said this quite often, if you don't put your clothes on, I will walk you to school in your underpants.

Like I will pick you up and walk you to school in your underpants. It's like I just lose my mind for like 10 seconds and say the most outrageous things.

Now, am I alone in that? Am I alone in that? Thank you, Mittens. Thank you. Probably. Did I say your name out loud? I shouldn't have. Sorry about that. The Mittens.

So. And afterwards, I calm myself down and apologize. It feels like that's what's happening here.

Jesus is just losing his mind over a silly thing and does this crazy sort of thing, you know. It's troubling, right? It's troubling. But remember the sandwich, okay? Fig tree, temple, fig tree. Jesus doesn't lose his temper.

[10:30] It never says he loses his temper. What he does is he uses the fig tree as an opportunity to teach them something. The fig tree becomes this parable telling us something about the temple.

The fig tree represents the temple. This leafy fig tree for all its promise of providing some sweet treat, providing food, was actually barren.

It was bankrupt. It's like, you know, all the crowds yelling, Hosanna on the highest to Jesus. There's nothing there. They all just disappear.

The fig tree was all show. It was just all show. It was as deceptive as the temple, which we get to in a moment. So let's talk about the temple. Verses 15 to 19. Jesus goes into the temple, immediately starts driving out the vendors, turning over tables, and he says, this was supposed to be a place of prayer, and you've made it a den of robbers.

So what's going on here? Well, you know, the temple was built by Herod, probably as some kind of favor to the Jewish people. But Herod, he did like, he was a city builder.

[11:42] He liked impressive buildings. So he built these, he built lots of big buildings. Remarkable things. This was a remarkable building. Remarkable. It covered 35 acres.

The columns at the front of it, it took three people holding hands. That was the circumference of it, three people holding hands. Huge, big, impressive building. There were different sections in the temple.

So there was the Holy of Holies right in the middle, which a priest once a year would go into. There was lots of places in the temple only Jewish people could go. There were places in the temple only women could go.

And when you first walked in, where Jesus entered, it was this enormous big area called the Court of Gentiles. This was the place, this was the area of the temple where the Gentiles were allowed, the non-Jewish people were allowed.

It was supposed to be the place where the Gentiles could meet God. But it had become a massive marketplace, filled with vendors. Corruption was rife. The temple refused to accept foreign currency.

[12:50] So if you wanted to go in there and give money, you had to first exchange your foreign money with little coins that had no image on them. And the exchange of it was terrible. You wanted to buy animals and stuff.

Extortionate rates. So it was supposed to be a place where the Gentiles could engage in prayer, have access to God, could learn how to forgive, to just have, you know, to meet their creator.

And the place was a gong show. Back in Isaiah 6, in the Old Testament, Isaiah is visiting the temple and he has a vision.

Let me read it to you. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings. With two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

[13:55] The whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And he said, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.

And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

And he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away. Your sins atoned for. Isn't that awesome? That's just awesome, isn't it?

This vision happened in the temple. For a thousand years it was this holy place. And now it was a circus. It's like the fig tree.

It looked impressive. Leafy, busy, big, huge, beautiful, but fruitless. It didn't seem like anyone's lives were being changed.

[14:56] It was just this vehicle for greed. Let's move on to the next incident. Remember the sandwich. Fig tree. Cursing. Temple.

Tipping over. Fig tree again. Verse 20, 21. And as they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree you cursed has withered.

Interesting detail. Tree was withered to its roots. I think it's telling us something important about Jesus' intentions here. So in your Bible, if you look at your Bible on this passage, there's a heading. And the heading is the cleansing of the temple, right? That's not in the original manuscript. So that's not like the Word of God. That's like a helpful heading for us.

The heading, the cleansing of the temple, I think is misleading. Because Jesus is not trying to cleanse the temple.

[16:00] His intention is not to reform the temple. Remember the sandwich, right? When Jesus curses the fig tree, he tells us there's no recovery for that fig tree.

This tree is not coming back. It's rotten. He's saying the same thing about the temple. It's just, it's rotten. It doesn't work. It's not doing. It's not doing anything. The temple is going to go the way of the fig tree.

And it was. The temple was destroyed in 70 AD. So folks, that's the fig tree sandwich explained there. And let me sort of pull some threads together here to finish.

So Jesus entered Jerusalem. And people were shouting. They're shouting. They're shouting all the right things. Conventional things. But then the crowd all disappeared. They didn't carry on with Jesus. He entered the temple alone.

They had a fickle faith. They had a faith that was easily distracted. Jesus was an interesting guy. But he wasn't the center of their life where he should be. They had these bursts of enthusiasm.

[17:04] But their lives weren't changed. It's just like the temple industry. You know, it was all show and chaos and busyness. It was very leafy, but no fruit.

No one's lives were being changed there. And I think this is the big challenge of the passage. Jesus wants more than our fickle excitement. He wants more than religious busyness.

He's not impressed by sort of just this sort of perfunctory religious language. Just saying the right things. These are things that can look good on the outside. We can look leafy, but...

You know, folks, are we changing in character? Is the life of Christ being reproduced in you? Are you growing in your humility?

Are you trusting God with your future? Are you becoming less attached to money? You know, when was the last time the words of Jesus caused change in you?

[18:08] I mean, these are questions I ask myself that I grieve about. And it's good. It's a good thing to do this. I ask myself, where are the areas of my life where Jesus is not the center?

Where are the areas where I know I can say the Christian-y things? I can say them better than you can. Because I've got a doctorate in this. I mean, you know, you've got a doctorate. You can say things really good.

I can say them to a master's level good. Now, I could look leafy, but... Jesus is not the center in a lot of areas.

Folks, this is just a good thing to take. Every now and then, just take an account of your life. Now, as Jordan mentioned at the start, we can... You know, we've got this season coming up called Lent, which is committed to this idea.

This idea of these sort of spiritual reckonings, where we take an account of our life. So, action point?

[19:10] Folks, come to Jesus. Pray for forgiveness, which is the last thing we talk about in the passage, that Jesus says to us. Come to Him. Pray for forgiveness. Ask for Holy Spirit change.

That Jesus would be your anchor, your comfort, and your only hope. Amen.