

A Fig Tree Cursed and the Temple Cleansed

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Date: 14 April 2013

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[0 : 00] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[2 : 42] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. as a teacher of God's word, and he seems to just destroy everything that the church stands for, and the word for you is good.

There's something unpredictable about Jesus, isn't there? Especially if you've never read about him before, and I keep saying this, there's nothing like sitting with your Bible, opening it, and reading about the life of Jesus, and it's then that you discover the intrigue.

You can't guess, you can't set and guess what Jesus is going to do. You think you know, you think you know what you expect him to do, but he very often acts in a way which is completely opposite to what you expect.

The same was true with the disciples. They didn't know either what he was going to do. For one moment or another, that's why they came following him, watching what he was going to do.

[4 : 05] The disciples were going to do something quite outrageous. But whatever we might think as we cast our eyes at first reading on this chapter, bear in mind that this is the Son of God.

So whatever he does, he does for a good reason. And it's on that premise that I'm going to ask you to follow what we're going to be saying this evening.

These are not the actions of someone who has lost his mind, or something who has lost his mind, quick temper, or a grudge against something. These are the actions of the Son of God.

And if you bear that in mind, then everything falls into the right place, which once again brings us back to the challenge of Jesus' identity. Either he was mad, or he was the Son of God.

If he was mad, then you don't want to take anything to do with him. But if he was the Son of God, then of all the people in the world, it's his voice that we should be listening to.

[5 : 26] Is that not correct? Does that not make sense? If Jesus is God, then he's the person, the number one person that we should be listening to this evening.

And anything he tells us and commands us to do, surely that's our first priority. Whatever else priority that we have, whatever other priorities we have in this world, and I'm quite sure there are loads, then surely we want to put Jesus first.

That seems to me to be the most logical thing in the world, and yet, for most people in the world, they don't want to know. And I put it to you tonight that the reason, if you don't want to know, the reason for that is not logic, it's your pride and your refusal to listen to the Son of God.

I don't understand that. I'm asking you to give me a good reason why you refuse to listen to the Son of God himself. But let's not assume that you're going to refuse to listen.

Let's assume that you are going to listen and that you're going to follow me through this passage.

I'm not going to try and give you my own version of events.

[6 : 38] We're going to simply look at the events as they take place and try to make sense of them, asking the question, why was it that Jesus spoke to the fig tree?

Why was it that he went through the courts of the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers? What were they doing anyway? What did the whole thing mean?

Is there a connection between the two events? I believe there is. Particularly because this whole passage seems to have taken place at the same time.

Number one, he goes to the fig tree, he speaks to it, he says, no one, may no one ever eat fruit from you again. Then he goes away, he immediately goes into the temple and he finds in the temple those who sold and bought in the temple and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

And then afterwards, the next day, his disciples draw his attention to the same thing again, to the fig tree. We're back to the fig tree. And they see that not only has it withered, but it is completely destroyed in one single night.

[7 : 43] And so all this takes place in one. The fig tree sandwiches the events that took place in the temple.

I believe that they are connected. We're going to call them this. We're going to call them, first of all, the cursing of the fig tree. And then we're going to call it the cleansing of the temple.

The cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple. What I want you to notice that let's try and, as always, notice in what happens, the wording and the precise way in which it is put.

He came to the fig tree and he found nothing but leaves because it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, may no one ever eat fruit from you again.

And his disciples heard it. Now, what does all this tell us? Well, again, it puts the choice. It presents us with a challenge that either Jesus was out of his mind, in which case, why was it, what power did he possess in which, which was able to actually bring about the fulfillment of the curse?

[8 : 58] you can't go to a tree and say, neither can I, and say to that tree, may no one ever eat fruit from you again. And the next day, find that that tree is withered to the ground.

It's just impossible. You and I simply do not have the power or the authority to do such a thing. So keep that in mind. So because it happened, then that authenticates what Jesus said.

And it reminds us, and it brings to our attention, that there must have been a reason for it. It's not that he took a spite against the fig tree because it didn't produce fruit, because he was hungry.

He was hungry, no doubt. We're told that. And that was the occasion for him trying to lay hold upon some food, as you and I would do if we were hungry.

No doubt, the tree being in front of him, it brought to his attention the fact that there could have been figs on the tree.

[10 : 09] And if it had been a different season, if it had been a little bit later on in the year, then the figs would have been growing and he would have been able to just pick from the tree and he would have been able to satisfy his hunger. But because it wasn't the right season, though the tree looked, and here's one of the important details of the story, the tree looked so appetizing.

It looked so alive, and yet there was no fruit on that tree. And that was when he said, may no one ever eat fruit from you again.

The whole point of this was not some kind of arbitrary, random spike that Jesus took against the tree. It was a parable.

It was an acted out object lesson in which he's telling his disciples and all those who are listening to him and watching him.

Remember that there were always crowds of people watching Jesus. and look at what he said, his disciples heard it. It was for their benefit that he did this in order to make a point to them and in order to get a message.

[11 : 25] Jesus is about a message. And a message is about what God wants to say to people. And this is about what God wanted to say to the people who were around Jesus at that time.

Who were those people? This is crucial to our understanding of the story. The people amongst whom Jesus came were the Jewish people.

Jesus himself was a son of David, a son of Abraham. He was born into the Jewish community. And his own people, his own relatives, were Jewish people.

the covenant people of God who were in a special relationship with God ever since the time that God called Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and pledged himself to be their God and they would be his people.

Through the centuries that followed, God stuck with them and loved them and led them and guided them through all kinds of difficult situations. And he brought them back when they repented.

[12 : 35] and he tolerated them when they sinned against him. He sent prophets amongst them to turn them back. And eventually, he sent his own son into their midst among them to be their savior.

The way that John chapter 1 puts it is this, he came to his own. His own people, his own family, his own relatives, his own flesh and blood.

He came to his own. But if you read on, it reads like this, his own received him not.

They refused to have anything to do with him. Despite all the privileges that they had of knowing God's word throughout the sense of having been brought up with God's word from the very, from the days of their youth, from having the heritage, throughout their forefathers through the centuries of having God speak to them.

When Jesus eventually did come into the world as the fulfillment of God's promise, they refused to listen to him. And eventually, they plotted against him and they nailed him to a cross.

[13:57] We will not have this man reigning over us. God was saying to his people, the Jews, I have given you my word.

I have given you myself. I've been with you through thick and thin, through darkness and light. I've been with you in the good times and the bad times.

I've delivered you. I've saved you. I've led you. I've taught you. I've done miracles amongst you.

You know that you belong to me as my people and surely I expect to find fruit when I come to you like my tree.

See, the Old Testament, it describes God's people as a tree on many occasions, on many different occasions. Like Psalm 80, we were just reading about the vine that God planted.

There are times in the Old Testament and well, they knew that. They knew what the allegory of the tree meant because they knew that Old Testament, like Hosea, chapter 9 and verse 10, where God says, like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel like the first fruits on the fig tree in its first season.

[15:17] I saw your fathers, but they came to Balpeor and consecrated themselves to the king of shame instead of serving me and loving me and obeying me.

They obeyed other gods. They went after other gods because they wanted to please themselves rather than doing service to me. And if they did that in the Old Testament, how much worse was it when God's own son came into the world and instead of recognizing him as they ought to have, anybody with any thinking sense who saw Jesus, the kind of person he was, the kind of power that he possessed, they knew that this must be, it could not be anyone else but the Son of God himself, the Messiah, was going to come into the world and instead of bowing down and consecrating their lives before him and following him, they refused him.

Despite all that God had given to them, they threw it back in his face. There's always a challenge in the Bible and I want to suggest to you today that even in the 21st century amongst Gentile peoples like ourselves, there's still a challenge in this because God expects when he gives us his message, when he gives us minds and hearts and a reason that is capable of understanding what he says to us in the Bible, I'm sure that the first time a person ever comes into contact with the Bible, then there's lots of questions and lots of things he has to come to understand.

He can't come to a living faith in Jesus just by knowing, just by knowing. But as he, as that person comes to a greater understanding of what God has done for that person like ourselves, I don't believe there's anyone here tonight that doesn't have a good understanding of what God has done in the person of Jesus Christ and the reason why Jesus came into the world and you have an understanding of why he came in because we are sinners and because we need forgiveness and because we need to be saved from God's anger and from his wrath.

But if you have that understanding, then God's looking for fruit. He's not looking for you to turn over a new leaf.

[18:02] The fruit that God is looking for is repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And the reason I say that is because of today's emphasis on when it comes to religion on, well, it's up to the person themselves to choose whatever religion suits them.

There's a whole variety of messages and voices and books and systems and beliefs all over the world. And if ever there was a day when you could access these different religions and beliefs it is today.

You can look on the internet, you can Google what you like. If you're interested in Buddhism, you just Google Buddhism, you can find out all there is to know about it. Or Hinduism, you can find out all there is to know about it.

And religion, of course, in today's world has become a kind of a supermarket. It's become of your choice against my choice. And if you choose to be a Buddhist, that's okay for you. And if you choose to be a Hindu, that's okay for you.

And everybody has to choose. And that sounds on the outside as if it's simply a matter of the individual choice. Like so many other things are in today's world.

[19 : 12] You choose one thing over another, that's your choice. You have liberty to do what you want. And it sounds so plausible, doesn't it?

But it's not what God is looking for. God has spoken in Jesus Christ.

And having spoken to you and to me tonight, He expects us to listen. It's a command. It's an order. It's not something that you can turn your back away from without any consequences.

When God speaks to you, then surely it stands to reason, doesn't it? If somebody else speaks to you, well, it's up to you whether you choose to listen to that person or not.

But when God speaks to you, you can't but listen. You have no choice in the matter. Surely, if you turn away from Him, then you are doing something which is grossly, grossly dishonoring to God.

[20 : 26] And the fruit that God is looking for tonight is for you to listen to Him and to accept what He says about you and to accept the message of His Son, Jesus, that He came into the world to die for you that you may be forgiven.

that's the gospel. And God is looking for fruit in you tonight. And I want you to be aware of that.

And I don't want you to feel comfortable with it because it's not a comfortable thing. It wasn't comfortable when the psalmist wrote, Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know my sitting down and my rising up. Because you're God. And because He is God, He knows there isn't anything that we can do or say or be that He doesn't know about.

So whatever freedom you have amongst humanity, every single one of us is accountable to God for what we do with His message and with His Son, Jesus.

[21 : 44] that's the cursing of the fig tree. Jesus, when He found no fruit on the fig tree, it wasn't that He had anything against the fig tree, He used it as an instrument, as a piece of equipment in order to make a very powerful point to those who chose to listen to Him.

He said, may no one ever eat fruit of you again. And of course, if you read on through the chapter, as we've done so, the next day they came to the same fig tree and they found that there was no fruit on it.

The curse had been fulfilled because Jesus Himself had spoken with power. It was a very solemn thing, wasn't it? It must have been very, very solemn for the disciples to have seen the fig tree and it was just destroyed and withered away.

And what Jesus was promising was that the day would come, and I believe He said this in great sadness, that the day would come where the privileges of being God's people would be taken away from them and where they would be destroyed for refusing to have listened to God's grace.

And you know what? That's exactly what happened. In 70 A.D., the Emperor Titus came in and he destroyed the temple and he destroyed Jerusalem and thousands of Jewish people were put to death.

[23 : 20] Jesus saw that coming. If you read Luke's account of exactly the same incident, He cries over them. He weeps over them. And I believe that He said this in great sadness.

I believe He did this in order to make one final plea to them to turn away from their stubbornness in refusing to believe what He came to do.

Now, that's the cursing of the fig tree. What about the cleansing of the temple? Well, it's the same thing. What had happened was the temple, He went into the temple precincts. You remember the temple was a magnificent building.

It's hard for us to appreciate what the temple meant to the Jewish people at that time and what it always had meant to them. It was the most precious, the most magnificent building.

If you go all the way back to the very beginning when Solomon built it, a thousand years B.C., and it was the most expensive. You remember some years ago we did this, did a study of Solomon and building the temple, and we discovered that it was the single most expensive building that anyone has ever built in all the world, in any age, at any time.

[24 : 35] And that was because there was an abundance of gold and silver and precious stones, and because Solomon invested billions and billions, essentially, into the building of this temple because God meant so much for him, to him, and he wanted to build up with this.

This was his way of expressing his love for God, and it was God's command. God's purpose, that he built this amazing building for the glory of God. Well, that was destroyed. I think it was in 4 something, 486, or something like that, that the King Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed the

temple in Jerusalem.

And what happened, of course, after that was that 70 years after the people, the Jewish people had been taken captive to Babylon, they were allowed back, and they began to build the temple again. And a man called Zerubbabel began to build the temple, and he persisted, and he built the temple. It wasn't like the first one, it wasn't as elaborate or magnificent as the first one, but it was built again. And that was destroyed until just before Jesus came into the world, Herod decided to build the temple, or rebuild it, or renovate it, and he built it once again.

[25 : 54] And they tell me it was still in the process of being built at this time when Jesus was in. And there were three sections to the temple. There was, first of all, the court of the Gentiles.

That was a kind of a semi-enclosed court. It was neither inside or outside. There was a route, I'm not entirely sure, it was a portico, but it was kind of on the outside.

A large area outside the main sanctuary where the Gentiles could come because they were not allowed to go any further into the temple. That was the court of the women.

And then there was the inner part where only if you were a Jewish man you were able to go, you were allowed to go. Now, what is happening here is taking place on the very outside of the temple. But it was still an area which ought to have been dedicated to the glory of God. It was a place of worship. But instead of that, what had happened was during the years it had deteriorated into a marketplace.

[26 : 58] This wasn't just an ordinary marketplace, by the way. There were loads of marketplaces in Jerusalem. There was a time and a place for everything. There was no problem with having a market. The problem was where the market was and what they were doing in the market.

They were selling animals not for food but for sacrifices. They were selling all kinds of ingredients that God had ordered that they include in their sacrifices in the Old Testament in order for them to worship.

Now, for example, you have to remember that the people who came to Jerusalem in that time, they weren't necessarily local people. They came from far away, further away in Judea, in Israel, and perhaps from further away in the Roman Empire.

there were Jewish people who wanted to come to Jerusalem and made the long and arduous journey in order to attend the Passover or in order to attend some other religious feast within the Jewish context.

And when you wanted to make a sacrifice, you had to bring an animal. You can look up the book of Leviticus to find the details as to what kind of animals that were brought. Now, that's okay if you live in Bethlehem, which is only a few miles away from Jerusalem.

[28 : 18] But it's a different story altogether if you're traveling hundreds of miles and you're having to bring not only the horse that you're riding on, but you're having to bring a lamb or a goat for sacrifice.

And when you got there, the first thing that would have to happen to the animal that was going to be used for sacrifice is he had to be inspected by the priest.

Now, what if, having traveled hundreds of miles with your lamb or your goat, you brought it to the priest and the priest said, no, no, this lamb is not good enough.

That would have been inconvenient to say the least. So, what did they do? The Jewish ruling leaders, they decided, we'll sort all this out.

We will provide ready-made sacrifices for you, but at a price. You have to buy them. We will provide everything that you need, and it's all got the priest stamp of approval on it, so there's absolutely no problem.

[29 : 25] You just come, bring yourself, and then you can make the sacrifice as long as you've got enough money to pay for it. But, of course, this had turned into an industry where those who ran the marketplace, they had lined their pockets in the worship industry.

And what had happened during the years was that God had been pushed further and further and further out of their thinking in favor of their business and how much money they could make in selling and buying the various sacrificial animals that they had to buy and sell.

And over time, God's worship had become a laughingstock. The honor and glory that was due to God was now a side issue.

And what really interested these men and people who were working there was how much money they could make at the various feasts and festivals when they could buy and sell animals. Besides

that, they tell me that you had to pay the half drachma temple tax, the shekel, and you had to change your money from Roman coins into Jewish coins.

And that came at a price just the same way as if you wanted to change pounds into euros at the airport. You have to pay a commission, a large commission. Well, these guys, they charged a large commission for you to change from Roman money into Jewish money.

[31 : 02] And all of this lined the pockets of all those business people whose business it was to try and to make money out of the... Well, Jesus was angry.

There's no getting away from the fact that Jesus, when he went into the court, he was angry. Once again, you're asking the question, was his anger justified?

Of course it was, because he was the son of God. God's anger is always justified. Whenever we read about it in the Bible, we're not talking about the kind of anger that you and I can be guilty of, in which you could flare up for a very small reason, or something that's unreasonable.

You and I can be very unreasonable, at least I can, but God can't. God is not capricious. If he is angry, if Jesus is angry, it's for a reason, and it's always righteous anger.

And when Jesus walked into the court, he saw, first of all, what they were failing to do, and which was to give God the glory as the central place in the place of worship.

[32 : 09] God had taken second place. They had lost sight of his grandeur and his majesty and his love and his commitment to his people.

They had pushed him to one side, and God is angry because he says, you shall not have any other gods except me. That's exactly what they were doing.

They had replaced him with the God of their own income and their own money. And how easy that is to happen and how often it happens.

It can happen in every age. It can happen tonight in the 21st century. It can happen right here in Stornoway where we've gathered here and we're concentrating, we hope, on God, his word, the Lord Jesus coming into the world.

The best event that ever took place in the world. But instead of that, what are you thinking about? What are you going to be doing tomorrow?

[33 : 12] What are you going to be doing during the week? The decisions, the choices you have to make, your place of work, chances of promotion, the house that you've seen, bigger and better and faster and flashier, I'm not saying that there's no place for business.

Of course there's a place for business. There's a place for buying and selling and trading. Of course there is. But not when it comes at the expense of God and the place that God takes in our hearts.

God says, I am the Lord and my glory I will not give to another. He says, honor me. Him that honors me, I will honor.

I'm asking you the question tonight, has God taken the first place from start to finish? Even this evening, half past six, we've only been here an hour. Were you singing the words that we were singing?

Were you giving glory to God? Was God at the very center of our attention? I'm talking to myself as well, or was it something else? I'm sure there's always distracting thoughts.

[34 : 25] I know how easy it is to become distracted in a place of worship. There are some distractions that are understandable when we're concerned about someone who's sick, someone who's in trouble, some burden that we're carrying.

I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the kind of distraction in which we have shown to ourselves who the real God is. And that's a very serious matter.

What do you think God sees tonight as he looks at your heart? Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up and even my thoughts are known to you.

Once again, God is looking for fruit. He has given us life, he has given us his message, he has given us his son, he has given us everything and left us with no excuse whatsoever.

But tonight, as he looks through my heart and your heart, he is asking, what fruit is there?

[35 : 51] Oh, these people were all so religious. They prided themselves in doing all the right things. They looked the part. If you would ask them, we're engaged in the business of sacrificing, we're engaged in the temple, the temple is our pride and our joy, and we've given everything to the temple, and yet God was nowhere to be seen.

And the reason I know that was because Jesus had been pushed out of the equation. And really, what Jesus was doing was walking into the very place that belonged to him in the very first instance

as God, and claiming the lordship over his people.

instead of bowing to him, instead of submitting to him and surrendering to him as they ought to have, we read in this passage that they plotted on how they might destroy him.

You see, it's one or the other. You might say, well, I would never destroy Jesus. I would never have supported those who crucified him. Of course not. I would have been a million miles away.

Would you? Would you? Would you? When you refuse to listen to Jesus, you are effectively saying, I wish that there was no such person.

[37 : 20] I don't want him in my life, and I will not have this Jesus to rule over me. It's one or the other.

which is it to be tonight. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we ask that you will move amongst us.

As Jesus moved amongst the people and the streets and the towns and the villages and everywhere he went, he provoked one or the other, either those who followed him and who came to love him and to accept his forgiveness or those who hated him.

And we pray, Lord, that tonight, 2,000 years later, as we are returning to the life of Jesus, to his person, and to his words, to his actions, we pray, Lord, that as these provoke the same response in us, we pray that in your grace and in your mercy, that you will turn the hearts of each one of us to yourself, so that we may know your forgiveness and eternal life.

In Jesus' name, Amen.