

Midweek 4
His Final Steps Led to a Fig Tree
Sermon Text: Mark 11:12-14,20-25

Some people are mightily puzzled by it. Others are shocked by it! By what? By the account we will study this evening about an event that took place on Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week. Tonight you and I follow our Savior again, and we watch how . . .

His Final Steps Led to a Fig Tree.

- I. A fig tree cursed to prove the danger of unfruitfulness.**
- II. A fig tree used to prove the power of prayer.**

I. A fig tree cursed to prove the danger of unfruitfulness.

Why are people either puzzled or shocked by Jesus' cursing of the fig tree? Because at first blush, what our Savior did seems quite out of character. Some readers ponder this section and worry, Was Jesus cracking under the pressure? Was he boiling over with frustration at all the opposition? Was the poor fig tree just in the wrong place at the wrong time? An unfortunate target of a divine temper tantrum! I can understand why some Bible readers might wonder that. Because if you or I had been walking in Jesus' sandals for those final steps, our tempers may well have boiled over! Our frustration with the hate-filled and completely unjust opposition of the Pharisees, chief priests, and teachers of the law might have resulted in not just a withered fig tree but a massive crater left where all of Jerusalem once stood—a crater caused by the fire and brimstone we had asked the Lord to rain down from heaven in judgment!

But our Savior Jesus is not like us. He never buckled under pressure. He never gave in so much as an inch to the tempter's constant and insidious attacks. The writer to the Hebrews assures us, "*We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin*" (Hebrews 4:15).

But then the question remains: Why? Why on the Monday morning of Holy Week did Jesus guided his steps toward that fig tree he saw in the distance? Why didn't he use his 20/20 divine vision to know ahead of time there weren't any figs on that tree? Why indeed when Mark informs us, "*It was not the season for figs*" (Mark 11:13)? Why, when Jesus found nothing but leaves, did he curse the tree by saying, "*'May no one ever eat fruit from you again!'*" *And his disciples were listening*" (Mark 11:14). Take that last sentence and tuck it away in your heart. We'll come back to it in a moment, because it helps answer our question.

But now, for a moment, let me tell you a little bit about fig trees. The fig tree Jesus cursed would have been orchard-sized: 10 to 15 feet high was the norm for figs, with some trees stretching as high as 25 feet. The tree's summer foliage is dense and thick, making it a wonderful shade tree to lounge under. Fig trees were also prized because they provided one of the basic staples of the Jewish diet, and those figs helped drive the economy. Figs were a good cash crop, usually yielding two crops per year, maybe even three. In Palestine, they lose all their leaves in December and then start budding again in late March, but they are already starting to form the next crop of figs before they are fully leafed out! This explains why when Jesus saw this fig tree "*in leaf*," he walked over to look for fruit buried under the leaves. That would be the norm. But there wasn't any fruit.

That's when our Savior "nuked" it! He cursed it! He cursed it so completely and thoroughly that when the disciples walked past that same fig tree one day later, *"they saw the fig tree withered down to the roots. Peter remembered and said, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered' "* (Mark 11:20,21). With his curse, Jesus switched off the life in that tree! If this event teaches us nothing else, it proves the truth of this verse: *"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Hebrews 10:31).

That is one of the reasons **our Savior's final steps led to a fig tree**. It was cursed to prove the danger of unfruitfulness. But not just for that one tree. Even though Mark clearly tells us that Jesus was *"hungry"* when he walked over to that tree (Mark 11:12), it wasn't because of his growling stomach that the tree was cursed. Remember, this is the same Savior who fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. Losing out on an early morning snack wasn't exactly a crisis for Christ, nor was he prone to divine temper tantrums.

So what was going on? Jesus used the fig tree for the children's message, the object lesson, that day. Some have called it an enacted parable. Remember the sentence I asked you to tuck away into your heart? *"And his disciples were listening."* Jesus wanted the disciples to witness what happened: to see, to hear, and to learn.

Because right after he cursed the fig tree on Monday, what did our Savior do? He took a few more of **his final steps** and went to the temple. There he cleaned house. Why? Because the temple was just like that fig tree. All leaves, promise, and show, but no real fruits of faith. But you say, "Wow, that's a stretch, Pastor. Didn't anybody warn you about the danger of allegorizing?" They did, and so I don't make this application lightly. I make it because it fits the immediate context and also the broader context of Scripture.

When Jesus left the fig tree to wither down to its roots and he stepped to the temple, he went there in the hope of finding fruit. The words of Hosea may well have been echoing in his heart and mind: *"For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings"* (Hosea 6:6). But all our Lord found was a den of thieves. Though the temple was an architectural wonder of the world and the show put on there was impressive, all our Savior saw was leaves. No fruit. All he found were far too many people going through the motions of worship and worship leaders bowing down to the almighty shekel of Tyre.

So he cleansed the temple, just as he had cursed the fig tree. All to drive home this truth: You don't mess with the Lord God on high! The Lord of grace is at the same time the God of righteous justice who is described in several Old Testament verses quoted by the writer to the Hebrews: *"Vengeance is mine. I will repay. And again: The Lord will judge his people"* (Hebrews 10:30).

So we come back to this basic thought: The fig tree was the children's message, the object lesson. Our Savior cursed a fig tree to drive home the truth of a parable he had taught his disciples earlier in his ministry. *"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. So he said to the gardener, 'Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?' But the gardener replied to him, 'Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down' "* (Luke 13:6-9). That parable was not issued as a warning to fig trees throughout the land. It was a warning for God's people and for us!

Our Lord is patient. Our Lord is gracious, but he is also righteous and just. He expects fruit from his people. The prophet Hosea, serving as the Lord's mouthpiece, used this very same picture: *"I regarded Israel like grapes found in the wilderness. I regarded your forefathers like*

the first ripe fruit on a fig tree in its first season, but they went to Baal Peor, and they devoted themselves to a shameful thing, and they became as disgusting as the thing they loved” (Hosea 9:10).

What about us? Are we bearing fruit for our Lord, or have we grown complacent in our faith? If so, remember Jesus cursing the fig tree! This event helps us understand why the apostle Paul begs us from the pages of God’s Word, *“As fellow workers we also urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says: At a favorable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. Look, now is the favorable time! See, now is the day of salvation!”* (2 Corinthians 6:1,2).

This cursing of the fig tree puzzles some and shocks others. I get that. It’s rare that Jesus, God’s holy Son and also the perfect steward of the Lord’s creation, destroys something in nature. Unless you include the miraculous catches of fish, which didn’t end well for the fish (Luke 5:1-11; John 21:4-11), and the fish that held the temple tax coin in its mouth, although Peter might have practiced catch and release (Matthew 17:24-27), there’s only one other miracle where Jesus destroyed something in nature. Remember it? It happened when he cast the demons into a herd of pigs (Mark 5:1-20).

But all these miracles served a greater purpose: to further his plan. The next morning when our Savior and his disciples walked past that fig tree, imagine how Peter and the others gawked and gaped at a tree that had withered down to its roots within 24 hours! You don’t see something like that every day. That’s when Jesus seized the teachable moment created by his object lesson, and he explained to his disciples why **his final steps led to a fig tree**.

II. A fig tree cursed to prove the power of prayer!

When Peter blurted out, *“Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered,”* Jesus replied, *“Have faith in God. Amen I tell you: Whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, everything that you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”* (Mark 11:21-24).

Prayer works. The half-brother of our Lord got it right when a few decades later he wrote, *“The prayer of a righteous person is able to do much because it is effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain, and the land produced its harvest”* (James 5:16-18).

Prayer is powerful. Elijah prayed, and there was a drought for three and a half years. He prayed again, and the Lord opened the spigots of heaven! This fig tree withered instantly! Prayer moves mountains! That’s what Jesus taught his disciples that day.

He’s also teaching us—but maybe we don’t quite believe it. Maybe we are filled with doubts. Maybe we don’t feel as if our prayers move mountains! Prayers for healing from cancer. Prayers for saving a marriage. Prayers for a pandemic disease to be wiped out overnight—yet the deaths continue.

Why? Because our Lord is righteous and holy. He is filled with limitless grace. And he knows all things! He alone sees how everything fits together through all of time! Our Lord can take even the most heinous, godless attacks of the devil himself and still figure out a way to further his wonderful plan of grace. That explains why sometimes our Father’s answer to a prayer might be no. That’s what happened to the apostle Paul, who prayed three times to be

healed. Yet the Lord answered, “ *‘My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me*” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

But what about prayers moving mountains? Don’t get mesmerized by Jesus’ illustration about the power of prayer. Moving mountains is showy. If you posted a YouTube video of the event, it would go viral. If you put it on Facebook, there would be an avalanche of likes. But would it be little more than all leaves, all show, and no real fruit? The last I checked we have engineers who have designed massive earthmovers that move mountains and build highways.

Therefore, don’t lose sight of Jesus’ point! He talked about moving mountains on purpose. His image would grab the attention of his apostles, who all too often had their heads in the clouds as they argued about who should be greatest in the kingdom of God. For in the very moment when our Savior grabbed their attention, he explained what’s really important when it comes to the power of prayer: “*Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. But if you do not forgive, your Father in heaven will not forgive your sins*” (Mark 11:25). What should be at the top of your prayer list and mine? Forgiveness of sins—for others and for ourselves. That’s the real reason why Jesus took all of **his final steps**—whether to the tomb of Lazarus, a dinner party in Bethany, his Father’s house, or a fig tree. All **his final steps** were heading to the center cross on Golgotha’s hill. There he would suffer. There he would bleed. There he would die. All for the forgiveness of sins. All for all people. All for you and me. Amen.