Judgement comes to Jerusalem

Text: Mark 11:12-21

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** John 15:1-17; Micah 7:1-7; Mark 11:12-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 98, 503, 138, 338, 513

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#38)

**Theme:**  On His way to the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus symbolically curses a fruitless fig tree and then, entering the Temple, disrupts the unholy activities there - with the result that the chief priests were looking for a way to destroy Him.

**Proposition:**  Be warned - Jesus came to Jerusalem in judgement and He will return to judge all people, so have faith in God, repent and believe in His Son.

**Introduction**

What do you think Jesus is like? Gentle, kind, humble, gracious and loving? Yes, all those characteristics – to perfection. He is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), full of grace (John 1:14). After Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a young donkey He went into the Temple and ‘*looked around at everything*’ (11:11). It was late on the Sunday before the Passover and He then went out to stay the night at nearby Bethany with His twelve disciples.

Two events happened the next day, on Monday, that are recorded in our text from Mark’s gospel: Jesus killed a fruitless fig tree, and Jesus caused a violent upset in the Temple. Why did Christ do these things? The answer is because He is just, righteous, holy and courageous – all these godly characteristics – to perfection. He is full of truth (John 1:14)

If you go to the city of Jerusalem today, you will not see the Temple that Jesus visited about 2,000 years ago. It has been destroyed – all that remains is the stone retaining wall that is part of the level platform on which a magnificent building once stood. If you go to the city of Jerusalem today, you will not see the fig tree that Jesus cursed – it is long dead. Jesus came to Jerusalem both to judge and to save. The historical events back then have great and abiding significance for you and me today, as we’ll see under three headings today:

1. A fruitless fig tree
2. A tragic temple
3. A just Judge
4. **A fruitless fig tree**

What does a prosperous, happy life look like today? Some people might say owning your own home (mortgage free), having a well-paid job you enjoy and being able to take long holidays for relaxation and rest. There’s an often-repeated picture of material prosperity and peace in the Old Testament, revealed in the words “*every man under his vine and under his fig tree*” (1 Kings 4:25, 2 Ki 18:31, Isa 36:16, Micah 4:4; Zech 3:10). The fruitfulness of both grape vines and fig trees is also used as a metaphor for a faithful blessed Israel bearing the fruits of obedience to her covenant Lord (Psalm 80:8–16, Isaiah 5:1–7, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 15:1–8, 17:5–10, and 19:10–14, and Hosea 10:1). When Israel was unfaithful the people experienced covenant curses – there were ‘*no grapes on the vine nor figs on the fig tree*’ (Jer 8:13).

As we heard earlier from Micah 7, as he searches for righteous people the prophet compares himself to a vinedresser or fig producer looking for choice fruit. “*Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires*” (Mic 7:1). Through His prophet Joel, the Lord spoke of a plague of locusts who would be His instrument of judgment on His people. These cutting locusts would ‘*lay waste my vine and splinter my fig tree*’ (Joel 1:7).

This Biblical background helps us to understand the special significance of what Mark carefully records as Jesus and His disciples leave Bethany for Jerusalem. Jesus was hungry – just like us he needed to eat to stay alive bodily. Brothers and Sisters, our Lord and Saviour is fully human. On that Monday, seeing a leafy fig tree in the distance, Jesus went to see if he could find anything on it to eat. However, he found no fruit because, Mark records ‘*it was not the season for figs*’ (v13). Jesus then curses the fig tree with the words “*May no one ever eat fruit from you again*” (v14). Does this sound quite strange, even weird and peculiar to you? The season for figs was not in the spring month of Nisan in which the Passover was celebrated. Surely Jesus would have known that? Why curse a fruit tree for not having any fruit when it was not harvest-time? Didn’t Jesus have far more important things to do in Jerusalem besides killing one ordinary fig tree?

The truth is that the focus of Christ on a fruitless fig tree was a powerful picture of what was taking place especially in Jerusalem, but also throughout Israel as a people. Just as the fig tree looked alive and leafy from afar, so from a distance, the people seemed righteous, but in fact they were completely lacking in spiritual fruit. Jesus used the leafy tree, attractive to look at, as a symbol for Jerusalem; an impressive city but lacking true faith in the covenant God of Israel. Just as Jesus judged the fruitless fig tree, so He would judge the Temple in Jerusalem. Just as He predicted that the fig tree would never again be able to bear fruit, so He would later predict the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:2).

In writing his gospel, Mark uses what is sometimes called a literary ‘sandwich’ structure (e.g. 1:16; 5:42; 7:3-4,19; 13:14), by wrapping one event with two parts of another one. Here the fig tree is the subject of the sections before and after the actions of Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple. Notice how Mark records in verse 20 and 21: ‘*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 that you cursed has withered.”*’. True to the prediction of Jesus, no one would ever eat fruit from that fig tree again.

So what does this mean for you and me today? As God’s people, the Lord expects to see spiritual fruit in our lives. Jesus describes Himself and His living relationship with those He died for this way: “*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned*” (John 15:5-6). To repent of your disobedience to God and to believe in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour is to be united to Him. To continue in a life of ongoing repentance and faith is to abide/remain in Him.

Those who abide/remain in Jesus will bear fruit. No exceptions. What does that fruit look like? Church attendance? Whilst it is certainly the Lord’s will that we do not ‘*neglect to meet together*’ (Heb 10:25), merely coming to worship services does not necessarily mean that we who come are bearing spiritual fruit. It is possible to be like a fig tree with leaves but no figs.

What is the fruit then, if it is not essentially the good and necessary spiritual disciples of the Christian life like congregational worship, fellowship, Bible study and prayer? The fruit of the Spirit is “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Gal 5:22-23). This is the fruit that Jesus expects and desires to see in those who call on His name. It is the outworking of a life lived in Christ.

How is your life by this measure? It is an uncomfortable, but necessary personal question for each one of us in light of God’s Word to us today. The fig tree that Jesus cursed was useless for fruit when Jesus came looking for it. That small tree pointed to the huge temple, which was beautiful to look at from a distance, but in reality, spiritually useless, as we’ll see in our second point.

1. **A tragic temple**

What is the most magnificent building that you have ever seen, either with your own eyes, or via photographs, videos or movies? Some might say St Paul’s Cathedral in London, England. Others the Marina Bay Sands hotel in Singapore. Or maybe the Taj Mahal in India. When Jesus walked this earth, the temple in Jerusalem was perhaps the most magnificent building to look upon anywhere on this planet. Construction began in 20 BC, the 18th year of King Herod the Great. He was a very unpopular king, infamous for his tyranny, extreme cruelty and self-serving obedience to the Romans. Herod wanted to demonstrate his own power and influence by making the Jerusalem Temple bigger than it had ever been before.

You likely know that the first temple was built under by King Solomon’s command. We have a detailed account of this construction in 1 Kings 5:1-9:10 and 3 Chronicles 2-7. As a result of Israel’s repeated and continued disobedience to her God, this beautiful building was repeatedly robbed by the pagan nations. Despite the warnings of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the people refused to repent of their lack of trust in their Lord and of their idolatry. The Temple and the city were further plundered by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC and then burned by his general Nebuzaradan in 587/586BC. Most of the people remaining in Israel were then exiled in Babylon for 70 years.

On their return, the Temple was rebuilt under the direction of Zerubbabel. You can read about this in the Biblical books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai. The restored Temple was apparently smaller and less ornate than the original one. In the book of Ezra we read that “*many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy*” (Ezra 3:12).

The Temple that Herod the Great began was still under construction when Jesus came to Jerusalem. Later that week one of his disciples would exclaim “*Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!*” (Mark 13:1). The Temple looked magnificent, impressive and awe-inspiring, but inside it was rotten to the core. So it was that when Jesus entered the outer part of the Temple – the ‘court of the Gentiles’ He ‘*began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple*’ (v15-16).

When pilgrims came to Jerusalem, as so many did for the Passover celebration, they could not use the common Roman currency in circulation in wider society for paying the Temple tax or buying products to sacrifice there. So, there was a marketplace set up in the outer court of the Temple in order that people could change their money to pay the ‘*shekel of the Sanctuary*’ as commanded in Ex 30:13-16 and then be able to buy animals, birds, wine, oil and salt for sacrifices there. Not only this, but people were also using this court as a ‘short cut’ to get from one side of the large Temple complex to the other as they supplied the merchants with items to sell. That was why Jesus would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

The outwardly beautifully magnificent building could be called inwardly a ‘tragic temple’. God had called Israel to be ‘*light for the nations*’ (Isa 42:6, 49:6). The court of the Gentiles in the Temple enabled non-Jewish peoples who desired to worship the covenant God of Israel to come close to the Holy of Holies. This reflected God’s grace within the temple precincts, but was being undermined by activities which had turned the sacred place of worship into an unholy marketplace.

This church building is not a temple like the one in Jerusalem. Not so much because it is much smaller and less visually beautiful, but because the presence of God is no longer represented in a place, but now within people like you and me. The Apostle Peter explains this in these words ‘*you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house*’ (1 Pet 2:5). Brothers and sisters God calls us to live holy lives that are consistent with the people He declares us to be in Christ – “*As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct*” (1 Pet 1:15); “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him*” (Eph 1:3-4).

When Jesus enters the ‘court of your life’ what does He see? A holy or an unholy place? What, we might ask, does holiness look like? We could accurately say, it is seen in spiritual fruit in the lives of those who are united to Christ in a living relationship. “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Gal 5:22-23). This is what Jesus, the righteous Judge is looking for in the lives of His people, which brings us to our third point.

1. **A just Judge**

Have you ever said these words “it is just not fair!”? For most of us we have said this more than once as children and likely thought it many times as adults. This world is not a fair place, it has not been since the fall into sin of our first ancestors Adam and Eve. It will not be a fair and just place until it is reformed into the New Earth. We naturally want to be treated fairly because we are made in the image of God who is perfectly just.

As Jesus enters the Temple in Jerusalem, He is a just Judge. He explains the good reason for His righteous anger which was perfectly expressed as He ‘*began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons*’ (v15). He taught the people, quoting from Isaiah 56:7 and saying: “*Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers*.” As we have seen, the court of the Gentiles was the only place within the Temple where people from the surrounding non-Jewish nations could come to worship God in prayer. By allowing this area to be turned into a bustling marketplace, the temple authorities prevented ‘the nations’ from gathering to pray to the covenant God of Israel. The phrase ‘den of robbers’ likely relates to the trade that robbed the court of the Gentiles from being a holy place of prayer, rather than that the merchants were swindling the pilgrims there (although that likely also took place).

Was the judgement of Jesus in cleansing the court of the Gentiles so that it could be used for the holy purpose for which it was intended? Yes, absolutely! Would we expect to see the authorities who governed the affairs of the temple rejoicing at the courageous judgement of the holy and righteous man Jesus? Yes, surely? Christ was truly applying the Old Testament Word of God to the evil that was taking place. Yet, the chief priests and the scribes did not rejoice to see that the Gentiles would now be able to pray in peace to the Lord from within their outer court. Instead, Mark writes they ‘*were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching*’ (v18).

Jesus was the holy man of God that they were not. As John writes in his gospel: “*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil*” (John 3:19). Jesus, the Light of the World, showed up the darkness in the hearts of those in charge of the temple and they hated Him for it.

When Jesus, through His Word, shows you the darkness in your heart, do you hate Him for it? Do you hate that He shows you your ‘*sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, and/or divisions?*’ (Gal 5:19-20) Or do you love Him because He is not only a just judge, but also your forgiving Saviour?

The next day after Jesus cleansed the Temple of traders (the Tuesday), Peter said to Him “*Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.*” (Mark 11:21). The judgement of Jesus had resulted in the complete destruction of the fig tree. Likewise His judgment of the Temple would later result in its complete destruction in AD 70 under the command of the Roman Titus who would nine years after become Emperor. The Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus later wrote of this catastrophic event: “*While the Temple was ablaze, the attackers plundered it, and countless people who were caught by them were slaughtered. There was no pity for age and no regard was accorded rank; children and old men, laymen and priests, alike were butchered; every class was pursued and crushed in the grip of war, whether they cried out for mercy or offered resistance*”. “*The Temple Mount, everywhere enveloped in flames, seemed to be boiling over from its base; yet the blood seemed more abundant than the flames*”. God’s judgement is a terrifying past and future reality (Heb 10.31). Mark records the answer Jesus gave to the disciples after Peter had seen Christ’s destruction of the fig tree “*Have faith in God*” (v22).

Do you believe that everything God says is true? Do you believe that whatever you pray for according to God’s will is absolutely certain to happen? Jesus used a powerful illustration of this when He said to His disciples: “*Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*” (Mark 11:23-24). If you prayed that the mountain upon which Jerusalem is built, be thrown by God into the Mediterranean Sea and that was God’s will, would it happen? Most certainly so! It is not so much our believing prayers that are powerful, but rather it is the listening God who powerfully acts according to His perfect will.

The revealed will of God is that Christ Jesus is coming again to judge the nations. He will return to this earth as the Just Judge He is. He will separate people from one another just like a shepherd in Bible times would divide the sheep off from the goats (Matt 25:32). Every human being who has ever lived will see this event, there will be not a single person absent. Everyone seeing the judgement of Christ will agree that it is unbiased! Nobody will say ‘it is just not fair’. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11). Those going into eternal punishment, forever separated from God, will agree that their fate is fair. They will agree that they have received exactly what they deserve for having disobeyed the good law of their Creator.

Those who have believed the Word of God and have come to trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour will enter into eternal life. They will not receive what they deserve for having disobeyed the good law of their Creator. Instead they will continue to receive grace from God. They will be declared ‘not guilty’ because Jesus Christ is truly not guilty and because He died in their place and gave the benefits of His perfect obedience to them so that they are called ‘righteous’ in Him.

Is the Day of Judgement a yet-to-come, once-in-history event that you should fear? Well that depends on whether you believe Jesus to be who He is and whether you trust Him with your life. He is perfectly gentle, kind, humble, gracious and loving. He is perfectly just, righteous, holy and courageous. He is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He invites you today saying “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*.”

Come and rest in Christ so that you can bear much fruit.

AMEN.