



CURSING TREES AND MOVING MOUNTAINS

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Mark 11:12-26

32nd Message

Brian Morgan

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Has there ever been an occasion when in the face of evil you felt the urge to march in General George Patton style and forcefully take over and set everything right? Are such actions ever appropriate for Christians? We have reached chapter 11 of Mark's gospel, the account of our Lord's climactic entrance into Jerusalem. Israel's long awaited king is set to restore the kingdom of David. To the great surprise of the disciples, however, Jesus presents himself not in the way of David but of Zechariah, mounted on a donkey, even the foal of a donkey (Zech 9:9). Israel's king arrives for his coronation in a spirit of humility and gentleness. This makes us all the more ill prepared for what happens the next day when, in an exhibition of violent and ferocious authority, he curses a fig tree and cleanses the temple. So much for attempting to place Jesus in a box. In our text today we will learn that there is much mystery surrounding spirituality and many tensions that we need to hold in balance. It takes maturity to wrestle with these tensions, giving full weight to each, yet not comprising one with another. Here we will learn when it is our rare right as Christians to exercise forceful control over an evil situation.

Our text has three movements. In the first (11:12-14), Jesus stops to examine a fig tree on his way to the city. Observing that the tree has no fruit, he delivers a shocking curse. In the second movement (11:15-19), Jesus takes the temple by storm and prohibits all commercial traffic in and about Israel's spiritual center. Like Jeremiah the prophet he delivers a stinging sermon in that arena of rare quiet. Finally, in the third movement, as he is returning to Bethany (11:20-26), the disciples ask him about the fig tree he had cursed earlier in the day. These three texts are interconnected and must be held tightly together in their context to interpret their meaning. The implications of this day will give the disciples the key to unleashing heavenly forces that are able to remove insurmountable obstacles to the kingdom of God on earth.

I. Cursing the Fig Tree (11:12-14)

And on the next day, when they had departed from Bethany, He became hungry. And seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And He answered and said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you forever!" And His disciples were listening.

Departing Bethany for Jerusalem, Jesus is overcome with hunger. From some distance he observes a fig tree well endowed with leaves. Hoping to find some fruit to eat, he makes his way to the tree. He was not expecting to find mature fruit on it because, as Mark says, "it was not the season for figs." Gundry further explains: "not even

for the early figs that grow on the old wood of the tree and ripen in June, much less for the summer figs that grow on the new wood and ripen August-October. Jesus could hope to find only buds which form just before and as the tree leafs...At maturity early figs are 'very good' (Jer 24:2,3, 5), but buds are of marginal edibility." That was what Jesus was looking for, small but edible buds that were a sign of future fruit. But he finds nothing, no buds, only leaves: 'No buds now? Well then, no fruit in June - or ever afterwards.'"¹

Jesus responds by delivering a curse that explodes with so many negatives it awakens the ears of the disciples: "*May no one no longer eat fruit from you forever!*" To this, Mark adds the comment, "*And His disciples were listening.*" For the first time in the gospel the disciples appear spiritually sensitive. On this occasion, unlike so many others, they were actually listening. Jesus' explosive curse, following his "gentle" demeanor of the previous day,² must have jarred their senses. This event takes root in their hearts as they pass Bethphage ("*the house of unripe figs*") and journey down the Kidron valley, past Gethsemane, to Jerusalem.

II. Cleansing the Court of the Gentiles (12:15-19)

A. Forceful, Authoritative Actions (11:15-16)

And they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to cast out those who were selling and buying in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple.

Jesus and his disciples arrive in the temple, in the area known as the court of the gentiles, the one place specifically designated for worship by God-fearing gentiles. Looking forward to the Messianic era, the prophet Isaiah envisioned a time when foreigners would come in droves to this outer court and God would do a new thing among them:

"Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And holds fast My covenant; Even those I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." (Isa 56:6,7)

Isaiah foresaw a time when this outer court of the gentiles would become as holy as the inner court of the Jews. Rikk Watts observes: "the time is at hand when even Gentiles can belong to the 'kingdom of priests'."³ But Jesus

finds this outer court overrun with commercialism, traffic and noise. The commerce, which seemed innocent enough, was designed to be a help, not a hindrance, to the pilgrims and their worship. Gundry writes:

The sellers sell sacrificial animals guaranteed to be clean to pilgrims who live too far away to bring their own and to locals who do not want to risk having their own animals declared unclean by priestly inspectors. The moneychangers give acceptable Tyrian currency for other currencies in order that worshipers may pay the temple tax and buy sacrificial animals (m. Seqal. 1:3, 47-8; 5:3-5 *et passim*). Doves are sold to worshipers who cannot afford animals (Lev 1:14; 5:7, 11; 12:6, 8).⁴

But the location where these entrepreneurs chose to set up shop was the only place gentiles had to worship. What might have seemed innocent commerce for the convenience of worshipers turned out to be big business. Worshipers had to exchange their “unclean” Roman money for Kosher funds (“the Tyrian currency was the closest thing to the old Hebrew shekel” [Wessel]), and moneychangers charged exorbitant fees for these transactions. Profit had taken precedence over worship. Added to all this was the sight of people laden with commercial items, using the temple mount as a short-cut from the Mount Olives to the city. The court of the gentiles which was meant to be a house of prayer for all peoples had become a busy commercial intersection—a noisy shopping mall.

Jesus is consumed with rage at the sight. Without warning he takes complete control over the situation with “a ferocious exercise of authority and power” (Gundry). What a shock this must have been to the disciples! In contrast to his gentle and humble demeanor the day before, riding on a colt into the city in a display of pure passivity, now Jesus is physically and forcefully taking control of everything around him. He begins by throwing out all the sellers and buyers within the precincts of the temple; then he overturns the money tables and the chairs of the dove traders. As the money scatters about, the furniture totters and overturns and the bemused merchants flee, Jesus creates a holy barrier to all who treated the sacred court as a short-cut to their destinations. He has cleansed the court of the gentiles of every vestige of commercialism, noise and traffic, restoring it to a quiet place of sacred worship.

The contrast between the Jews’ attitude towards the gentile court and the attitude of Jesus could not be sharper. The Jews viewed the court as inconsequential, merely an appropriate place to set up shop or to be traversed for convenience, but Jesus regards it as unique holy ground not to be violated. That is why he restores it, using violent authority, to its rightful purpose, and in view of the greater salvation which was about to dawn.

When is it proper to become angry and exercise force as a Christian? It is when foreigners, guests and God-fearers come to worship and in that vulnerable state instead of finding a safe place to pray they are taken advantage of financially or ignored. That is when Christians are free to throw the offering plates in the air! If we took this seriously I wonder how we would respond to what goes on in some modern-day churches.

Jesus’ actions had tremendous implications for his messianic claims, for in the Old Testament, temple cleansing was the sole prerogative of the king. Here Jesus seizes that role as if it were his by divine right. His action was a slap

in the face to the existing high priest, since all this commercial activity was taking place under his authorization. If Jesus’ actions were not insulting enough, he takes on the role of a prophet, preaching in the manner of Jeremiah. John Calvin said: “He declared Himself to be both King and High Priest, who presided over the Temple and the worship of God.”⁵ This claim would be blasphemous were it not true.

B. Forceful, Authoritative Teaching (11:17)

And He began to teach and say to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a robbers’ den.”

Jesus’ words, quoted from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, are nothing new, but he applies them with fresh force on this occasion. God had designed the temple to be a house of prayer for all nations but, as in the days of Jeremiah, the Jewish leadership had made it a haven for robbers. Rikki Watts fills in the background:

The expression ‘den of thieves’ comes from Jeremiah’s famous ‘Temple Sermon’ (7:2b-15) which addresses the people’s foolish misconception that they can commit all manner of sin and then ‘flee’ to the Temple like a brigand to his cave, hoping to escape the consequences of their actions through participation in the cult...As a result, judgement is irrevocable and the Temple is to suffer a fate similar to that of the Shiloh shrine.⁶

This comparison to Jeremiah has explosive ramifications. Jesus is attacking the whole idea of a temple tax. He sees the selling of doves as an abuse of the poor, and his prohibition of vessels being carried about is an attack on profiteering by the establishment. In light of this comparison, the only thing remaining for the Temple and its leadership is judgment. No wonder his sermon provoked an enraged response.

C. An Angry Response (11:18,19)

And the chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for all the multitude was astonished at His teaching. And whenever evening came, they would go out of the city.

Following Jesus’ allusion to the fact that God would judge them, the chief priests and scribes respond the same way they did to Jeremiah’s pronouncements: they sought how to destroy him. But his power and authority have had too great an impact on the multitude. No action can be taken, at least for now. As Jerusalem had become too dangerous a place for Jesus to spend the night, he and his disciples made it their habit to retreat back to Bethany each evening for safe lodging, and that is what they do on this occasion.

III. Lessons on Prayer from the Fig Tree (12:20-26)

A. A Fig Tree Withered (12:20,21)

And as they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. And being reminded, Peter said to Him, “Rabbi, behold, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.”

Next morning they pass by the fig tree again and notice that a miracle has occurred. The leafy tree had completely

withered from the roots up, so that there was no prospect of it ever being revived. When the spiritually perceptive Peter points out this fact to the Lord, Jesus uses the tree as a parable to teach the disciples about removing obstacles in the kingdom.

Now we can understand the connection between the fig tree, which Jesus had cursed, and the temple. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the fig tree is a well-known symbol for the nation of Israel (cf. Hos 9:10; Nah 3:12; Zech 10:2). The tree was fully in leaf, but it lacked fruit. So too was the nation. Its spiritual center, the temple, was rife with religious activity but it bore no fruit. This made the temple ripe for judgement and, like the tree, it would never be revived. Both the temple and its sacrificial system were finished. Jesus would build a new one (Heb 12:22-24).

B. A Mountain Cast into the Sea (11:22,23)

And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him.

Again, bearing in mind the context of the prophets, we can grasp the implications of what Jesus is saying. The prophets foresaw a day when all obstacles to worship would be removed from among the nations. Mountains would be brought low, valleys lifted up, and all nations would come to worship the Lord. As Watts observes: "It is a feature of the 'Messianic Age' that all obstacles to God's returning people will be removed, particularly mountains (Isa 40:4; 45:2; 49:11; cf. 64:1-3)."⁸

In that context Jesus tells the disciples to have faith in God. With faith they can appropriate those prophetic promises, because that time had now arrived. "The 'moving of mountains' expected in the last days was now taking place."⁹ Through faith and believing prayer they could remove the obstacles that were preventing the nations from true worship of Yahweh. Not only would they be removed, they would be "cast into the sea." This is the same language which Mark used of Jesus casting out demons out of the Gerasene demoniac. Having been cast into the sea, that chaotic world, they would never return.

But then with poignant irony we are stunned to learn exactly what was the insurmountable obstacle to worldwide worship. It was, in Jesus' words, "**this mountain**" — Zion, the very temple mount itself. So corrupt had it become, rather than helping the nations worship it had grown to be the main obstacle to worship. So Jesus tells the disciples that if they have faith, they can say to "**this**" mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea," and if they do not doubt in their hearts, it will be done. Believing prayer can accomplish the impossible. So now Jerusalem is to be cleansed of its demons and its temple cast into the sea, not by force but by believing prayer.

Jesus goes on to make their faith even more radical.

C. The Greatest Promise and Obstacle of All (11:24,25)

"Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you.

Jesus now applies this principle of believing prayer across the board, applying it to all things for which we ask

(cf. Jas 1:5-8). It seems almost too good to be true. But before we can grasp how wonderful all of this is in the broadest of terms, Jesus brings the matter right home to the human heart. This is where we find the new temple of God being built, not in stone but in tablets of the human heart. Verse 25:

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions."¹⁰

The phrase, "*whenever you stand praying, forgive,*" is a clear reference to 1 Kings 8, the occasion when Solomon dedicated the first Temple (1 Kgs 8:14,22). On that holy occasion, the king stood in front of the altar in the presence of the people and, lifting his hands towards heaven, uttered a lengthy prayer of dedication. He thanked God that he had fulfilled his covenant to grant David a seed to sit on his throne, and then explained that the primary purpose of this temple was that it be a house of prayer (8:27-30). Then he listed several petitions for times when God's people might go astray, and ended each petition with the expression, "hear in heaven, and **forgive** the sin of your people" (8:31-53). Solomon prayed that when foreigners came to this temple, God would hear their prayers and grant their requests (8:41-43).

Now here is Jesus, the new Son of David, speaking to the disciples as if they are shortly to be in their new role as kings, standing in prayer before the new temple, one built not with stones but with tablets of human hearts (1 Pet 2:5ff.). Jesus warns them that the greatest obstacle to the nations coming into the kingdom will not be gentile hostility but their own lack of forgiveness. Before they beseech God to forgive them they are told to forgive others. A hard and unforgiving heart is a mountain that needs to be removed before revival can break out. And it can be removed only by believing prayer.

If the disciples were slow to comprehend this radical statement about the power of forgiveness, they would shortly gaze upon an image that would forever burn it in their souls. Within a week they would see their king crucified. Hanging from that tree, with outstretched arms, he will cry out, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

IV. Four Exhortations

The thrust of our text establishes a sharp contrast to the "gentle" demeanor of our Lord which we observed in our last study. These verses center on his passionate concern for the world. They leave us with powerful implications for where we need to take swift and forceful action in our own lives. I will conclude with four exhortations.

A. Be Discerning

First, we need to be discerning about the fruit of our own lives. Don't be fooled by a lot of leaves; look for fruit. We can be consumed with religious activity and holy meetings yet we may never hear the voice of God, and are totally devoid of fruit. Our very lack of fruit renders us counter-productive to the purpose of the kingdom and the joy of leading others to Christ. If this describes you, don't be afraid to radically prune your tree, even lopping off whole branches in order to bear fruit. Pruning is painful

yes, but it is far better than having the whole tree cursed.

B. Take Control

Next, we need to be physical. The only time when Jesus got physically violent in the gospels was when the holy space for gentiles was overrun and desecrated. We live in an age where all holy space and holy time are overrun by what is commercial. Turn on the television to watch a show and you are bombarded with commercials. You can't even go to a restaurant to eat a meal without being surrounded by a bank of television monitors. Turn on your computer to work and you are drowned by an invasion of trivia on the Web. It's hard to create that space where we can hear the voice of God. So it is right for you to take control and set up holy boundaries where there is a safe place and time for you and your family and friends to pray to God. And it is right for you to guard those boundaries with some force. When our children were young, we kept dinner time sacred. Our phone was off the hook for two hours, between 6 and 8 p.m., in order to avoid commercial callers. It isn't wrong to turn off the TV, radio, computer or Walkman to create time and space for the holy, especially when we are approached by those on the outside seeking a place to worship. This is the age when the nations are coming to Zion, and it is our responsibility to create a holy time and space for them.

C. Have Faith

We are privileged to live in the age when God is making a highway of holiness to Zion, removing all obstacles in his path, especially mountains. So Jesus invites us to enter into the process and pray that all obstacles might be removed, especially those that are set up by the church. Identify the insurmountable obstacles that are preventing your friends from coming to Christ and pray that God will remove them and cast them into the sea. Nothing is impossible for God.

And don't be intimidated by the government outlawing prayer in the public schools and pushing God out of the center of American life. They can try, but it can't be done. The more they oppose prayer, the more dependent on prayer we become. Prayer is the most important activity you can engage in with non-Christians. Bring them into this court, speak to the Lord before them, and then leave them there in the presence of the Holy One.

D. Be Forgiving

And finally, always bring your prayer home. Picture yourself as Israel's king, standing in the shoes of the Son of David, hands raised to heaven, making supplication to God for revival among the nations. Now from that holy position, never forget the great obstacle that blocks the entrance to Zion for others. It is not the world's hatred of the cross; it is our inability to forgive that hostility once we receive it. Do you have a hard heart? Are you able to forgive someone who has deeply wronged you? Are layers of resentment choking your compassion? Would you like that mountain to be removed? Then pray, and your forgiveness of others will unleash powerful forces in heaven. Remember the story of Stephen (Acts 6:11ff.). He was accused of speaking against the temple. Facing his accusers, he had the countenance of an angel. When he was stoned by the Jews, he looked to heaven and, seeing Jesus, said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" As Stephen was speaking those words, Saul of Tarsus heard his cry and those very words became the goad that led him to Christ. Through that one man, Paul, nations came to Zion. As those nations march to Zion, don't you agree that Stephen would say his death was worth it?

Forgiveness moves the greatest mountains on earth. O Lord, lead us in that way. Amen.

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1. Robert Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 636.

2. Jesus' curse has jarred many a modern commentator as well. Note T. W. Manson's response: "It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill temper (for the supernatural energy employed to blast the unfortunate tree might have been more usefully expended in forcing a crop of figs out of season); and as it stands it is simply incredible." (T.W. Manson, "The Cleansing of the Temple," BJRL [1951] 259.)

3. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 324 (cf. Isa 12:9; 15:39; 13:27; 66:18f; Zech 14:16; Mal 1:11).

4. Gundry, 642.

5. Quoted by C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 359.

6. Watts, 327.

7. These three observations come from R. Bauckham, quoted by Watts, 326.

8. Watts, 334

9. Watts, 334.

10. The best Greek manuscripts do not include v. 26. Most scholars think it is an addition from Matthew's text.