

The Messiah's Warning

Mark 11:12-21

Anyone here ever zone out...daydream while driving on the highway? That's why we need caution signs when there's sudden changes ahead. It save lives. There's something ahead – be ready for change. One sign I will never forget. Back in 99, I was driving a youth group from Prince George to Rosarito, Mexico. We could see the ocean from the I5 highway after we passed San Diego. We were getting close to the Mexican border. And there it stood...large as life.

Family Crossing Sign

Immediately the sign had a double impact. It hit my mind...caution, families cross here, where there's no pedestrian crossing and cars are traveling 70 miles hr. But symbolically, it hit my heart. It spoke of past tragedies on that stretch of road. And a national tragedy: that families in Mexico were willing to risk death or imprisonment to get out.

In Mark 11, Jesus creates some unusual warning signs. Signs with double meaning. If people heed them, many will be saved.

Pray

We find in the OT, God used many ways to send warnings. One way was through the word of His prophets. When the people are too calloused to

listen, He got them to act out warnings. For example, Isaiah was God's prophet at a time when Assyria was swallowing up the countries around it and it seemed the only one who could stand up to them was Egypt and Cush. But God warned the king of Judah (caught in the middle) not to make an alliance with them.

Eventually, Isaiah was called upon to act out a warning...to anyone trusting in Egypt/Cush. Isaiah had to go naked and barefoot for three years. It was a sign that the king of Assyria would defeat Egypt/Cush take the survivors away to exile...stripped and barefoot. King of Judah, don't turn to Cush and Egypt or you will be put to shame (Is 20). (Other bizarre warnings: Jer 13:1-11, Ezek 4-5).

This time, Jesus the Messiah is delivering the warning. And in Mark, it comes as a 'warning sandwich'. The outside 'bread' (fig tree) holds together the inside 'lettuce and tomatoes'(temple) to make a complete message.

It's early in the morning (Matt 21:18) the evening after Jesus carefully observed all the operations of the temple. We were left wondering what the humble king must be thinking.

V12-13 Nothing but leaves

Jesus is a fully human, hungry man. But why would He even expect there

to be something to eat if it's out of season...early April. Because on a fig tree, the fruit begins to develop even before the leaves sprout. In Hebrew it's called 'piggim' at this stage. (It's quite complex, but basically there is a tiny wasp that gets inside the young pod to pollinate the piggim internally...which turns into the fruit) This confusion could be cleared up by adding the word 'ripe' in the translation process. It was not the season for ripe fruit. But people who were hungry enough still ate it. So really, the tree has false advertising. "I have fruit, I have fruit." And what does Jesus find? Nothing but leaves. It's barren. Fruitless. Pay attention. When something seems odd, yet mentioned in detail, there's extra study to do. God is helping us make the connection between the fig fruit and a theme running through the Old Testament.

V14 Acting Parable #1

First thought: Woe, Jesus is hangry!
Second: God talks to trees? It's not just any tree. And he does it to draw the disciple's attention. There is something symbolic going on...a double meaning.
But at first glance, a typical westerner is going to question the morals of Jesus. One commentator on Mark, (William Placher) tells of a man who phoned him up to say that he was not a Christian because Jesus cursed an

innocent fig tree. Some philosophers use this passage to 'wag their finger' at Jesus (ie Bertrand Russell).

Let's put this into practical sense first. How many years do you keep a fig tree that doesn't produce fruit? Fig trees don't produce because: 1. some are too young (can take 2-6 yrs), 2. Have too much nitrogen (add phosphorus), 3. Don't have the right amount of water. Jesus poses this question in a parable...where the fig tree represents a warning to the people of Jerusalem.

Read Lk 13:6-9. Fig trees were used to symbolize Israel in the OT.

Hosea 9:10 *When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree.*

Jeremiah 8:13 *I will take away their harvest, declares the Lord. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree...*

In Joel 1:7, God send locusts as a warning to repent, like an invading army: *It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white.*

Micah 7:1-2 *What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave. The faithful have been swept from the land;*

It would not be a stretch to think Jesus was recalling Micah...using the

moment he discovered no fruit as an 'acted parable' to show what God thinks of the Temple activities Jesus had observed the night before. The fig leaves are a false advertisement. The Temple is a 'false advertisement'. The disciples have about 2 miles of walking to think about this...before they come to the Temple. Today there are no crowds blessing the humble king. But today the king will exercise His divine authority to cleanse the temple like King Josiah of old (2 kgs 23).

Slide: Herod's Temple Mount

King Herod's Temple is the third and last Temple of Israel. It had been under construction for about 50 years at the time. It was a magnificent and crafty way for Herod to gain the support of the political religious class in Israel and showcase his architectural prowess to the Romans. The Court of the Gentiles alone, was 500 yards by 325 yards (35 acres or about 5 American football fields). The large covered area closest to us in the picture is where the business would usually take place: the Portico (30 feet high). Sheep and doves being sold, foreign currency exchanged into the Tyrian shekel (no coin images allowed in temple treasury). But during the busy times (especially Passover) the business could crowd into the area reserved for Gentiles.

V15-16 Acting Parable #2

Is Jesus physically or verbally assaulting the people doing business? NO. He is disrupting business as usual. He is sending a message.

Who's in charge of this large-scale operation? The Sanhedrin (chief priests, teachers of the law, scribes)

The commotion is so great that people are blocked from carrying things like sacred articles into the central temple area. It's curious that no temple guards or Romans from the adjacent garrison show up. Perhaps it's the timing or perhaps the disturbance has not affected the entire area.

As a crowd gathers, they're not shouting fight fight fight! They're listening to Jesus teach. Seems the Sanhedrin has trouble understanding Isaiah a lot.

V17 Cleansing for Gentiles

Jesus appeals directly to scripture. Is it not written? You should know better than to conduct your business here! Jesus quotes from Isaiah 56, written some 730 years before.

Read Isaiah 56:1-8

Everyone thought that the Messiah would kick foreigners out of the temple. Instead, He clears the temple for them!

Isaiah also prophesied (Isa 53) that the Messiah will serve to suffer and die for our sins. Jesus will be the ransom to save people of all nations. Today

believers gather anywhere (even in Lillooet) to worship in spirit and truth. Jesus is accusing the Sanhedrin of turning God's space for worship from all nations...into a haven for robbers. The chief priests and teachers of the law were actually working against God's will.

Let us guard against racial prejudice, hypocrisy, idolatry and pride.

Just like the fig tree promised fruit by showing its leaves, so the religious leaders promise that their temple and traditions will bring them close to God. 613 rules for the Sabbath alone. But instead, the people are like sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:34). And these false shepherds get rich off their sheep. Works will never replace faith. We can't receive God's spirit that way. Jesus came to show us the way of salvation begins with the heart...repentance and belief. Because sin begins in the heart. No amount of religious ceremony can change that. We need a transformed heart...like a caterpillar to a butterfly. Jesus calls it being born again. Born of spirit. That only happens by faith and God's grace.

So Jesus did not come to end God's covenant with Israel. But he came to show them their hope is no longer in the Sanhedrin's way or the Temple. Sadly the people of Jerusalem

hardened their heart to repentance and belief...just like in Nazareth. In Luke's gospel, we find that Jesus wept when He was nearing Jerusalem on the donkey. He said *"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."* (19:41-44)

All peoples find the way the truth and eternal life through Jesus the Messiah, Son of God. God continues to have a special place for the children of Abraham. Many will finally realize Jesus is their savior. Anyone who teaches that God ended his covenant with Israel and replaced it with the church is skipping a lot of Scripture. The best way to understand this issue, is to study Romans chap 9-11 (esp 11:11-36). Pray for the Jews...that their hearts would finally soften toward Jesus.

V18 A Desperate Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin were always looking for a way to control Jesus and the people's opinion of Him. But they failed every time. It irked them, that Jesus accepted outcasts (2:16-17). They

hated how He exercised authority...to forgive sinners (2:8-10), to skip regular fasts (2:18-22), to ignore some Sabbath laws (2:23-28), to heal on a Sabbath (3:5-6), to cast out demons (5:22-30), to downplay cleanliness rituals (7:5-13), to point out their compromise of the Lord's Commandments (7:6-13) and refusing to give in to their demands for proof He is sent by God (8:11-12). Now Jesus is stirring things up right on their home turf. And because the people are amazed with His authority (hanging on every word)...He's getting away with it. The Chief Priests, Scribes and Teachers of the Law probably think Jesus is readying the people for a revolt to kick them out of power. They are so concerned about their control, that they can't see God's Son...right in front of them. Fear is the tool of Satan (1 Pet 5:8). *God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.* 1 Jn 4:17-18

The stage is set for a showdown between love and fear.

When Jesus is finished for the day, His home away from Galilee is not in the religious center of the most religious

city in Israel. But with His friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, up in the wee little town of Bethany.

V19-21 Miracle sign

Peter is stunned by how powerful Jesus' words are. He has not grasped that Jesus is God in the flesh. That He created the world with the Father and Spirit (Gen 1:26, Jn 1:1-3). What is it for God, to advance the decay of a tree? Or make things appear much older than they are? It is not wise to compromise God's word on Creation in order to accept man-made theories about how we got here. Even if they use that mind numbing Jedi trick phrase...millions and millions of years. Jesus is serious about showing the disciples (and us) the consequences of fruitless religion. The whole temple, Sanhedrin system is growing no fruit for God. It's a system, not a relationship of love and trust. It marginalizes those without the health, wealth and power. It's a heavy burden of works on the people. And it's run by arrogant, skeptical, controlling and fearful people. In 70 AD, Jesus' prophesy came true. Jerusalem was destroyed...only 7 years after the temple was finally completed. Can we apply these warnings to us? That's hard.

But sometimes believers can get lazy and 'zone out' on the kingdom road.

The Christian life is a journey of growth. The Holy Spirit works to convict. The Father corrects us for our own good. And when we're stubborn, Jesus waits at the door of our heart...for us to repent, so He can enter to fellowship with us in joy. Maybe when we're restless, confused or discouraged, it's because we've been ignoring His warning signs? There are consequences for leaning on our own understanding. Or for putting other things ahead of God. As a church family, how do we protect ourselves from going down the same road as the Sanhedrin? Could we ever let the church become an institution that does not yield to Christ, the bible as final authority? Could we ever use the church for our gain...instead of God's? Consider the cleansing the church went through in the 1500s because people were willing to confront a religious authority gone astray. Or the role of Christians to address social ills that the church was letting slide...like slavery. How do we protect our Sunday services from becoming all show and no fruit? We are pressured to be a consumer, tolerant of any view or morality. Be assured that God continues to advance His plans and Satan cannot hold them back (Matt 16:18). There is a

wonderful passage of scripture to help us as a church family and as individuals. It's found in John 15.

Read John 15:1-4

How do we remain in Jesus?

Read v9-12.

Love as Jesus loves. This is how we will produce fruit for God. A life unashamed of the Gospel. Praying and ready for anything. Not afraid of death.

The fruit that comes by letting God have His way is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

Church, we can expect trouble from this world. It is fallen...infected by sin. God has warned us in scripture and by His Spirit. Even unbelievers have a conscience. But as we walk in the light of Christ's love, we will be heeding God's warnings and have hope for tomorrow. For someday heaven and earth be one (Rev 21).

As we sing the closing hymn, consider that God did not sweep us away to heaven once we received Jesus as our King. But works with us here...to grow and serve others. And to enjoy His presence along the way.

Hymn: This is my Father's World.