

Introduction

1. When travelling overseas, having the right currency is important.
 - a. Deborah and I travelled to St. Petersburg, Russia in the fall of 2013 as I taught a couple of courses at the St. Petersburg Evangelical Theological Institute.
 - b. It was difficult to obtain rubles before we left. We were advised to take \$100 bills for exchange into Russian rubles at a Russian bank when we arrived.
 - c. We went to a Russian bank, which was a very different experience than going into a U.S. bank.
 - d. While we had \$100 bills to exchange, the key piece of information that we did not receive was that they needed to be crisp, new, uncirculated bills. Ours were not.
 - e. Apparently, there are a lot of counterfeits out there. The bank would not take our \$100s.
 - f. We had to rely on a contact at the Institute to make the exchange by other means.
2. This passage in Mark is another Markan sandwich, two related stories put together, which includes Jesus's encounter with both a fig tree along the road and money-changers in the temple.
3. **Read Mk 11:12-26.**

A. Cursing a Tree (12-14,20-25)

1. In today's text, we once again encounter a literary feature that occurs several times in Mark—a sandwich.
 - a. Mark places a story within a story. A story begins which is the bottom slice of bread. A second story is told. That is the middle of the sandwich. Then the first story concludes. That is the top slice of bread forming our Markan sandwich.
 - b. We first encountered this literary feature as Mark used it to highlight the two primary sources of opposition to Jesus' ministry: his family and the Jewish teachers of the law from Jerusalem (Mk 3:20-21; 31-35)
 - c. James Brooks observes that Mark often sandwiched one story inside another like this to "indicate a lapse of time, heighten tension, draw attention to, contrast, and most importantly to use two accounts to interpret each other. In other words the purpose . . . is primarily theological. Other examples are 4:1-20; 5:21-43; 6:7-29; 11:12-25; 14:1-11; 14:53-72 (or 14:53-15:15; possibly 14:17-31; 15:40-16:8)" (James A. Brooks, *Mark*, 73).
 - d. Today's Markan sandwich highlights Jesus pronouncement of impending judgment on Jerusalem for its corrupt practices and failure to bear good fruit to the glory of God.
2. An Encounter with a Fig Tree (12-14)
 - a. Jesus and His disciples had spent the night in Bethany (12).
 - 1) They were about three miles outside the city back down the road to Jericho.
 - 2) Most likely they stayed in the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary in Bethany.
 - b. On their morning walk to the temple, Jesus was "hungry" and saw a fig tree in the distance (12-13).
 - 1) The fig tree was "in leaf."
 - 2) However, "it was not the season for figs," and Jesus found nothing to eat.
 - c. Jesus cursed the tree in the presence of His disciples (14)
 - 1) Jesus said, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."
 - 2) Why would Jesus curse a fig tree for having no fruit when it wasn't the season for fruit?
 - a) Do you ever get hangry (hungry = angry)? Was Jesus just hangry? I don't think so.
 - b) This little "miracle" was again a chance for Jesus to teach His disciples kingdom truth.
 - d. Wiersbe writes, "The fig tree produces leaves in March or April and then starts to bear fruit in June, with another crop in August and possibly a third crop in December. The presence of leaves could mean the presence of fruit, even though that fruit was 'left over from the previous season. . . . If He had power to kill the tree, why didn't He use that power to restore the tree and make it produce fruit? Apart from the drowning of the pigs (Mark 5:13), this is the only instance of our Lord using His miraculous power to destroy something in nature. He did it because He wanted to teach us two important lessons. First, there is a lesson on *failure*: Israel had failed to be fruitful for God. . . . Jesus also used this miracle to teach us a lesson on *faith*" (Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 134-35).

e. Daniel Akin adds, “There is no anger, no malice, no temper tantrum. It is (as we will see) an object lesson, an acted-out parable of our Lord’s judgment on Israel and on those who claim to be one thing but are actually another, who put on a show but do not produce. It is a curse on the temple and the nation of Israel. By application it could be a curse on you and me and on our churches . . . The outward appearance said, ‘Come here! I have fruit that will meet your needs.’ However, when you arrive, you realize you have been deceived. It was a show with no substance. Sadly this is what Israel had become, especially the temple and the religious leaders (the Sanhedrin) who oversaw its operation. They gave an outward appearance of great spirituality and devotion to God but proved to be hypocrites” (Daniel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 251).

3. A Dead Fig Tree (20-25)

a. The story continues in vv 20-25. It is the next morning, Tuesday of Holy Week, as Jesus and His disciples come again to Jerusalem most likely from Bethany the same way they had come the previous morning, and once again come across the fig tree from the previous day (20).

b. Now, the fig tree is “withered from the roots.” (20)

c. Peter remembered the curse of Jesus upon this tree from the previous day.

1) As usual, Peter was the spokesman for what was most likely in the minds of the other disciples.

2) “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” (21)

d. Jesus used Peter’s observation about the withered tree as a teachable moment.

1) Jesus’ message was “Have faith in God.” (22)

a) Jesus continued, “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them” (23).

b) Faith is expressed openly with words.

c) Faith is confirmed by belief (Gk., *pisteue*) that the words spoken to God will be fulfilled.

d) The message to the disciples and to us was to have faith in God evidenced by your actions unlike the tree and the temple priesthood who professed faith but who did not show it.

2) The example of a mountain being thrown into the sea seems extreme, almost preposterous to us. However, if having the mountain thrown into the sea was necessary for us to accomplish God’s will, then we should ask for it believing God will do it.

a) Wiersbe writes, “In Jewish imagery, a mountain signifies something strong and immovable, a problem that stands in the way (Zech 4:7). We can move these mountains only by trusting God” (Wiersbe 135).

b) Perhaps the mention of a “mountain” was also an allusion to Zech 14:4 and the coming of messiah in power on the Mt. of Olives?

3) Jesus concluded, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (24)

4) Mark 11:24 is not a magic verse that makes Jesus our wish-granting genie.

a) Remember this was the erroneous thinking of Jesus’ disciples as James and John came to Jesus, “Teacher, . . . we want you to do for us whatever we ask” (cf, Mk 10:35).

b) There are conditions on getting what we ask for in prayer.

c) Wiersbe states, “Of course, this is not the only lesson Jesus ever gave on prayer, and we must be careful not to isolate it from the rest of Scripture. Prayer must be in the will of God (1 John 5:14-15), and the one praying must be abiding in the love of God (John 15:7-14). . . . the purpose of prayer is not to get man’s will done in heaven, but to get God’s will done on earth” (Wiersbe, 135).

d) Akin adds, “When we pray with mountain-moving faith, our God will give us what we need to glorify His name” (Akin, 257).

e) James, the half-brother of Jesus, would later write about not having an attitude like that of the disciples James and John when asking God for things in prayer: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (Jm 4:1-3).

- e. Jesus placed an important condition on our prayer requests based on our relationship with God. (25)
 - 1) If our relationship with God is not right, our prayers will not be heard.
 - 2) If our relationships with others are not right, then our relationship with God won't be right either.
 - 3) Jesus said, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (25).
 - 4) We can add another condition, by extension of the one that Jesus mentioned, that if anyone has anything against us, we should ask their forgiveness and make that relationship right before coming to God with a request (cf, Mt 5:23-24).
4. What about verse 26 in KJV that is missing in the NIV translation?
 - a. "²⁵And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mk 11:25-26, KJV, underlining mine).
 - b. Mk 12:25-26 stands in parallel with Mt 6:14-15: "¹⁴For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: ¹⁵But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Mt 6:14-15, KJV)
 - c. This is an issue related to the manuscripts of the gospels which were available to the writers of the KJV in 1611 versus the best manuscripts that were available to the translators of the NIV (ca 1978).
 - d. The best manuscript evidence indicates that the words in Mk 12:26 are not in the oldest manuscripts.
 - e. Mark 11:26 was most likely added by a later copyist to bring Mark into harmony with the fuller words recorded in Matthew's gospel.
 - f. Jesus most likely said these words, but Mark did not include the full saying in his manuscript. So, the editors of the NIV went with the best manuscript evidence available to them and left this verse out.
 - g. In the final analysis, the words in v 26 don't change the meaning of v 25. Furthermore, Matthew has given us the complete saying in His gospel. That is why we look at the synoptic gospels together.

B. Clearing the Temple (15-19)

1. Now we come to the meat of the sandwich—Jesus in the temple.
2. Remember what I told you last week? The clearing of the temple is recorded in Matthew and Luke as having happened on Sunday evening of Holy Week.
 - a. In Mark, this event happened on Monday morning of Holy Week.
 - b. In John, this event happened on an earlier visit of Jesus to Jerusalem (cf, Jn 2:13-16). It is possible that Jesus had to clear the temple more than once!
 - c. Weirsbe notes, "Jesus had cleansed the temple during His first Passover visit (John 2:13-22), but the results had been temporary. It was not long before the religious leaders permitted the money changers and the merchants to return . . . The priests received their share of the profits, and, after all, these services were a convenience to the Jews who traveled to Jerusalem to worship. . . . This 'religious market' was set up in the court of the Gentiles, the one place where the Jews should have been busy doing serious missionary work. . . . The court of the Gentiles should have been a place for praying, but it was instead a place for preying and paying" (Wiersbe 136).
 - d. Recollections of when this event happened may be unclear, but the facts related to the event are clear in all four gospels, which are very similar (cf., Mt 21:12-16, Mk 11:15-18, Lk 19:45-47; Jn 2:13-16).
 - e. The fact that Jesus cleared the temple of those who were there with wrong motives is central to all four gospel accounts.
3. "Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, . . ." (15)
 - a. Money changers were necessary since the temple tax could only be paid using shekels (cf., Ex 30:11-16) and many came from foreign lands and needed to exchange their foreign coins for shekels.
 - b. Those who sold doves was a provision for the poor (cf, Lev 14:22) who could not afford to bring bigger sacrifices such as sheep or bulls. Joseph and Mary gave a pair of doves at Jesus's dedication at the temple (cf., Lk 2:24).
 - c. Furthermore, Jesus ". . . would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts." This was not based on Scripture but on reverence for God's house in the Jewish Mishna. (16)

4. Jesus told them why He did what He was doing.
 - a. Jesus' actions were not sinful as they were done with righteous anger and holy zeal to ensure that God's will was done.
 - b. In Mk 11:17 Jesus quoted scripture from Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 to support His actions.
 - 1) "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'" (Isa 56:7)
 - 2) Instead of a house of prayer for the nations, Jesus said that you (i.e., money changers, merchants, and priesthood complicit with them) ". . . have made it a den of robbers" (Jer 7:11)
 - c. Wiersbe writes, "The Jews looked on the temple primarily as a place of sacrifice, but Jesus saw it as a place of prayer. True prayer is in itself a sacrifice to God (Ps. 141:1-2) . . . Both Isaiah (Isa. 1:10-17) and Jeremiah (Jer. 7:1-16) had warned the people of their day that the presence of the physical temple was no guarantee of blessing from God. It was what the people did in the temple *of their hearts* that was really important" (Wiersbe, 137).
 - 1) My message on Ezekiel 8-11 last Sunday delivered this same message.
 - 2) James Brooks observes, "Jeremiah continued in vv. 12-15 to say that God was going to do to the temple of Solomon what he did to the shrine at Shiloh—utterly destroy it. By quoting from Jeremiah, Jesus suggested that God would do the same to the temple of Herod that existed in his day" (James Brooks, *Mark*, 185).
5. So, what is the connection between the two parts of this Markan sandwich—a tree and the temple?
 - a. Wiersbe writes, "Our Lord's condemning of the tree and cleansing of the temple were both symbolic acts that illustrated the sad spiritual condition of the nation of Israel. In spite of its many privileges and opportunities, Israel was outwardly fruitless (the tree) and inwardly corrupt (the temple). It was unusual for Jesus to act in judgment (John 3:17), yet there comes a time when this is the only thing God can do (John 12:35-41)" (Wiersbe, 133-34).
 - b. Akin notes, "It was popularly believed that when Messiah came He would purge the temple *of* Gentiles. Instead, Jesus comes and cleanses the temple *for* Gentiles" (Akin, 255).
6. Reactions to Jesus' actions.
 - a. "The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him . . ." (18)
 - 1) They had not wanted to kill Jesus during Passover due to the possibility of a riot and political consequences falling on them from the Romans.
 - 2) Now their fear and hatred of Jesus overwhelmed their good sense and caused them to renew their plot which was first conceived in Mk 3:6.
 - b. The Jewish leaders feared Jesus because of the reaction of the people to His words and actions.
 - 1) ". . . the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching"
 - 2) All along the people had been amazed at His teaching (cf, Mk 1:27).
 - 3) The leaders felt threatened and perhaps guilty due to their hypocrisy (cf, Mk 7:9-13).

C. Questions/Thoughts for Reflection

1. What have you asked for from God in faith and received?
 - a. What have you not received that you have requested of God?
 - b. Why do you think that you have not received what you asked for?
2. Should we be amazed, like Peter over the withered fig tree, when the words of God come true before our eyes?
3. What does it mean to have "faith in God"?
4. Is there someone that you need to forgive or from whom you need to ask forgiveness so that your prayers to God are unhindered?
5. How do we turn the Lord's house into a commercial venue? What should be our primary focus?
6. Are you still amazed at Jesus' teaching or so familiar with it that it seems like old news? How can you hear and respond to the gospel with fresh ears?
7. What fruit are you producing? What about our church? Are we green with leaves but fruitless?