

Back in April (on Palm Sunday), we skipped forward to where we are now. And we had a bit of a brief overview of this whole section of Mark, where Jesus had the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and everyone was welcoming Him and waving palm branches ... And the whole scene was building up to this mighty crescendo – and the expectation's there, “What’s going to happen when Jesus arrives at the temple... “

And it was a bit of a let-down... Jesus arrived at the Temple; He looked around at everything; it was too late; And so He left...

And then it continued on...

- Next day He cursed the fig tree;
- drove the traders out of the temple; and
- then the next morning, the disciples noticed that the fig tree was withered...

And we did talk (a little bit) about the cursing of the fig tree. Jesus wasn't being like a spoilt kid, or being vindictive against that poor old tree... Alright, it might seem a bit harsh – the tree didn't have any fruit, but it wasn't really the season for fruit... – When Jesus killed that fig tree, it was a living, breathing metaphor for Israel and the temple and the Jewish religious system...

Just like that fig tree (all covered in nice green leaves, but no fruit),,, The temple (particularly at the time of Passover) was a hive of religious activity, and it was all very grand... But there was no fruit... The worship of Israel had become so fruitless, that when the Son of God came to the temple, they

put Him on trial, and they humiliated Him, and they handed Him over, to have Him crucified...

And so Jesus killed the fig tree. It was a metaphor of the old fruitless Jewish religious system coming to an end. ...

So, we had a bit of an overview back then, but today, we're going to look at it, in a bit more depth.

The temple in Jerusalem, was a very grand construction... It's no wonder the disciples marvelled over it when they saw it... It was massive, and it was fancy...

Now, I have here, a diagram, of the design of the temple in the days of Jesus... This isn't the original temple that Solomon built – this one was much bigger... This is the temple that King Herod built (probably more as a monument to himself)...

Now, if you can see the design there:

- Right on the inside, is the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest was allowed to go in there, and even then, only once a year.
- Still inside the main central (fully-enclosed) building, is where the priests were allowed to go.
- In the courtyard around that building, was as close as the clean Jewish men were allowed to get.

- In the cross-shaped courtyard in the right of the picture up there, was as close as the Jewish women were allowed to get.
- And then you come out of the building, down the flight of steps, and to a stone parapet (fence). In the diagram there, it's just before we get to the white part... And when we get to the white part of the diagram, that's the Court of the Gentiles – it was all enclosed by another wall, which isn't shown on this diagram... But in this white area, was as close as the Gentiles (non-Jews) were allowed to come... If they went any closer, the rule was, they'd get killed...

Now, the Court of the Gentiles, was actually part of the Temple complex. This was the place where the Gentiles who had been converted to worship YHWH (The Lord our God) – this is where they would come to worship and pray...

And Bible scholars are pretty sure, that this is the same area, where the traders were setting up their stalls, to make a profit out of anyone who was coming to worship...

You know how, if you're on holidays, and

- *you go somewhere where there are pretty native birds, there might be someone there with a little cart, selling \$0.05 of birdseed for \$5; or*
- *you might go to a theme park, and a can of soft drink that you might pay \$0.50 at the supermarket, or \$2 at just about any shop, might cost you \$7; or*

- *you might go to the airport and you're going overseas, and you want to get a bit of currency, and you lose about 20% on the exchange rate, plus you pay an additional fee, maybe about \$20 just to do the deal*

Well, that's the sort of thing that was going on here...

The Temple was like a religious tourist attraction... This was the highlight of any religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem... And all the religious traders were there, selling their wares:

- Exchanging currency so you would have the right coinage for the Temple tax;
- Selling birds and animals and grains so you could do your sacrifice...

And it's believed, that by the time of Jesus, a lot of this trading took place in the court of the Gentiles... And so these foreigners, who had come here to worship YHWH – they weren't allowed in the inner areas, but they still had a place where they could pray and worship God,,,,, but because of the rabble of the market, they could hardly even do that...

And Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹⁶ And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ And he was teaching them and saying 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 den of robbers."

Do you get this??? God's vision for His temple, was much bigger than the nation of Israel. It was to be a house of prayer for **all** nations... But the only spot that people of a different race could get, had become a place of commercial greed and profit... They couldn't even pray there without being disturbed...

Now that's significant, but Jesus' words cut much deeper than this, but we'll miss it, unless we know the Old Testament...

In Jeremiah 7, Approx. 600BC

YHWH, the Lord our God, chastises Israel, for having a false sense of security, that their religious observances would make up for all of their misdeeds... Alright, so they would come to the temple, not at all repentant for the things that they've done – holding every intention of continuing in their wrongdoing,, doing their sacrifices, and believing this made everything OK for them...

And this is the passage that Jesus is pointing us to, when He says that they've made God's house **a den of robbers**

Jeremiah 7:1-15 (ESV)

Evil in the Land

7 The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH:

² "Stand in the gate of YHWH's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of YHWH, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship

YHWH. ³ Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH.'

⁵ "For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, ⁶ if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

⁸ "Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!' — only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares YHWH.

¹² Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. ¹³ And now,

because you have done all these things, declares YHWH, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, ¹⁴ therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. ¹⁵ And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Alright, before Jerusalem, **Shiloh** was the place that God had chosen to be the religious capital... But when the people turned to idolatry, they were defeated by the Philistines, and the Ark of the Covenant was captured... And Psalm 78 tells us about Shiloh's destruction.

And so **Jerusalem** became the religious capital, and eventually the temple of Solomon was built in Jerusalem...

In Jeremiah 7, God is warning them again, "Remember what I did at Shiloh. Don't go thinking, that because this is the temple of YHWH, you can have a wicked heart, and that your religious offerings are going to save you... - You've become a den of robbers in my eyes... And of course, eventually the temple of Solomon was destroyed too, because the people wouldn't repent..."

And **now** Jesus, is calling **them** "a den of robbers"... What He's doing, is He's pointing them to the destruction of the last

temple, and He's saying, "Hey, don't think that I won't do it again... This is you"...

You see, the "Den of robbers", isn't so much about dishonest trade in the temple precinct, although that's a symptom of it... It's about the false sense of security that religious ceremonies bring... The temple was like that fig tree – it all looked very flash – plenty going on – all the religious sacrifices... But their hearts were evil. Their hearts were **far** from God – there was no fruit of righteousness...

As one commentator puts it:

*"Jesus indirectly attacks them for allowing the temple to degenerate into a safe hiding place where people **think** that they find forgiveness and fellowship with God, no matter how they act on the outside. Jesus' prophetic action and words attack a false trust in the efficacy of the temple sacrificial system."*ⁱ

This is all about how God is going to wipe the slate clean, and start over again... And of course, by the time we get to Chapter 13, Jesus openly tells His disciples, that the temple's going to be destroyed... which it was 70AD.

Now of course the religious leaders were none too happy with these words of Jesus. And we wonder how someone as nice as Jesus was crucified... Well, He wasn't very nice... He was very offensive... They were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

Exit the temple.

Next morning, they see the fig tree is withered away to its roots... And that's the living, breathing and now dead metaphor for the temple and Jewish religious system – we've already talked about that...

But what do we learn from this? Well, I believe there's 2 very important lessons for us –

1. The first lesson, is a warning. It's a warning against having a false sense of secure salvation that comes from "fruitless religion"; and
2. The second lesson, is on "prayer"...

So let's begin with the warning:

Many people, who claim to be Christians today, are like that fig tree – all show, and no fruit... And of course, when we're talking about fruit, we're talking about the fruit of righteousness – the fruit of the Spirit – we're talking about the fruit of a changed redeemed life... And many people (who claim to be Christians) are no different to the world around them... The only different thing about them, is their fruitless religious observances...

And this is comes in all forms of tradition:

There are those who are wicked and immoral – they lie, cheat and steal for 6.5 days / week, but they have a bit of religious observance, and they think everything's ok again...

Some go to confession during the week, or maybe they go to Saturday evening mass... And because they “do their religious duty”, they leave church, believing that they’re all right with God (because the priest has told them they’re forgiven)... And then go straight to the pub to get drunk and hopefully hook-up with someone to take them home to spend the night with them... And they do it all over again – no intention of repenting – no intention of changing...

It’s just empty religion, and God hates it...

But let’s look closer to home – there are more and more protestant evangelical churches, who are now preaching some form of easy-believism... Basically the message is, “Just believe in Jesus, and you’re forgiven – you don’t have to try and change – you don’t have to try and be obedient to God – just believe in Jesus and you’ll be right”...

My, what an empty; empty religious belief that is...

When I read Jeremiah 7, I was reminded of Romans 11. In Romans 11, Paul gives us an image of Israel as an olive tree... And because much of Israel (God’s chosen people) rejected Jesus, it’s like those branches were broken off... But Jesus came for much more than Israel... And we Gentiles, by the mercy and grace of God (we weren’t originally God’s chosen people), but through Christ, we’ve been grafted in to that olive tree – we’ve been grafted in to God’s wonderful plan of salvation...

But then Paul gives a warning...

Romans 11: ²¹ ... if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

Alright, God has done this over and over and over again...
Unrepentant hearts – empty religion – fruitless religion...
God hates it...

- At Shiloh, they were confident their religious acts would save them (even though their hearts were evil)... It didn't work.
- At the temple of Solomon, they were confident their religious acts would save them (even though their hearts were filled with injustice and evil)... It didn't work.
- At the temple of Herod, they were confident their religious acts would save them (even though their hearts were filled with injustice and evil)... But in 70AD, the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed...

Will we ever learn??? When will we learn, that being a disciple of Jesus, is a matter of the heart??? It's not a matter of empty, fruitless religious observance – it's not a matter of empty, fruitless belief – It's like James said: **Faith without works is dead.**

The life of discipleship – to follow Jesus, isn't only about belief. It means:

- We amend our ways and our deeds
- It means we act with justice and mercy;
- It means we don't oppress those who are weak
 - The foreigner (refugee)
 - Fatherless
 - Widow
 - The innocent

As Jeremiah said:

⁸ "Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail
(we're OK – We're God's people).

⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear
falsely,
{worship other gods}

¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house,
which is called by my name, and say, 'We are
delivered!' — only to go on doing all these
abominations?

When will we learn??? Will we come here, to worship Jesus,
and stay the same sinful people we've always been??? If we
are disciples of Jesus, let's follow the way of Jesus...

So, that's the first lesson

The second lesson, we're going to leave until next week, when
we talk about prayer...

Being a disciple of Jesus, is a life of fruitful faith...

Questions:

ⁱ Garland David E. The NIV Application Commentary. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 1996.
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