

"Fruitless Wonder" - Mark 11:12-21

This morning, we continue our study of Mark's Gospel, Mark's account of the Great Event, Jesus' earthly ministry. And we've come to the story of what we call Passion Week. Passion Week begins with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. (We looked at that last Sunday.) And it ends with Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. For us, it is the most important event ever. All of human history pivots around the culmination of this one week. Without the finished work of Jesus Christ, we would all be doomed to an eternity in hell.

Passion week is stuffed with significant events. Last Sunday we saw that the triumphal entry was the perfect fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy.

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

The triumphal entry was a coronation parade, but of course, it was a false coronation because most of those celebrating Jesus' arrival would be calling for His crucifixion by the end of the week.

Today, we're going to take a look at two more significant events that took place during Passion Week. At first glance, you might be tempted to think that these two events are completely unrelated, but if you think that, you would be wrong. These two events underscore the absolute necessity for a New Covenant. The Old Covenant, the one given to Israel through Moses, could never take away sin. The Levitical worship, the Temple worship had become corrupt. In fact, corruption of Old Covenant worship was inevitable because no human being is capable of keeping the Law perfectly. And the Levitical sacrifice was ineffective for salvation.

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4)

Levitical worship, that elaborate sacrificial system, was given by God as a type, as a sign pointing to the coming perfect sacrifice. In fact, all of the Old Testament points forward to Jesus. All of the New Testament, looks back to Jesus. It's why we say the Bible is Christocentric.

As Jesus came to Jerusalem for His final Passover, one of the things He had to do was point out the hypocrisy of what the Temple worship had become. Although Temple worship had been ordained by Almighty God, it had been corrupted horribly by sinful man. It was a fruitless wonder.

Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it. (Mark 11:12-14)

Now before we dive into this somewhat puzzling passage, I'd like to engage in a quick review of the timeline. Not long before this, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after he had been buried four days. This was an astounding miracle performed in Bethany, which was just a couple miles outside of Jerusalem. News of this miracle spread fast and convinced a whole bunch of folks that Jesus was the indeed promised Messiah. It also convinced the Jewish religious leaders that they had to kill him and, they reasoned, they should kill Lazarus too because he was living proof of Jesus' deity. So, because of the

danger, Jesus and His disciples retreated to the region of Perea, just beyond the Jordan River. But as Passover week approached, Jesus would return to the Holy City. He crossed the Jordan, spent the night with Zacchaeus in Jericho, and then made the 13-mile trek uphill back to Bethany.

Now, there is some debate about when He arrived in Bethany. We know they would not have traveled on the Sabbath, so, some folks, some pretty smart theologians, believe Jesus actually arrived in Bethany on Sunday. That would likely push the triumphal entry to Monday, which means, we've been celebrating Palm Sunday a day early. But that timeline does have the advantage of explaining why nothing significant happened on Wednesday of Passion Week. John MacArthur, the famous author and pastor of Grace Community Church in Los Angeles holds this view; that's one example.

I tend to think that they arrived in Bethany on Friday, that they spent a couple nights there. We know they enjoyed a meal at the house of Simon the Leper, where Mary anointed Jesus with that flask of very valuable perfume. And then of course, Jesus had a couple of His disciples go into the next village to find the foal of a donkey. Taking Saturday off, He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, looked around, and then walked back to Bethany to spend the night. So, according to this timeline, it is now Monday of Passion Week. Or, maybe it's Tuesday. Frankly, it doesn't matter much which day it is. What matters is what happened.

That morning, as Jesus and His disciples walked to Jerusalem, He was hungry and there, at the side of the road, was a fig tree. It was healthy fig tree, full of lush, green leaves. It's not surprising, because fig trees were everywhere in Israel at that time. But it wasn't the season for figs. If they had been in Jericho, there would have been plenty of figs. But they were now in the high country, 2,474 feet above sea level.

No figs.

And so, Jesus, curses the fig tree.

"Let no one eat fruit from you ever again."

Well, that's pretty harsh! Poor fig tree. It wasn't at fault; fig season hadn't arrived.

But Jesus is using this as a living illustration, a parable. It represents something of significant, spiritual importance. It points directly to the Temple and it points to the hypocrisy of the Temple worship.

I want to remind you of the passage with which we opened our worship this morning.

*"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. **You will know them by their fruits.** Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **Therefore by their fruits you will know them.** (Matthew 7:15-20)*

That fig tree was a fruitless wonder and so was the Temple. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be destroyed.

So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE

CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS' ? But you have made it a 'DEN OF THIEVES.'" (Mark 11:15-17)

Wow, that's pretty assertive! Jesus is really serious about worship. He will not long tolerate false, hypocritical worship. And this isn't the first time He's kicked the merchants out of the Temple. Matthew and Luke record this very same incident, but John records a Temple cleansing that occurred a couple years previous to this. That time, He made a whip of cords, drove the critters and the merchants out, wrecked the money changer's tables.

Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE HAS EATEN ME UP." (John 2:17)

Temple worship had turned into an absolute abomination. It was full of pomp. It was spectacular; it was beautiful. It was insanely noisy. But it was all for show. The Temple had become a marketplace, a place designed to separate people from their money. The Jewish religious system had become a means for men to exert power and become wealthy. It produced lots of leaves, but no good fruit. It was a fruitless wonder.

Here's what was going on: People would bring their sacrificial animals in, and there would be a priest there to examine it. It might have been the best of your own flock, a lamb without any spot or blemish, but the priest would say, "Sorry, not good enough." And then you would have to buy an animal from the temple vendors at a grossly inflated price. Of course, the priest would get a kick-back. It was a scam!

Poor folks, by law, could offer a dove as a sacrifice. Doves were literally a dime a dozen, if you bought them at your local town. But of course, the priest would say, "Not good enough! But there's a vendor who will sell you one for four bucks."

And then there was the Temple tax. It was a half-shekel, but you couldn't pay it with regular money. It had to be Temple money. But you could exchange your funds. Of course, the mark-up was at least 25 percent.

We know all this from historians like Josephus. It was fraudulent; it was extortion. It was perverted; it was an absolute travesty.

Jesus wouldn't put up with it. He didn't put up with it then and He will not put up with it now. It breaks my heart to see so much of the visible Church engaging in exactly the same kind of false, hypocritical worship today. Too many preachers are constructing temples built to man. Too many preachers are lining their pockets by taking advantage of poor, gullible people. Too many preachers are spreading a false, prosperity gospel. These are false prophets and you will know them by their fruits.

Are they really exalting Jesus? Or are they exalting self? Are they leading people to a blessed eternity of glorifying Christ and enjoying Him forever? Or are they focused on their best life now? Bigger houses. Fancier cars. Gulfstream jets.

They are fruitless wonders!

In Jesus day, the Temple certainly was not a house of worship for all nations. It really wasn't the Temple of God. It was Herod's temple. It was indeed a den of thieves.

And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. (Mark 11:18)

Why did the scribes and chief priests fear Him? They held all the cards. They had all the power. They were afraid because He was messing with their gravy-train. This system of

corrupt Temple worship was lining their pockets. They had no interest in worshipping God. Their passion was power and wealth.

But the people were blown away by Jesus' teaching. Jesus taught with authority. Jesus is authority. He is the very Word of God. Luke says,

all the people were very attentive to hear Him. (Luke 19:48)

In other words, they were hanging on His every word. I'm not surprised. These were the very folks who were being taken advantage of by the fruitless wonder. They were looking for someone to overturn the established order. Of course, when Jesus wouldn't do what they expected, they turned on Him too.

God is no respecter of false, hypocritical worship. Jesus won't put up with it forever. Judgment is coming. It may be postponed for a time because God is long-suffering. But it is inevitable.

When evening had come, He went out of the city. Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away." (Mark 11:19-21)

That fig tree was a picture of the false, hypocritical worship that took place in the Jerusalem Temple. It was a fruitless wonder. When Jesus cursed it, it withered away. It dried up from the roots. That tree would never again produce fruit. In fact, it wouldn't even produce green leaves. It was dead.

Jesus is serious about worship. Just as He cursed the fig tree, He pronounced judgement on the hypocrisy of the Temple worship.

We need to be as serious about our worship as Jesus is. We must never become like the church at Sardis, that church that Jesus instructed the Apostle John to warn:

"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. (Revelation 3:1-3)

How can we, as a church remain spiritually alive? We can do so only if we remain focused on the Author and Finisher of our faith. Our focus must always be on Jesus and what He has accomplished on our behalf.

Turn to John, Chapter 4. Jesus had a remarkable encounter with a sinful Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. And she asked Jesus an implied question:

Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." (John 4:20)

Essentially, she was asking where she should go to worship.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:21-24)

True worship is not about a place. It is not about the Temple in Jerusalem and it's not about some mountain in Samaria. True worship is about a Person and that person is Jesus Christ. So, as we gather to worship, our focus must be on Him.

You all are a bunch of sinners and so am I. Because of our cosmic treason, deserve to spend eternity suffering in hell but God loves us anyway.

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

We can be reconciled to God by simply believing in His finished work, by confessing our sin, by believing He paid the penalty for our sin, by confessing Him as Lord, and believing God raised Him from the dead. Don't you think that makes Him worthy of our worship?

Authentic worship is without guile. Authentic worship doesn't ask, "What's in it for me?" Authentic worship is powered by the Holy Spirit. Authentic worship is based on the truth of who Jesus is. Authentic worship is simply giving glory to Jesus Christ for saving us from an eternity in hell. Authentic worship is simply being satisfied in Him.

when we are satisfied in Him, then we will bear fruit for the kingdom and we will by no means be fruitless wonders.