

The Authority of Jesus

Mark 11:11-33

Bryn MacPhail / April 1, 2012

During our journey through the Gospel of Mark we have noted a number of things about Jesus.

We have watched Jesus heal a paralytic, a demoniac, a deaf-mute man—we have even witnessed Him bring a little girl who had died, back to life again.

We have observed Jesus calm the blustering wind and the raging sea.

Jesus regularly displays His power over, both, the natural and the supernatural realm.

We have seen Jesus be *compassionate* and *tender* with those who were hurting, and we have seen Jesus be *tough* on those who imagined they had it all together.

This morning we have another one of those passages where Jesus demonstrates that He is no pushover.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus has consistently stood against *hypocrisy*.

Admittedly, there is an unusual element in our text this morning, but I do hope to bring some clarity to that before we are done.

This might be one of the strangest stories involving Jesus in the entire New Testament.

Mark tells us in 10:12 that *Jesus is hungry*. Jesus sees a fig tree in the distance, and approaches it, but it has nothing but leaves on it.

And then, in what appears on the surface to be a childish outburst, Jesus exclaims, "**May no one ever eat fruit from you again!**"

What makes this cursing of the tree even more unusual is that Mark tells us that it was not even the season for figs (11:13).

Surely, Jesus, being a native of Palestine, would have known this. How could He have expected a fig tree to bear fruit out of season?

And what kind of response is cursing the tree?

Our first clue to what Jesus was doing comes at the end of verse 14 where Mark writes that the "**disciples were listening**".

Evidently, Jesus was trying to teach the disciples something through His actions.

The scene suddenly shifts back to Jerusalem where Jesus enters the temple, and again, Jesus acts in an extraordinary way.

Mark describes for us how Jesus aggressively clears the temple.

John's gospel describes it with even more detail—how Jesus made a whip and physically drove out the merchants, who were selling animals in the temple.

John details for us how Jesus flips tables, and how he pours all of the money on the floor while shouting, "**Stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise!**"(Jn.2:14-16).

Jesus, 'meek and mild', with a whip, flipping tables, and yelling at merchants. This is two outbursts in a row.

What is going on here?

What point is Jesus trying to make?

It seems to me that, through the cursing of the fig tree, and in the clearing of the temple, *Jesus is making a statement about His authority.*

But I wouldn't want us to view this as simply a power play by Jesus against His religious counterparts.

The reason Jesus asserts His authority has everything to do with *the manifest hypocrisy* of the religious institution of His day.

Those on the receiving side of these judgments were not yet convinced of Jesus' authority. Accordingly, they approach Jesus and ask, "**By what authority are You doing these things?**" and, "**Who gave you this authority?**" (11:28).

Instead of answering their question directly, Jesus answers their question with another question, "**Was the baptism of John [the Baptist] from heaven, or from men?**" (11:30).

The temple authorities were in a bind. If they say that John's baptism was "**from heaven**", Jesus will have a case for His saying that His authority also comes from heaven.

If they answer that John's baptism was "**from men**", they risk a riot, for the multitude considered John to have been a prophet (11:31, 32).

The temple authorities were in a no-win situation, so they respond, "**We do not know**" (11:33).

And Jesus says to them, "**Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things**" (11:33).

Jesus refuses to answer their question, "**Neither will I tell you**", He says.

But let me suggest to you that Jesus does answer their question.

Jesus answers the temple authorities in the manner he usually does--in the form of a parable: *the Parable of the Vine-growers* (12:1-9).

The cursed fig tree, the clearing of the temple, the authority by which Jesus does these things, are all answered in the parable of the vine-growers.

In this parable, a man plants a vineyard and rents it out to vine-growers and goes on a journey.

At harvest time, the owner sends a servant to collect some of the produce from the vine-growers.

The vine-growers, however, beat up the servant and send him away empty-handed.

The owner continues to send one servant after another, some are beaten and some are even killed.

Finally, the owner had only one more to send, his "**beloved son**", thinking they would respect him.

Instead of respecting the son, however, the vine-growers said to one another, "**Here comes the heir, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!**"

Then they took the son and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

Jesus then asks, "**What will the owner of the vineyard do?**" Answering His own question, Jesus says that the owner will "**come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others**".

The allegory here is straightforward:

The *owner* of the vineyard is *God*.

The *vineyard* represents the covenant people of *Israel*.

And the *vine-growers* are *the religious leaders*.

The *servants* sent by the owner are the *prophets*.

And the *son*, of course, is *Jesus*.

We are now finally ready to piece this puzzle together.

First, we have *the fig tree*. Having the appearance of housing fruit, it was, in fact, barren.

Jesus pronounces judgment against the tree and we are told that it "**withered from the roots up**" (11:20).

Secondly, we have the incident in *the temple*. Like the fig tree “**in leaf**”, the temple had the appearance of housing spiritual fruit, but when it too was found to be barren, judgment was pronounced against it.

What was Jesus doing when He cursed the fig tree? And what was Jesus doing when He cleared the temple?

In addition to asserting His authority, *Jesus was acting out a prophecy*.

Like many of the ancient prophets who presented their prophecies through eccentric actions, Jesus acts out His prophecy.

And, in acting out His prophecy, Jesus communicated the message that God was going to judge the religious leaders of His day.

It has already been said that the vine-growers represent the leaders of Israel, yet, we must be careful to not limit our interpretation to the first Century temple officials.

While we confess that Jesus curses the fig tree, clears the temple, and tells this parable in condemnation of the prevailing hypocrisy of the day, we must not limit our application of this text.

There is a sense in which the warning to the religious leaders of Jesus' day now applies to us.

The sin of the first century religious leaders, and the sin of many in the church today is the same--we were put in the vineyard as TENANTS, but we often insist on being OWNERS instead.

We forget that God is the owner of everything, and that we are only stewards.

The temple officials had forgotten this and so they ask Jesus, 'What authority do you have, coming here and ransacking *our* temple?'

Jesus does answer their question.

The temple is not theirs--it is God's. They are only tenants.

The same is true for us in the church. Whether monarchs, ministers, elders, or deacons—we are only tenants.

Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God, is the only Head of the Church.

I am encouraged by this reality, but I'm also massively challenged by it.

We've been entrusted as tenants to care for something of immense value.

We've been entrusted to care for something of immense value, without actually having authority over it.

And what we're being told here is that *how the church looks on the outside is a lot less important than what it looks like on the inside.*

The cursing of a fig tree that was full of leaves on the outside, but barren of fruit on the inside, was a preview of what He would do when He cleared the Temple and disrupted their business.

What I don't want to be lost on us is our own vulnerability to this same judgment from Christ.

When I was a minister in the Presbytery of Toronto, I had occasion to see some big, beautiful, churches close their doors forever.

These churches were impressive landmarks. These congregations were deeply rooted in the history of their respective communities.

On the outside, they were beautiful. But on the inside they were barren.

Have a look around this morning. This place is beautiful.

We are a 201 year-old, downtown, congregation with an impressive facility.

God has entrusted this place to us. Not to act as owners, but to act as tenants.

We are stewards of this ministry.

I gather that over the last few decades, the amount of fruit on this particular tree in the vineyard has varied. At times, it may have even seemed as though this tree was barren of any good fruit.

But that's not today.

God, in His mercy, has given us a new start.

There is fruit on this tree.

That's not something I ever want to take for granted.

Hypocrisy presents an ongoing threat to the people of God.

Hypocrisy is that word we use to describe something that presents one way on the outside, and another way on the inside.

It's like a fig tree that is full of leaves, but has no fruit.

It's like a religious façade that houses lucrative business transactions.

It's like a well-dressed churchman who thinks little of personally interacting with Jesus Christ as Lord.

What we learn from the Scriptures is that *hypocrisy courts the judgment of Christ*.

And what we know from our present day experience is that *hypocrisy impairs the effectiveness of the church*.

The church will always be full of imperfect people. And it will always be the case that a flawed individual will be commissioned to fill a pulpit to speak God's Word.

We are not required to be perfect. Christ is the only perfect One.

His perfection, not ours, brings salvation.

The call, which remains for us, is to show some *consistency* between *who we profess to be* in Christ and *how we behave* in this world.

Our challenge is to have our *walk* to match our *talk*.

The way we do this is by attempting to live every moment of our lives in close proximity to Jesus Christ.

Success for you as a Christian, and for us as a congregation, should mean more than just an absence of hypocrisy.

We're here to *make a difference in the lives of others*.

We're here to *serve*.

We're here to *represent Jesus*.

We're here to *bear fruit*.

And so as we go from this place this afternoon, let's commit ourselves to abiding in Jesus Christ. Amen.