

Tree Speech

Mark 11:12-25 May 6, 2026

There is a tree that grows at Syracuse University known as The Tree of 40 Fruit.¹ It is a living, growing art project of professor Sam Van Aken, who has grafted the tree in such a way that it does, in fact, bear 40 different varieties of stone fruit every year. Peaches, plums, apricots, nectarines, cherries, and almonds all grow on this tree, along with their unique leaves and blossoms.

The first Tree of 40 fruit was planted in 2011.² Others can be found growing at the University of Southern Indiana, Colby College in Maine, Roanoke College in Virginia, and various museums on the east coast. You can't *plant* a Tree of 40 fruit seed. You have to graft each branch, year by year. But the result is both beautiful and bountiful.

In our text, Jesus inspects a fig tree. It's mature and well-supplied with all it needs. After all, it's growing in a town whose name *means* "House of Figs."³ But Jesus doesn't find a tree with many varieties of fruit. He doesn't find any figs. He doesn't even find the precursor to fruit on the tree. He then does something we've never seen Him do before: He works a *destructive* miracle. Then He goes into the temple and violently disrupt what was happening there, only to go *back* to the fig tree and give the disciples what, on first listen, seems like an unattainable teaching about true faith.

What is going on? Is this a scene where, as one infamous commentator dares to suggest, Jesus "wastes" His miraculous power because He was in an "ill-temper?"⁴

No, this isn't Jesus losing His cool. Something prophetic and theological is happening in this text. It has many ties to many other passages of Scripture. So, let's listen to what our Lord wants to reveal as we see Him curse a fig tree, cleanse His Father's house, and counsel His followers about faith.

Mark 11:12 - ¹² The next day when they went out from Bethany, he was hungry.

Did Jesus get sick? We're not specifically told, but a question like that helps us gauge our assumptions about Jesus' humanity. He is fully God and fully Man. We see Him *tired* in the Gospels. We see Him *thirst*. And here, He was *hungry*. Not *hangry* - that's not why the tree gets cursed, but the Lord experienced humanity in a real and comprehensive sense.

It makes sense that He was hungry. They're doing a *lot* of walking in these passages but the first meal was eaten at midmorning, not straightaway like we usually do.⁵ But more important than the hunger is the connective work Mark is bringing into this text. "The next day." In the last passage,

¹ <https://www.samvanaken.com/tree-of-40-fruit-2>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ik3l4U_17bI

³ John Walvoord and Roy Zuck *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*

⁴ T.W. Manson *The Cleansing Of The Temple*

⁵ James Brooks *The New American Commentary, Volume 23: Mark*

Jesus had just come into Jerusalem, entered the temple and *examined* everything there, then He left. "The next day." Mark wants to tie these scenes together.

And he's not only tying this text to the last, he's also going to use this "sandwich" technique we've seen him use before.⁶ Remember when it was the story of Jairus' daughter being raised from the dead? It starts one story, then interrupts the telling with a separate story, then he returns to the first story. He does this a few times in his Gospel to develop themes and what these situations reveal.

Remember: The Gospels are not just a list of biographical facts. They are carefully constructed literary works of inspiration, given that we might know *truth*. We must understand this fig tree story in the context of Jesus' entry into the temple in verse 11, His return to the temple in verse 15, *and* in connection with the many passages of Scripture that are tied to what we see in this scene.

Mark 11:13 - ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree with leaves, he went to find out if there was anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for it was not the season for figs.

Why would He expect figs if it's not the right season? Well, Jesus wasn't *actually* hoping to find a fig for His hunger. He's not trying to solve a problem, but preach a sermon. He's acting out a prophetic parable for His disciples. This would first remind them of the parable He told in Luke 13 about a master examining a fig tree, finding no fruit, and demanding it be cut down. It should *also* remind them of Micah 7, where God laments the fact that when He came looking for faithful people in the land of Israel, He found none. He said it was like finding no early figs, which the Lord *craves*.⁷

Our God *craves* spiritual fruit in our lives. He's looking for growth. He's looking for faithfulness. He examines *our* lives, just as He examined the temple and this fig tree. Does He find fruit?

We'll get back to the *personal* application at the end. But Christ's main teaching was about the *national* situation. And to do that, the fig tree was a great illustration. Figs were incredibly important in Israel. They were the most fruitful of all trees and their fruit was often used to produce the *firstfruits* offerings required in the temple.⁸

Now, fig trees have an interesting phenomenon called the breba crop. These are small green figs that appear at times even *before* the leaves.⁹ They taste bad and are not normally eaten,¹⁰ but they signal a true crop of fruit is coming. This tree had no ripe figs *and* no breba figs, but lots of leaves. It was leafy by sterile. Good for nothing. Soaking up light and water, but giving no crop.

This image is the *opposite* of what Jews hoped for, ideally *and* prophetically. In Haggai, in Micah, in Zechariah, we're given the ideal image of the Messianic age: You will sit under your own fig tree

⁶ Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

⁷ Micah 7:1

⁸ William Telford *The Barren Temple And The Withered Tree*

⁹ Brooks

¹⁰ William Lane *The Gospel Of Mark*

and gather its fruit. Whereas in Jeremiah 8, when pronouncing God's judgment on Israel, the image is "There will be...no figs on the fig tree, and even the leaf will wither."¹¹

Mark 11:14 - ¹⁴ He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And his disciples heard it.

He *wanted* them to hear it. This isn't irritation, it's instruction. He's trying to help the disciples understand what is at stake personally and nationally as Christ heads into Passion week.

When the Master came to inspect the fig tree of Israel, did He find faith? Did He find obedience? Did He find fruit? In some cases He did on the *individual* level, but not on the national level. For thousands of years, Israel had recited Proverbs 27:18:

Proverbs 27:18 - ¹⁸ Whoever tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and whoever looks after his master will be honored.

But they did not look after their Master, they did not tend the spiritual fig tree, and judgment would be the result.

But why did Jesus *curse* the tree? Seems "mean" to us, right? He *could've* just done a miracle of fruit producing like He had done with the loaves and fishes. But it's not actually about the physical fruit and His physical hunger. This is about Israel and faith and obedience.

God will not *force* fruit to grow in your life if you will not cooperate with Him. Now, *He* is the Author and Finisher of our faith - He will complete the work He began in you - but spiritual growth does not happen if we refuse to walk with God and obey Him and present ourselves as sacrifices.

Mark 11:15-17 - ¹⁵ They came to Jerusalem, and he went into the temple and began to throw out those buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching them: "Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of thieves!"

Usually when I read this text, my first interpretation is that Jesus was upset that the money changers were ripping off pilgrims coming to offer sacrifice. And that is true - but that's only half of it.

First, let's understand the scam. This system had only started in 30AD.¹² The high priest's family *bought* their priesthood from Rome and they actually owned the booths that the merchants used.¹³ When you came, you had to convert your money into the temple shekel, and they would add a surcharge on when you did. On top of that, things like doves would be tripled in price.¹⁴ It was

¹¹ Jeremiah 8:13

¹² Witherington

¹³ Robert Utley *The Gospel According To Peter: Mark And I & II Peter*

¹⁴ Utley

quite a racket - one that put a *burden* on people trying to worship God. That's a *big* no-no in God's eyes.

But there was another layer here, one that Jesus specifically called out in the two Old Testament Scriptures He quoted. The first was Isaiah 56:7 which reminded Israel that God's plan was not to isolate the Jews, but that ultimately *all* the Gentile nations would be brought into the family of faith.

But instead of being a light to the Gentiles, the leaders of Israel made it *impossible* for any Gentile God-fearers to join in. The temple of Jesus' time was segregated into various courts. You had the court of the men, for *Jewish* men, the court of the women, and then the court of the Gentiles. It was a big area where *anyone* seeking the God of Israel could come in and pray. But *now* it was overrun with commerce. All these booths, all the animals, all the transactions happened there.

So, you're a Gentile, who God really loves and wants to come and find faith, but instead of being able to pray, you're dealing with thousands of sheep and birds and merchants and pilgrims and animal poop and noise. Gentile worshippers were effectively pushed out though God wanted to *graft them in*, like the Tree of 40 fruits!

Jesus had already cleared this nonsense out once at the beginning of His ministry. But they went right back to it. Now, at the *end* of His ministry, He does it again. This time He also quotes Jeremiah 7, "where Jeremiah condemns the idea that the temple is a safe haven for Judah in its sin."¹⁵

Sadly, the leaders of Israel rejected God's mercy and His patience and His warnings. They kept bringing robbers into the temple. And in the end they would reap what they sowed. In 66 AD, Josephus records that "robbers" took possession of the temple and slaughtered the priests.¹⁶ Josephus used the same word for robbers that Mark used.

Mark 11:18 - ¹⁸ The chief priests and the scribes heard it and started looking for a way to kill him. For they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was astonished by his teaching.

Jesus essentially brings the activity of the temple to a stop. At least for the moment, He shut down the cash cow for the corrupt family of the High Priest. But what was *worse* news for them was the multitudes of people were in agreement with Jesus. "Yeah! These guys are ripping me off!"

And so, the chief priests and scribes decided it was time to kill Jesus. Of course, the Pharisees and the Herodians were like, "What took you so long?" *They've* been plotting to kill Jesus since chapter 3! But now we have a unified conspiracy: Pharisees, Sadducees (represented by the High Priest and chief priests), the scribes, the Herodians, and nearly all the Sanhedrin.

Mark 11:19 - ¹⁹ Whenever evening came, they would go out of the city.

¹⁵ Craig Keener *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Second Edition)*

¹⁶ Keener

I love this because, despite the power wielded by all those involved in the conspiracy against Jesus, despite the power of Rome, despite everything going on, it's clear that *Jesus* is in charge. He comes and goes as He pleases because *He* would accomplish what His Father sent Him to do. But now, Mark closes the sandwich with a few more challenging verses.

Mark 11:20-21 - ²⁰ Early in the morning, as they were passing by, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. ²¹ Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."

This tree was an object lesson. On the national level, Israel was spiritually dead. From the roots up. Look at the corruption of their leaders. Instead of nourishing their people, they exploited them. Look at the temple, defiled with commerce. It was fruitless and ruined.

Mark 11:22-24 - ²² Jesus replied to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, everything you pray and ask for—believe that you have received, it and it will be yours.

Doesn't this seem to come out of nowhere? What does *this* have to do with Israel and the coming judgment? And how can we take these verses other than to think, "Well, if I'm honest, I'll never have faith like that?" If I really was a Christian, shouldn't I be going around working crazy miracles?

Well, first of all, these words also connect back to Old Testament prophecy. This brings us back to Zechariah 4, where the Lord spoke to Zerubbabel about how God can overcome any difficulty, even a mountain standing in our way. It's that famous passage that says, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts."

Also, we need to understand that this is not the only time Jesus taught these words to His disciples. These same phrases are used multiple, different times in both Matthew and Luke.

Let's try to put ourselves in the place of the 12. Jesus has been saying things that are totally different than what you've always assumed about the Messiah, about the Kingdom and when and how it is established. And now, throughout Mark 11 through 16, Jesus is going to suggest that *He Himself* is going to replace the temple.¹⁷ He has totally rejected *all* the leaders of their nation.

So, if you're one of the 12, your entire traditional belief system has been upended by this interaction with the fig tree and Jesus' actions in the temple.¹⁸

So *now*, Jesus gives them personal comfort and instruction that God has not proclaimed *them* as fig-less trees. God has not given up on *them*, even if His glory has departed from the temple. *We* can have faith in God and it's important that our faith is founded, focused, and flowing from *His* will

¹⁷ Witherington

¹⁸ Utley

and *His* power, not traditionalism or nationalism or materialism. Instead of relating to God through dead formality, we can commune with Him with living and power-filled faith. And when we're walking with Him, nothing is too hard for Him to accomplish in and through our lives. And *that's* how we bear fruit. *Not* through legalism. *Not* through traditionalism. *Not* through nationalism. Through personal, obedient faith.

Mark 11:25 - ²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you your wrongdoing."

And now we inspect the tree of our own lives. It's easy to see the deadness of a Sadducee. It's easy to write off the temple when it's full of scammers. But Jesus encourages the disciples - and us - to carefully examine our own lives. Are we growing in spiritual fruit? God is a forgiver. He was willing to forgive the merchants, the Pharisees, even the High Priest himself if they would repent. So, if we think we're living for God, if we think we're walking with Him, but we're not *like* Him, we're more like this leafy but sterile tree.

May God save us from being a tree like that. May the Lord cleanse the temple of our hearts from any corrupt merchant we've given space to. Instead, may we *grow* in many fruits. Fruits of forgiveness. Of repentance. Of obedience. Of worship. Fruit of all kinds as the Lord continues to graft onto our lives, to cultivate in our lives, and to reap a harvest of His powerful grace as we grow in Him.