

Mark 11:12-19

Jesus Mean and Wild

This entire passage seems like an overreaction. What if we did the things Jesus did here? Would it be celebrated? Either Jesus has anger issues or something more is going on.

The passage opens with **The Cursing** (vs. 12-14). While returning to Jerusalem from Bethany, he becomes hungry. In the distance he sees a fig tree and naturally assumes it will alleviate his hunger. Seeing the tree, he goes to collect food and finds it fruitless cursing it as a result.

The problem is that fig trees were not in season at this time of year. So why curse it? It is important to remember that for fig trees, fruit precedes leaves. Mark explains the tree “was in leaf” (vs. 13) thus Jesus would have rightly assumed, from a distance, the leafy tree possessed fruit. So, although it looked healthy, it was diseased.

For Jesus, this became a profound illustration for the state of Israel in his day. One can imagine the pilgrim, suffering in a broken world and living a broken life see from afar the Temple of God thinking that there he would find his answers. And what does he discover? Leaves. Just leaves. A fruitless tree. A diseased tree. Such trees deserve destruction. They are only good for fire. Likewise, dead religion is good only for judgment, which Jesus turns his attention to next.

After cursing the tree, Jesus **Cleanses** the Temple (vs. 15-19). Maybe the cursing of the Fig Tree wasn't an overreaction (it clearly was a diseased tree), but surely his violence in the Temple was, right? The Temple had become desecrated by filthy religious consumerism. The religious system was profiting off worshippers.

One area of corruption centered around the Temple tax. During Passover, Jewish males paid a temple tax of ½ shekel (Exodus 30:13). Since most coins at the time contained idolatrous images on them, only the Tyrian silver ½ shekel was accepted. This required exchanging coins which came with a rate of 4-8%. So, to exchange a ½ shekel for another would cost an additional 4-8%.

The more egregious corruption came in the selling of sacrifices. Originally, the Temple offered a helpful service for pilgrims by providing acceptable sacrifices for a price. However, this service become an opportunity for corruption. Doves, for example, outside the temple sold for about a nickel or dime (in American currency), but inside the Temple they would cost about \$10! This is worse than modern movie theaters!

This issue alone is reason enough to make us angry. Manipulating religion for filthy profit and power is wicked. Unfortunately, it remains a significant problem even today. Far too many religious leaders in the West profit from the faith and spiritual needs of others, many of whom are poor.

The problem, however, isn't limited to religious leaders, but also of worshipers. American consumerism has crept into the church. The average Christian is not a worshiper, but a consumer. We choose churches off preferences, not biblical standards. Programs, popularity, perception, etc. For far too many pastors, platform matters more than the pulpit. What we sell is more important than who we proclaim. If we are to have a pure church in America, the idol of consumerism must be crucified.

No wonder, then, Jesus is angry. It's not an overreaction, but righteous anger. Noticed that Jesus chases away both sellers and buyers. What Jesus does here is precisely what he did to the Fig Tree. This is why Mark sandwiches the cleansing between the cursing. They are clearly connected. The tree lacked fruit. Israel lacked faith. Thus, Jesus is publicly, even violently, judging religion. Religion became nothing more than a formula for gaining God's favor while simultaneously extorting people of faith.

It is imperative we articulate the differences between the gospel and religion. Religion depends on what I do. The gospel depends on what Jesus has done. Religion says, "I obey; therefore, I'm accepted." The gospel says, "Because I am accepted, I obey." Religion has good people and bad people. The gospel has understood we're all bad, but Jesus is good. Religion is very aware of other people's sins. The gospel is very aware of my own. Religion values a birth family. The gospel values a new birth. Religion preys on fear and insecurity. The gospel is based on joy and assurance. The Religious have an uncertainty standing before God. The gospel bases assurance on the finished work of Christ. Religion says, "I obey God in order to get things from God." The gospel says, "I obey to get God – to delight in and resemble him." Religion is about me. The gospel is about Jesus. Religion sees Jesus as the means. The gospel sees Jesus as the end. Religion says that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life, thus when bad things happen, we become angry at God or at ourselves. The gospel reminds us that all my punishment fell on Jesus and when life go wrong, I am free to struggle openly knowing that while God may allow this for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial. Religion drives us to perform. The gospel drives us to love. Religion ends in pride or despair. The gospel ends in humble joy.

The same can be shown in contrasting law and grace. The Law is the first word, Grace is the last. The Law exposes us, while Grace exonerates us. The Law diagnoses, but Grace delivers. The Law accuses, but Grace acquits. The Law condemns the best of us, while Grace saves the worst of us. The Law says "cursed," Grace says "blessed." The Law says "slave," but Grace says "son." The Law says "guilty," but Grace says "forgiven." The Law can break a hard heart, but only Grace can heal it.

In the end, Jesus finds religion fruitless because it is faithless. And it isn't limited to Israel in the 1st century. Paul had the same battle with the Judaizers in Galatia. John had the same battle with the early Gnostics in Ephesus. Augustine had the same battle with the Pelagians.

What is often forgotten in this story is that Jesus does not merely knock over the tables and raise his voice. He cleanses the temple. He restores it to proper order. In Matthew's parallel account, we discover "And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them" (Matthew 21:14). Jesus didn't just come to wipe out the corrupt system of religion in his day. He cleansed the temple. More than that, he restored proper worship.