

**Series:** Real Religion  
**Title:** True Transformation  
**Text:** Mark 11:12-19  
**Date:** September 20, 2020

### **Verse 12**

Verse 12 transitions away from the excitement of the Triumphal Entry to a much more grim scene. The passage provides a strong contrast to the previous verses. Instead of jubilation, one finds judgment. The verse begins a story about the way in which Jesus cursed a fig tree. We read, "The next day when they went out from Bethany, he was hungry" (Mark 11:12). The day in view is Monday, the day after the Triumphal Entry.<sup>1</sup> During the Holy Week, Jesus and His traveling entourage had their lodging accommodations near Bethany (Mark 11:1). Apparently, the crew travelled back and forth from the town to the capital city. Based on our current verse, it seems Jesus went back to Bethany after the events associated with the Triumphal Entry (Mark 11:1-11).

In our current verse, we see Jesus returning to Jerusalem. On His journey, He became hungry. Such should be expected, since the events of the previous day were quite demanding. Some propose He might not have had the opportunity to eat after the festivities surrounding His entrance into Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the walk between the two towns would require food for fuel. To top it all off, the first meal of the day was customarily not consumed until midday.<sup>3</sup> Jesus was hungry!

While it may seem like a mere secondary detail in our passage, the fact that Jesus experienced hunger has great theological significance. Though He was 100% God, He was also 100% man. As a man, Jesus experienced many of the weaknesses and infirmities we experience. He hungered and He thirsted. We see such realities displayed in Matthew 4:2 at Jesus' temptation.

Our Lord's gnawing desire for food in our passage reminds us that He came to earth to live the life we could never live. He embraced humanity on our behalf so that He could live a perfect life on behalf of our imperfect lives.<sup>4</sup> In Jesus we have a savior and deliverer. He fully embraced humanity for us. Throughout our days, we can look to Him for provision and strength. We have hope and help because He embraced humanity on our behalf, and because He lived a perfect human life. Scripture says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16).

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, 359.

<sup>2</sup> Robertson, 359.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, 182.

<sup>4</sup> Ryle, 182.

### Verse 13

In Mark 11:13, Mark described the way in which the hungry Jesus approached a fig tree to look for food. He said, "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." A fig tree would have been a common sight in ancient Canaan. Many of them grew to a height of 19 feet.<sup>5</sup> They were a popular source of fruit and food.

Interestingly, the events in our passage took place when figs were not in season.<sup>6</sup> Some have hastily concluded that Jesus cursed the tree because it did not have fruit when it should have had fruit. Such was not the case. The first fig harvest did not occur until sometime in late May or early June. The later harvest occurred in August.<sup>7</sup> The Passover occurred around April, so there would not have been fruit on the tree at the time of the events in our text. Only leaves would have been present. They usually began to appear in March.<sup>8</sup> In A.D. 30, the Passover took place during the first week of April, so one should not have expected to find fruit on a fig tree.<sup>9</sup> However, the fruitless nature of the tree still served as a good illustration for Jesus' teaching point.

The fig tree in our passage should be seen in light of the Garden of Eden. Figs were always available in that perfect place. In fact, it was fig leaves that Adam and Eve used to mask the shame of their nakedness after sinning (Genesis 3:7). The Bible teaches us that Eden's produce will once again exist in abundance when the Lord establishes the New Heaven and the New Earth (Revelation 22:2-3). This view is also seen in the Minor Prophets. For them, figs were emblematic of the Anointed One's physical kingdom (Micah 4:4 and Zechariah 3:10). Seen in this way, ripe figs have Messianic implications. One has commented, "In the Messianic age figs and all other products of nature will always be in season."<sup>10</sup>

The fig tree should also be seen in light of 11:1-11. It was intended to be an object lesson concerning the nation of Israel. Though she showed signs of life (Matthew 23:23-26), she was really spiritually dead. The leaves on the fig tree were common leaves or foliage.<sup>11</sup> They represented the way in which God's chosen people appeared to be vibrant. Later in Mark 13:1, we will see the disciples marveling over national Israel. Through cursing a fig tree, Jesus provided a stark lesson concerning Israel's true state.

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<sup>5</sup> Schnabel, 266.

<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, 184.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, 359.

<sup>8</sup> Schnabel, 266.

<sup>9</sup> Schnabel, 266.

<sup>10</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 92.

The lack of figs on the tree represented her spiritual deadness. Israel seemed to be okay, but she wasn't.

Jesus' use of a fig tree as an object lesson concerning Israel's apostasy was thoroughly rooted in Old Testament prophecy. For the prophets, such trees were often used as a symbol of judgment (Psalm 105:33; Isaiah 34:4; Jeremiah 5:17; Hosea 2:12; Joel 1:7; Amos 4:9; Nahum 3:12; Habakuk 3:17; and Haggai 2:19). The Jews in Jesus' day were worthy of the same wrath pronounced by the prophets of olden times. Though they welcomed Jesus as king at the Triumphal Entry (Mark 11:9-10), they were spiritually bare. They lacked real faith that led to repentance (Mark 1:15). Their apostate fruitlessness would reach a crescendo when they rejected God's Anointed One (Mark 14:64).

Believers of all generation should be on guard against falling into the same state of first-century Jews. Are we not sometimes guilty of fruitlessness ourselves? Do we not sometimes have signs of life, beautiful leaves, without having figs, real good works? Are we clinging to our spiritual heritage, church membership, baptism, moral life, or good reputation in an unhealthy way? Could it be that we are guilty of substituting such things for true godliness and spiritual maturity? Be careful that you are not engaged in the same sin as Ananias and Sapphira — boasting of good works before the church while being spiritually empty of real transformation (Acts 5:1-11).

Lack of spiritual fruit is a serious issue in the eyes of Jesus (Matthew 7:16-20). In John's gospel, Jesus warned that a lack of spiritual fruit will result in spiritual death. He said, "If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6). In the book of Revelation, John spoke of the same reality. He said the dead will be one day be judged "according to their works" (Revelation 20:13). At the great white throne judgment, all who are devoid of spiritual fruit will be thrown into the lake of fire to live with Satan forever (Revelation 20:15). Though good works do not earn salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9), they are certainly an evidence of true salvation (Ephesians 2:10). Professing believers should carefully examine their lives (2 Corinthians 13:5) to make sure they bear good fruit (John 15:5; Galatians 5:22; and James 2:26).

#### **Verse 14**

Seeing the fruitless nature of the fig tree, Jesus pronounced a curse over it. Mark recorded, "He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again!' And his disciples heard it" (Mark 11:14). Jesus used emphatic language in His pronouncement against the tree. The original language of the text employs a double negative.<sup>12</sup> The disciples were most likely shocked by Jesus' strong curse.

It is important to comment on the nature of Jesus' curse. He did not exhibit unrighteous, unrestrained anger (Psalm 4:4 and Ephesians 4:26). He was surely cool, collected, calm, and calculated in His pronouncement. In holy fury, He issued forth judgment on the tree.

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<sup>12</sup> Schnabel, 267.

Our Lord's actions may arouse angst amongst some who are of an earth-friendly persuasion. Was Jesus' act one of calloused and reckless destruction? Should He have shown more regard for God's creation? It is important to clarify that Jesus, as He did in Mark 5:13 in the incident with a herd of pigs, exercises His authority over creation (Matthew 28:18 and Colossians 1:16) in order to highlight important spiritual truth. The expense of one small tree paled in comparison to the value of souls who needed to be warned about the peril of spiritual fruitlessness.

In recording Jesus' prophetic curse of the fig tree, Mark highlighted Jesus' role as prophet, priest, and king. He emphasized this three-fold nature of our Lord again in Mark 15:16-32. He wanted his readers to know that Jesus was more than a good teacher, moral example, or effective leader. He aimed to present Jesus as the ultimate prophet. The fact that His pronouncement over the tree came to pass (Mark 11:20) was evidence that Jesus was a true prophet sent from God. Deuteronomy 18:22 had warned God's people, "When a prophet speaks in the Lord's name, and the message does not come true or is not fulfilled, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him." Jesus showed He was a true prophet, because what He prophesied came to pass.

### **Verses 15 and 16**

In verse 15, Mark transitioned to describe Jesus' visit to the temple during the Holy Week. The occasion turned out to be a heated one. Mark records, "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 moneychangers and the chairs of those selling doves, and would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple" (Mark 11:15-16). It is perhaps an understatement to say that the temple was important to first-century Jews. One has said it was at "the heart of Israel's religious life and a central symbol of its national identity."<sup>13</sup> Such reality makes Jesus' actions at the temple even more remarkable.

The word translated "temple" is one that was used of the outer courts. It was the area in which Gentiles were allowed to mingle.<sup>14</sup> As Jesus entered the open place, He saw sights that greatly disturbed Him. Merchants and moneychangers were making a racket out of the sacred space.

Our Lord demonstrated judgement on three groups of people who were gathered at Israel's most holy sight – merchants, money changers, and those who transported purchased goods. The first group sold animals for sacrifices. Based on Leviticus 22:22-25 and Deuteronomy 17:1, worshippers were required to sacrifice unblemished animals in temple observances. From John 2:14, we learn that oxen, sheep, and doves were often sold in the courts of the temple during Jesus' time. Though markets were usually held outside of the temple area for years, historians believe they were first

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<sup>13</sup> Schnabel, 265.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, 185.

introduced to the temple complex in the year 30 AD, the exact year in which Jesus was crucified!<sup>15</sup>

At the time of the events in our text, many of the worshippers were in need of such animals, since a great number of them had travelled from long distances for the Passover (Mark 10:32; 11:1; and 15:21). Sinful, capitalistic salesmen seized an opportunity to make an exaggerated wage off of Holy Week activities. It is for this reason that Jesus was perturbed. He had a holy anger towards those who made merchandise of the holy things of God.

Second, Jesus exercised authoritative judgment over moneychangers. He overturned their tables. Such furniture was normally used for placing coins on display.<sup>16</sup> Since people travelled from outside of Jerusalem for the Passover, many needed to exchange their common currency for the currency that was required to make purchases in Jerusalem. Many need to exchange the popular Roman money for shekels.<sup>17</sup> As people entered the temple complex, they could see who had what type of coinage for exchange. Jesus upended the tables because of the way in which they were used for unjust gains. John tells us of a similar episode that happened earlier in Jesus' ministry (John 2:14-22).

Third, Jesus "would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple." This final group of people probably contained those who had recently bought wares from merchants. One should be careful to understand the cultural and religious background behind the scene at hand. Jesus' actions should not be used as a mandate against buying or selling anything within the church. The problem for Jesus was with what one has called "dishonest commercial exploitation."<sup>18</sup> The issue was one of priority. The main focus of the temple had been turned away from pure worship unto profit-making enterprises.

In addition, Jesus' aim wasn't necessarily to reform or purify the temple.<sup>19</sup> We will see later in Mark that God ordained the destruction of it (Mark 13:2). Jesus' main purpose in our current passage was to demonstrate His disdain for the bankrupt Jewish religious system, and to display His Messianic authority over all things. The motive and message behind His actions were clear to the religious leaders. Later they ask Him, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do these things?" (Mark 11:28).

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<sup>15</sup> Brooks, 184.

<sup>16</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, 185.

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, 185.

<sup>19</sup> Schnabel, 265.

## Verse 17

After driving out the unjust merchants, Jesus gave a lesson on temple worship. Mark records, "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!'" (Mark 11:17). Notice Jesus' use of the phrase "Is it not written." The verbiage was common amongst first-century rabbis. It was used in debates to appeal to the authority of holy writings. As He did in Mark 7:6, Jesus used the formula to direct people's attention to the authority of God's Word. For our Lord, human opinions and perspectives mattered little when compared to Scripture. May we follow His lead, making the Bible our sole authority for faith and practice.

The question posed in verse 17 contains grammar in the original language of the text that expects a positive answer.<sup>20</sup> Jesus affirmed positively that the place of worship was designed to be a place of fervent prayer. Such a perspective was thoroughly rooted in Scripture. To exchange prayer for unjust profits was an unthinkable sin!

It seems that, in an overreaction against legalism, many within the contemporary Church have become too flippant toward the place of worship. Sure, we don't want to go to the extreme of Roman Catholicism and make shrines out of buildings; however, it would be helpful to reclaim the idea that the place of gathering is set apart for holy purposes. The Lord wants the Church to regard their assembly as a solemn one. Prayer, praise, and preaching are to be the focus when we are together. Careful vigilance should be implemented to ensure we don't detract or distract from Jesus' priorities for the Church.

Jesus expressed the outrage of the situation by calling the merchants "thieves." The Greek word underlying English translations is a strong one. It referred to a bandit, to one who robbed others by force and violence.<sup>21</sup> For Jesus, it was a high crime to pollute worship, stifle prayer, and divert the focus of God's house away from truth.

Jesus' sermon centered on truth from Isaiah 56:7, a passage that said, "I will bring them to my holy mountain and let them rejoice in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." Jesus likely also referenced Jeremiah 7:11 – "Has this house, which bears my name, become a den of robbers in your view? Yes, I too have seen it." By citing two Old Testament passages, Jesus made sermon points that were well in keeping with the Word of God. Scripture was His authority in His teaching. As mentioned earlier, one can see Him using the same hermeneutical approach in Mark 7:6-13.

It is important to pay special attention to the mention of "nations" in verse 17. By using the word, Jesus pointed to important theological truth concerning the New Covenant. His cursing of the fig tree, along with His later pronouncement concerning the temple (Mark 13:2), was designed to highlight the way in which the Lord would move from working primarily amongst the Jews to primarily amongst the Gentiles. Years before

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<sup>20</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 92.

Jesus graced the Earth, the prophets foretold of this shift (Isaiah 2:2-3; Isaiah 49:6; and Micah 4:1-2). Good Jews should have been aware of the Lord's plan. Even the call of Abraham predicted that the non-Jewish nations would be cut into God's plan of redemption (Genesis 12:1-3).

After the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ, Paul would provide a theological treatise concerning the place of the Gentiles in the work of salvation (Romans 10:1-11:36). In Romans 11:25, he plainly talked about what he called "the fullness of the Gentiles." The Church Age has a primary emphasis on the salvation of non-Jewish people. When Jesus gave the Great Commission (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:18-20; and Acts 1:8), He highlighted the place of the nations in His plan. Our Lord's cursing of the fig tree was intended to underscore all of these realities.

### **Verse 18**

In regard to Jesus' actions in the temple, verse 18 indicates that "The chief priests and the scribes heard it and started looking for a way to kill" Jesus (Mark 11:18). Previously in Mark's gospel, we have seen that the Pharisees and Herodians had plotted to have Jesus killed. Now the chief priests and scribes are portrayed as joining in on the action. Previously in Mark's gospel, Jesus had prophesied that these two groups of people would have a hand in orchestrating His death (Mark 8:31 and 33).<sup>22</sup>

The two groups had to scheme in secret, however, because "they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was astonished by his teaching." The religious leaders were driven by the fear of man. Such people pleasing-tendencies were be put on display again later in Mark 11:32. The religious elite despised Jesus, but they were hard pressed to do anything against Him. People loved His teaching (Mark 1:22 and 27). They thronged to witness His miracles (1:32 and 2:1-2). The day before the events in our current passage, the masses had lined the streets to welcome Jesus as Messiah (Mark 11:8-10). The chief priests and scribes wanted to get rid of Jesus, but they knew it would be tough. If they did anything to Him, the general populace would likely stand up in outrage.

Some cast aspersions on the veracity of the event in our text, questioning how Jesus could perform such actions without being apprehended. According to Mark 15:16, a Roman cohort would have been stationed at the governor's residence that was in close proximity to the temple courts.<sup>23</sup> Why didn't they arrest Jesus? The answer is found within verse 18. the chief priests and scribes did not report the incident because they feared the people who loved and admired Jesus (Mark 11:8 and 18).

### **Verse 19**

Verse 19 says, "Whenever evening came, they would go out of the city" (Mark 11:19). Back in Mark 11:1, we saw that Jesus and His disciples lodged in Bethany during the Holy

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<sup>22</sup> Schnabel, 274.

<sup>23</sup> Schnabel, 266.

Week. Each day they made the approximate two-mile trip into the city. We saw them make this trip in 11:11 and 12. We will see reference to it again in 11:20 and 27. Even after the Crucifixion, we will see female followers of Jesus making the same trip on Resurrection Sunday (Mark 16:1-2). In our current verse, Jesus and His disciples are depicted as exiting Jerusalem when “evening” came. The time would have been before sunset, possibly at 5:00 pm, since sunset in early April would have been at around 7:00 pm.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Schnabel, 274.