

LIVE IT OR LOSE IT

Scriptures: Mark 11:12-20; Jeremiah 7:1-15

Recently I visited a person in the hospital undergoing chemotherapy for a recurrence of cancer. It was a scary situation, and I expected to find him depressed if not frightened, wondering why God let this happen. Instead he was sitting up in bed talking to someone on the phone, and he said to me, “Hey, I’ve got a theological question.” “Okay,” I said. I was expecting him to ask me about God, healing, the problem of evil, or maybe life after death. Instead he pointed at the phone and said, “My friend wants to know why Jesus put a curse on a fig tree for not producing figs when they weren’t even in season.” I stared at him and told him that when I figured it out I would give him a copy of this sermon.

Let me come back to the fig tree in a moment. First I want to look at what Jesus did in the temple. Mark 11:5 says,

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he (Jesus) entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the table of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

There are various theories about why Jesus did this, but the most common is that Jesus was angry about the merchants and money changers cheating people. That’s what I was always told growing up. We get this idea from verse 17 where Jesus says, “You have made the temple a den of robbers.” I have always pictured corrupt merchants and currency traders charging exorbitant prices and getting away with it because they had an exclusive franchise to operate in the temple.

But if you look at the story closely, there are several details that do not fit that picture. First, in verse 15 Jesus drives out not only those who are selling in the temple but also those who are buying. If the problem is with crooked merchants, why punish the buyers? Then verse 16 goes a step further, “And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.” This goes beyond punishing crooked merchants. Jesus is practically shutting down the temple. He won’t even let people carry their offerings through the temple or anything else they use in worship.

This action of Jesus is not just a protest against crooked business practices. It is a judgment on the temple itself. That is why even the buyers and passer-bys are kicked out. The proof of this is in the phrase “den of robbers.” When Jesus calls the temple a “den of robbers” he is quoting directly from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah.

Take a moment and look with me again at our first scripture lesson from Jeremiah 7 (OT, p. 707). Jeremiah stands in the temple, just as Jesus did, and beginning in verse 9 he says,

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”—only to go on doing all

these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?

According to Jeremiah it is not just crooked merchants that are desecrating the temple. It is the whole people of Israel. They have lied and cheated people not just in the temple but in their daily lives. They have hurt other people, betrayed their spouses, exploited the disadvantaged, and devoted their lives to false gods. When Jesus calls the temple “a den of robbers,” he is quoting Jeremiah. He is condemning not just a few scam artists but everyone who thinks they can go to the temple once in a while and live anyway they want to the rest of the time.

The problem, as Jesus points out, is that the people of Israel have forgotten their mission. In verse 17 he quotes the prophet Isaiah when he says, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’?” Near the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 12, God calls Abraham to become a great nation and says to Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Abraham’s descendants were known as the people of Israel, and their mission was to bring God’s blessing to all the nations of the earth. The temple was meant to be a beacon of light for the world. But instead it had become just another arena for corruption, another opportunity to exploit people. The people of Israel had failed in the purpose for which God created them.

Now let’s go back to the fig tree. As my friend in the hospital recognized, this story makes no sense. Why would Jesus curse a fig tree for having no figs when it was not the season for them? If Jesus were hungry, he could have multiplied the figs just like he did the loaves of bread. He could have miraculously produced some figs, instead of cursing the tree. This story is totally uncharacteristic of Jesus and makes absolutely no sense, unless ... unless what we have here is a *symbolic story*, a sort of acted out parable.

Do you notice how the story of the fig tree is wrapped around the story of the temple? That is intentional in Mark’s gospel. The story of the fig tree is meant to be a commentary on the story of the temple. It is a parable. Did you notice how the fig tree had leaves but no fruit? That is symbolic. The tree put on a show of being a live healthy fig tree, but it was not fulfilling its true purpose; it was not bearing fruit. In the temple the people of Israel put on a show of being God’s people, but they really weren’t fulfilling God’s purpose for them. They were not bearing the fruit of God’s righteousness and love in their lives. They were not being a blessing to all the nations. Because of this, Jesus says, they are destined to wither, just like the fig tree.

That is exactly what happened about 40 years later. In 70 A.D. the temple was destroyed by the Romans and never rebuilt. Just like the fig tree, it withered and never revived.

Now here is the implication of both stories: If we don’t bear fruit, if we don’t fulfill the purpose for which God created us and gave us our church, if we don’t live the new life Jesus gave us through his death on the cross, we could lose it. We cannot take it for granted that God will always be there for us if we spend most of our lives ignoring God.

Many of you may have seen the 1998 movie *Saving Private Ryan* about the invasion of Normandy in World War II. The movie opens with an elderly man walking stiffly but determinedly through a cemetery perched above the Normandy beach where allied troops landed on D-day. He approaches a grave at the cemetery and kneels down in front of it, weeping.

Suddenly the movie jumps back 54 years to the day of the invasion. For the next 20 minutes we watch one of the most horrifying war sequences ever filmed. Some 5,000 allied troops were killed or wounded on the beaches of Normandy that day, it seems like the movie shows every one of them, in anguishing personal detail. Finally a beachhead is established, and for a moment the troops are safe.

But then the real plot of the movie begins. Eight soldiers who survived the invasion are sent to rescue an American paratrooper named Ryan who was dropped behind enemy lines. They go through harrowing experiences to find him, and when they find him several men lose their lives trying to rescue him and get him out. The last one killed is the captain of the unit played by Tom Hanks. As he dies, he says to Private Ryan, "Earn this."

At that moment the movie switches back to the gray haired man at the cemetery, and we realize that we are looking at Private Ryan, now in his 70s. He is kneeling before the grave of the captain. Slowly he stands up, turns to his wife, and says, "Tell me I've been a good person." His wife is puzzled. She does not understand the question, but we who have been watching the movie understand it completely. He is asking her, "Tell me that my life has been worth saving. Tell me that I have fulfilled the purpose for which the captain gave his life."

We need to ask the same question. Are you fulfilling the purpose for which Jesus gave his life to save you? Are you bearing the fruit of righteousness and love for which you were planted and nurtured?

There is no way we can ever earn that gift. In that sense the captain in the movie is wrong. There is no way to earn this new life we have been given by Jesus' sacrifice. But please, please don't waste it.

- Ken Onstot
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