Mark Lesson 38 (2023)

**JESUS CONDEMNS THE UNBELIEVING ISRAEL**

(*Subtitle: “Have Faith in God!”)*

Mark 11:12-25

Key Verse: 11:22

*“‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered.”*

In the previous passage, Jesus made his public entrance into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. A large crowd paraded with him, shouting, “*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”* In Mark's account, Jesus allowed people to call him “Lord!” in public for the first time - no more messianic secrets. This was the very moment that Jesus had been waiting for. This event is usually called Jesus’ triumphal entry because, in a few days, he would become the ultimate sacrifice for our sins through his death and rise again in three days. However, before all these happened, Jesus did something very drastic to the temple, which made the Jewish religious authorities very upset and afraid. He also cursed the fig tree, representing the nation Israel, and when the disciples discovered the fig tree Jesus cursed was withered and uprooted, they were frightened. They needed follow-ups. Jesus told them they should have faith in God, and then Jesus taught them how to have faith in God step by step. This morning let’s think about why Jesus did what he did and what it means to have faith in God.

Look at verses 12-14. “The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard him say it.” Most of us may wonder why Jesus cursed the fig tree for not having its fruit when it wasn’t even the season for figs. It’s hard to believe that Jesus cursed the fig tree simply because he couldn’t get food from it when hungry. However, it’s tricky because verse 12 says that Jesus was hungry when he approached the fig tree. However, Jesus’ cursing the fig tree would make a lot more sense if it were symbolic of teaching his disciples what would happen to Israel.

The fig tree in today’s passage, full of green leaves with no actual fruit, was a good illustration of the unbelieving nation Israel. God had chosen the people of Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to bear the fruit of righteousness among the people of all countries (Ex. 19:5,6). But they bore no good fruit at all. (Isa. 5:1-7) We read a lot in the Old Testament about God’s disappointment with His people Israel. God had been even more disappointed by their arrogance and hypocrisy. Their hypocrisy and arrogance peaked during Jesus’ ministry on earth. When Jesus cursed the fig tree by saying, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again,” Jesus wanted his disciples to be aware of God’s impending judgment on the nation Israel (14).

Look at verses 15 and 16. “On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.” The Temple of Jerusalem has a special place in the Jewish religion. The Temple building was magnificent and gorgeous, and it was considered the most sacred place where they believed God dwelt and the atonement for our sins was constantly offered.

But as soon as Jesus entered the temple, Jesus, instead of praying, began driving out people who were trading. He overturned the tables of the money changers and other merchants in the temple courts (Pic#). According to John, Jesus even made a whip out of cords and drove out all merchants and people doing money-making business in the temple courts, along with sheep, doves, and other animals. He wouldn’t even allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. (Pic#2) The temple area where people were buying, and selling was the outer courtyard, also called the Court of the Gentiles. (Pic#3)

But why were there so many buyers and sellers in the sacred place? During the Passover season, pilgrims from all over the nation and many parts of the world came to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem. One of the Passover feast's highlights was offering animal sacrifices to God. And the animal has to be without any blemish or defect (Lev 1:2-3). Some people didn’t bring their animals and planned to buy one at the market. Still, others brought their animals. Yet, when their animals failed the inspection, they were forced to buy another at a very high price. And those also who came from foreign countries had to have their money exchanged into Jewish currency because this was the only money the merchants accepted. Only cash was accepted to pay the temple tax, and the rate was unfair. So, who was taking all the money? Not God, but the priests and Jewish religious hierarchy, even though the name of God was used.

The cleansing of the temple was an unprecedented revolutionary event in Israel’s history. No prophet dared to do what Jesus did to the temple. What does it show about Jesus? It reveals the spiritual authority of Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah. Jesus acted as the owner of the Temple.

Look at verse 17. “And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.’” The Scripture Jesus quoted here is from the prophecy of Isaiah 56:7b, which states, “For my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” So what did he mean when he said this? **First,** when Jesus said, “For my house will be called a house of prayer **for all nations**,” he told people that God is not only the God of the Jews but also the God of all people of all nations. It was God’s will that his temple was not just for the Jews but for all people. But the Jewish religious leaders disobeyed and distorted God’s will. They took advantage of the non-Jewish pilgrims and blocked them from coming to God.

Also, when Jesus said, *‘****My house*** *will be called a house of prayer for all nations,”* he was claiming that the temple belonged to him rather than to the Jewish leaders. He proclaimed that he was the Lord of the Temple and the Messiah. Again, we see no more messianic secrets. And he even rebuked the religious leaders severely by saying, “You have made it a den of robbers.”

Look at verses 18-19. “The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.” These religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus because Jesus’ words and actions threatened their reputation and financial resources. Mark alone recorded that they were afraid of Jesus. Their fear of Jesus was not holy fear but unhealthy fear. When they were afraid, they became vulnerable to the devil.

Look at verses 20 and 21. “In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” The sight of the sudden death of the fig tree, which used to have full of green leaves, scared Simon Peter and the other disciples. (Pic#4b). The phrase “withered from the roots” means the complete death of the fig tree, giving off from its sources of nourishment. (Pic#4) The roots of the fig tree may refer to the religious leaders of Israel. It indicates that the curse of spiritual death would spread from them to the whole generation of unbelieving Jews in Israel. Whoops! Through his spiritual instinct, Simon Peter connected the tree's death with Jesus’ curse words the previous day. So, he said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” He must have felt that not just the nation Israel but also his own life was doomed.

Look at verses 22-23. “‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered.” Instead of explaining the significance of the cursing of the fig tree, Jesus taught his disciples something crucial for their spiritual development as his disciples. He said to them, “Have faith in God!” He was telling his disciples, *“Even if the world goes upside down, you should put your trust in God.”* Jesus said a similar thing to his disciples in John 14:1 by saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.” (NIV-1973)

In Matthew and Luke’s accounts of this event, the phrase “Have faith in God!” is missing. Mark is the only one who included the phrase “Have faith in God!” We wonder why. Mark has a clear purpose. My best guess is that although it may sound too simple, having faith in God is the best answer to all our problems and needs. It sounds like an overstatement. But faith in God gives us the most profound solution to all our problems and circumstances. It reminds us of Proverbs 3:5-6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Okay, faith in God is the best answer, but the question is, *“How can we have faith in God?”* In the following verses, verses 23-25, Jesus gives crucial tips.

***First, we should stop doubting (23).*** Read verse 23 again. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.” When Jesus said this, he was talking about the power of faith. Here “mountain” refers to difficulties and challenges beyond our control. When we face an impossible situation, we become anxious, fearful, and paranoid. Even though we don’t want to doubt God, it’s hard not to. But if we want to have faith in God, we have to engage in a spiritual battle against our doubt or negative thoughts.

For example, what should we do if we face the seemingly immovable mountain in front of us? By trusting that God can move that mountain, we should say to the mountain, “Go, throw yourself into the sea!” But often, the mountain does not move. Sometimes, God removes the mountains quickly, but he does not always remove them quickly. It’s easy for us to fall into doubt and become pessimistic quickly. Why doesn’t God move mountains quickly? It’s because God wants to build the character of trust and confidence in us. So, having faith in God is an ongoing spiritual battle against doubt, feelings of uncertainty, and negative thoughts. How can we stop doubting and overcoming negative thoughts? There is no other way than to push the brake pedal. “STOP!” Stop doubting but put your trust in God. It may not be easy, but you will do better and better.

***Second, we should pray according to God’s will (24).*** Read verse 24. “Therefore, I tell you, whatever you for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” In this verse, Jesus relates faith to prayer. It means that prayer is an expression of our faith in God. Jesus said that whatever we request in prayer will be given to us, and even before accepting it, we should assume that we have received it. What a tremendous promise it is! It sounds so easy.

However, we should be careful because Jesus wasn’t giving us blank checks. For example, in the previous passage, we learned that when James and John asked Jesus to bet one of them sit at his right and the other at his left in the coming messianic kingdom, Jesus didn’t say to them, *“You will get it if you don’t doubt. Just believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”* But he told them, “You don’t know what you are asking.” He also said, “These things belong to those who for whom they have been prepared.” He meant, *“That’s not God’s will for you. So, no matter how hard you ask, it will not be given to you.”*

Here, we learn that our prayer request should align with God’s will. In other words, our prayer is insisting on what we want but accepting God’s will. 1 John 5:14-15 states, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.” James 4:3 also states, “When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” We say, “Amen.” But it’s not easy to accept God’s will.

However, there is a difference between accepting God’s sovereign will and being fatalistic. Accepting God’s will means we deeply trust in God’s love and providence that in all things, God works for the good and best of his loving children. That’s our prayer. We become fatalistic if we don’t trust God’s love and providence. We don’t grow in faith. Our best prayer is not to ask God to give us this or that but to remain in Jesus and his words. He said to his disciples, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (Jn. 15:7)

***Third, we should forgive others unconditionally.*** Read verse 25. *“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”* Faith in God is not the only condition for answered prayer. We must forgive our fellow human beings. Forgiving our brothers and sisters is a precondition for obtaining forgiveness from God the Father.

*Does it mean we will not be forgiven if we hold grudges against someone and do not forgive them?* Forgiving someone who hurt us is not easy. It’s often a long process. But by forgiving others, we don’t lose anything, but we gain the wholeness of God. In other words, our salvation cannot be complete and whole until we let go of grievances and resentment. By forgiving others, we are empowered to be free.

Let me close the sermon. Today is Father’s Day. One man who was a thief told his son on his deathbed, *“Son, don’t become a thief!”* Human fathers love their children. Even though they are imperfect, they do their best for their children. How much more would God, our Heaven Father, do for his children? God, our Father, wants his children to live by faith because faith in him is the best way to live. Faith is an attitude.

These days, we feel insecure due to unpredictable weather changes due to global warming, economic crisis, political polarization, gun violence, racism, the threat of nuclear disasters, etc. But we must know that even if heaven falls, we can have access to God our Father, along with his abundant blessings and kingdom, through faith in God. Faith in God is our spiritual direction. It’s still our choice to trust God or remain in doubt and fear. And when we choose to trust in God, we will be safe and secure in God our Father now and forever. We may be in a difficult situation beyond our control. But let’s put out trust in God by overcoming doubt, seeking to follow God’s will in prayer, and forgiving others unconditionally. Let’s turn to our neighbor and say, **“Have Faith in God!”** Happy Father’s Day!