

The King's Curse

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'm sure everybody here has heard of Airbnb, or maybe you've even used Airbnb at some point when you've been away on holiday. Well, I saw this headline in the news last month that said, Airbnb permanently bans parties and events around the world.

Now, apparently, a home in the affluent neighborhood of Sandbanks near Bournemouth, estimated to be worth £2 million, was trashed in March last year when it was used as a party attended by around 60 people.

Now, in Glasgow, we call it an empty, but this has taken it to another level, having an empty in somebody else's house. And apparently, this house was booked by two people, a couple, who had said they were going there for a two-night break.

And I guess you can understand why the owners of the house were not too happy about their home being wrecked by a bunch of random strangers. And you can understand Airbnb thinking about how they need to change their policy to ban parties in other people's homes.

And we know the reason why. It's simple. It's because only the owners of a house get to decide what happens in that house because it belongs to them and to nobody else.

[1 : 1 6] So nobody else has got the right to choose what goes on in someone else's property. And I guess, like me, you would be rightly angered if somebody came into your house and they rearranged the furniture, they ripped off the wallpaper, they broke your possessions, and they started a party.

We wouldn't be best pleased, would we? Because they can't treat our home any way that they like. Now, we actually see this in our Bible reading from Mark chapter 11 because the temple, God's house, was being misused and it was being abused.

It had been turned into a marketplace. We saw that in our reading. And it was bang out of order because who decides what happens in God's house? God's house being the temple in Jerusalem.

Well, only God gets to decide what happens in his place. And that's why Jesus went in and he cleared the temple of all that was going on. Now, last time we looked at the Gospel of Mark, or if you're here catching up, chapters 11 to 13 in Mark's Gospel are all about the temple.

The temple, the temple, the temple. All the action takes place in the temple. So everything that Jesus does is centered around the temple, God's house.

[2 : 3 4] Now, remember it began last time as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the triumphal entry as God's promised Messiah in chapter 1 to 11 of, sorry, verse 1 to 11 of our chapter.

And so in today's reading, Jesus then goes into the temple. He goes into the temple courts and he clears them. And what's interesting is that the visit of Jesus to the temple courts is sandwiched between what seems to be like a random story about a fig tree.

Now, Mark often uses the sandwiching technique in his Gospel to make a point. And so, one, the top layer of your sandwich, Jesus curses the fig tree. Then the filling bit, Jesus clears the temple.

And then the sandwich bit at the bottom, Jesus goes to the withered fig tree and it is dying. And that's what's happening here. Jesus clears the temple.

The cursed fig tree dies. And the point of this sandwich, the point of what Jesus is doing is he's really indicating what is in store for the fruitless religion of Israel.

[3 : 45] And so it's an object lesson for his disciples. And it essentially shows us how Jesus judges false fruitless religion and how Jesus wants real fruitful faith.

That's what we're going to think about this afternoon. And that's what our two points are. First of all, Jesus judges false fruitless religion. We see this in verse 12 to 21. And then secondly, Jesus wants real fruitful faith.

So first, Jesus judges false fruitless religion. We see this when Jesus curses the fig tree. And then he clears the temple courts. And so all the action starts with the fig tree.

So let me read again what happens. The next day, as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree and 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. So where was Jesus going? Well, Jesus was on his way to the temple in Jerusalem and he's hungry.

[4 : 54] And it seems like an odd detail to mention the fact that Jesus is hungry, but then it brings the fig tree into play. Jesus went to the fig tree to get some fruit because he saw that it was in leaf.

But it didn't have any fruit. So he cursed it. And it seems like a weird thing for Jesus to do, doesn't it? But this wasn't some kind of random fit of rage by Jesus.

Actually, this is the only miracle performed by Jesus in all of the Gospels that's destructive. So every other miracle we could say is redemptive.

Every other miracle does something good. It helps. It restores. It heals. It makes better. All except the cursing of the fig tree. In other words, this is the one exception.

So why does Jesus do this? Especially because Mark says it wasn't even the season for figs. Now, I'm no horticulturalist, but apparently figs around Jerusalem would begin to leaf in March or in April.

[5 : 56] And they would produce fruit in June when all their leaves were out. But apparently, when fig leaves appear, they're normally accompanied by some early fruit, some early figs.

And these early figs are smaller, but they can be eaten. And then they drop off before the real figs, the proper figs, come. But if the leaf appears and there are no early figs, then it's a sign that there's something wrong with the tree.

Like the tree is diseased. The tree is dying. Now, I don't want to stray into any kind of fruitless discussion here. Because the issue is that there's something wrong with the tree.

There's something wrong with the tree. It wasn't healthy. It was fruitless. Despite these appearances of life, of figs, of fruit. And so the point is about what this fruitless fig tree illustrates.

Because sandwiched between the fig tree being cursed by Jesus and then the fig tree withering and dying is this episode of the clearing of the temple. And so the cursing of the fig tree is a bit like an acted out prophecy for the temple.

[7 : 10] It shows how Jesus judges false fruitless religion and the false fruitless religion of unbelieving Israel in this instance. And so just as Jesus curses the fig tree for having no fruit on it, so he condemns the fruitless religion of Israel, which is represented by what is going on at the temple.

And so while the fig tree's leaves gave the impression that it had fruit, so Israel, despite appearances, had failed to produce the fruit that God expected of them.

Now, in the Old Testament part of the Bible, the fig tree is often used as a metaphor to describe Israel. So in Jeremiah, God compared Israel's unfaithfulness to a fig tree that bears no figs.

And so Jesus is showing how God's people are unfruitful and they're spiritually barren. And we see this by what is happening at the temple. So let me read what happens.

Verse 15. On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were 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.

[8 : 27] 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.

Now, the temple, the architecture of it, it was divided into different sections. And so all the action here takes place in the temple courts. Sometimes called the court of the Gentiles because it was only in the temple courts that the Gentiles were allowed to be.

And yet the temple courts had become like this marketplace full of traders and money changers. And yet this area was supposed to be set aside for people from all nations to come and to worship God.

And that's why Jesus quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah when he says, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. And then he quotes from the prophet Jeremiah when he says, But you have made it a den of robbers.

So the temple courts should have been a house of prayer for all nations. But the nations couldn't get near because it was a stock market for animal dealers and a bank for money changers.

[9 : 41] And it wasn't that all of these services were bad because animal sacrifices had to be made in the temple and money had to be changed. So the offerings were in the right currency.

But the problem with all of this was that it was happening in the temple courts. It had become a center for business instead of being a place for worship and for prayer.

It wasn't a place of prayer for the nations as God intended it to be in his house. So God had called his people, Israel, to be a light to the nations, to shine before them about God and about his glory so that they would come and follow him.

But what was happening at the temple was the nations were being prevented from getting to God. Those outside of Israel had no opportunity to get to him because the temple courts, where they were allowed, were so busy with everything else.

And so can you see how Israel had turned in on itself? Instead of looking outwards to the nations that needed to know God, they were navel-gazing and only concerned about them.

[10 : 54] They didn't care about people from other nations. And they certainly didn't care about the salvation of people from other nations. And so when Jesus quotes Isaiah 56, My house will be called the house of prayer for all nations, Because, you see, the temple wasn't just for the people of Israel.

Of course, the temple is God's house. But isn't Jesus acting as if it's his house? And that's why he has got the authority to decide what goes on there and what doesn't.

And it's all of Jesus' behavior and his authority that angers the religious leaders. So in verse 18, we read, 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.

So the perversion of the temple worship took place on the watch of these religious leaders. They seemed more interested in gaining wealth from merchants than in giving worship to God.

And so Jesus rightly judges their false, fruitless religion. It needed to wither and to die just like the cursed fig tree. And that's what happens.

[12 : 22] Verse 20, 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. So this was a clear object lesson for Jesus' disciples.

The withering of the fig tree illustrates the devastating judgment on Israel and their temple for their false, fruitless religion. And so, well, what is the application of this for us today?

Well, we could easily just swap the word temple for church, couldn't we? Because Jesus continues to judge false, fruitless religion, whether he finds it in the temple or whether he finds it in the church.

Fruitless religion, barren religion, pointless religion is an abomination to God. Deserves to be cursed by him so that it withers and dies.

And so Jesus is angry at the kind of false religion that appears good on the outside, like a nice fig tree, and yet bears absolutely no spiritual fruit.

[13 : 30] And so from the outside, the temple in Jerusalem looked beautiful. It was a magnificent building. Many churches still do look beautiful.

I was in Paris a couple of weeks ago. Notre Dame, Sacre Coeur, Saint-Soupli. Amazing buildings, phenomenal. Even in Glasgow, Glasgow Cathedral.

Buildings can look so good, so impressive. Look at that great institution. Look at all the buzz of activity that takes place there.

Isn't it so impressive? By all appearances, it seems like a great place full of devotion to God. And yet at the temple in Jerusalem, it was nothing more than false, fruitless religion.

And the practices there at the temple gave a window onto the spiritual condition of the people. In the same way that the practices in any church give a window onto the spiritual condition of our hearts.

[14 : 35] And so the question is, what does Jesus see when he scrutinizes our practices today? Of course, it's easy to apply this teaching to the national church in our land.

It's fair game, easy picking when it comes to false, fruitless religion. Because if you reject the true religion of the Bible and turn away from it, then the only result is withering, decay, and death.

And it is happening all around us. And yet we should be asking, what does Jesus see when he looks at us? What does he see when he looks at Christ Church Glasgow?

What does he see when he looks at your heart and at my heart? Because while busyness and noisiness and buzz and people coming and going might look good on the outside, is this a place where God is worshipped in spirit and in truth?

Or are we just going through the motions every single Sunday? Is this a house of prayer? Because we are people who are sincere about prayer.

[15 : 45] Or are we just too busy to really pray? Is there genuine spiritual vitality here in our lives? Or is it all just outward show?

Because busy churches, with all the buzz and activity, can look good at a surface level. But if it's not the overflow of hearts transformed by Jesus, then it's nothing more than false, fruitless religion.

Remember, it was Jesus' own disciples who heard him curse the fig tree and saw him clear the temple. And so it was an object lesson for them.

They got a front row seat. And so what's Jesus' verdict on Christ Church Glasgow, I wonder? What's his verdict on your life and on my life? Because it doesn't matter what we think about ourselves.

And it doesn't matter what other people think. What matters is Jesus' assessment of us. So are we truly worshipping God? Are we truly helping other people come to meet God?

[16 : 54] Because just as the temple prevented all the nations from meeting with God, so we can end up having all of these unnecessary barriers that stop people encountering God today.

And so don't we need to constantly examine our own hearts? Because we can't fool God. We can't fool Jesus. And so this private lesson of the fig tree for the disciples soon became a public spectacle about how false and how fruitless their religion really was.

And so surely this is a stark warning against false fruitless religion, isn't it? Jesus sees everything we do. And that's why we need to repent of any false fruitless religion that misses the point.

Because if we don't, then Jesus may judge and allow things, things that we have invested our life in, to just wither and die.

He cleared the temple. It was later destroyed. And Jesus has cleared plenty church buildings in our land because of their fruitless activity.

[18 : 03] And he's let them die too. Because that's what he does. You can't mess about with Jesus Christ. There is nowhere to run. And there is nowhere to hide from him.

And so that's the first thing we need to see. Jesus judges false fruitless religion. But the second thing is that Jesus wants real faithful fruit. And we see this in verse 22 to 25.

And this concludes, this concludes the cursing fig tree clearing temple episode. Because in sharp contrast to the false fruitless religion of Israel, Jesus calls his people, and if you're a follower of Jesus, then you are one of his people.

He calls his people to real fruitful faith. And so what the temple was intended for but was fruitless in producing for Israel was real faith, believing prayer, and genuine forgiveness.

And these are the three things that should characterize the true people of God. Faith, prayer, and forgiveness. Because unlike fruitless religion, which is all about what you can see on the outside, the facade, real fruitfulness, real fruitfulness, actually flows from what's on the inside, from the heart, from what you can't see, like faith, and prayer, and forgiveness, all matters of the heart.

[19 : 26] Let's just look at these three aspects that are emphasized by Jesus here. The first is faith, verse 22. Have faith in God, Jesus answered. He's telling his disciples, and he's telling us to have faith in God.

And that's what the temple pointed towards. Yes, the temple was the center of the Jewish religion, but it was a means to an end. The end being faith in God.

And so the temple was never supposed to be an end in itself. But the temple became more important to Israel than what the temple stood for. And that's why Jesus hated the misuse of the temple.

Without faith in God, it was all fruitless. And yet the implications of this continue to play out today, don't they? Like when people are so attracted to their church buildings, they forget what those buildings are supposed to be for.

Like when the building is worshipped more than the God the building is pointing to. So when the outward religion, the outward show of religion, can become so important that people lose focus on the real God and faith in him.

[20 : 40] Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. This is a difficult verse to interpret, but surely Jesus is calling here for prayer with great faith.

Prayer that believes that mountains can be thrown into the sea. Now, Jesus isn't talking about the kind of prayer that believes God will give you whatever you want, sometimes called the name it and claim it prayer.

That's not what he's saying here. When Jesus speaks of this mountain, it could be a mountain that they could see, like Mount Zion. And so to think of it being thrown into the sea was inconceivable.

But Jesus calls for the kind of prayer that has faith in God who is able to do those kinds of impossible things. And so believing prayer is part of what it means to have faith in God.

But in the context here, it surely goes beyond individual personal prayer between me and God. Because remember, Jesus had said the temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations.

[21 : 49] In other words, God wants all people to worship him. And so surely the prayers of God's people are to be kingdom prayers.

Prayers with a desire for those who don't know God to come to know God. Jesus condemned the false, fruitless religion of Israel because it was so inward focused that it excluded people from all nations.

Whereas the kingdom of God that came in Jesus actually propels God's people outwards, not inwards, but outwards towards those who don't know him.

And shouldn't that be our prayer? To pray with faith that God would bring people from all nations to worship him. And I wonder how much that is the burden of your prayers.

Because prayers that conform to God's will for this world are the kind of prayers that God loves to answer. And so yes, Jesus does want us to have faith that can move mountains, but it will be the mountains that God wants to be moved, not our mountains.

[23 : 02] So there's faith and there's prayer. And then thirdly, there's forgiveness. Verse 25, And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

So forgiveness is the fruit of real faith in Jesus. Faith in God means that we will forgive others because God has forgiven us.

He forgives us our sins. And we all sin, so we all need forgiveness. And that's what the whole temple system was essentially saying.

Sinful people like us cannot have access at all to a holy God. And so some sacrifice must be made for our sin before we can be acceptable to God.

And that's how God forgives. It is through sacrifice. And so what Jesus is saying here is that his people, God's people, must be the kind of community that can forgive one another.

[24 : 06] Now, Jesus is saying something revolutionary here at the time because he lived in a culture where it was payback rather than forgive. But what he says is still revolutionary in our culture because our culture would rather cancel people than extend forgiveness to them.

And yet forgiveness is at the very heart of Christianity, at the heart of the gospel. And so forgiveness or lack of forgiveness has a huge impact on our lives and on our society.

And so if Jesus says this here, it's clear that our ability to forgive as God's people will have a bearing on our fruitfulness. Because if we are forgiving people, but we can't forgive others, we haven't really grasped the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We're living out a false fruitless religion rather than real fruitful faith. And so as we close, Jesus judges false fruitless religion wherever he finds it.

And Jesus wants real fruitful faith. And the emphasis has all been on the temple in these chapters. And the temple was no longer required.

[25 : 21] We don't need it. It isn't there anymore. And so to speak of cleansing the temple gives the wrong impression. It was clearing rather than cleansing.

Because if you cleanse something, then you expect that you'll use it again. It's still got a purpose. But Jesus' judgment of the temple here led to his prediction that the temple would one day be destroyed.

Which it was a few years later in AD 70. It was no longer needed because Jesus would supersede the temple as the meeting place between God and sinful human beings.

And so the temple became irrelevant because Jesus fulfilled its purpose in himself. How? Through his death on the cross.

When Jesus died, remember the curtain in the temple was torn in two, ripped from top to bottom, indicating that the sacrificial system was no longer required.

[26 : 21] Because through Jesus' sacrifice for sin on the cross, human beings can meet with God. And so Jesus is the true and better temple.

Forgiveness comes through him. And that's why Revelation, the very last book of the Bible, gives us this tremendous vision of the future with God dwelling with people from all nations.

And so Jesus commands us to have faith in God. And he didn't see faith at the temple. He didn't see it in the temple courts.

All he saw was false, fruitless religion. And it may have looked good on the outside, but it deserved and it got his judgment. And so may Jesus see in us, in all of us, real, fruitful faith, in all we do, and all our days.

gives his whole life everything. Amen. My name is Paul Zhou. Shate of truth. Due to the two stories. And if the religious love that Nancy can clean down the works.iges from Christ on theondooli, and he even felt with us. Thank you. Thank you. Thanks. You'll hear theselims. Tell me about the semanas of God neighbourhoods.

[27 : 33] Everything else. What does all of us have with us? Everything else? Yeah, I'll have a ■■■jali. If there's all of us, let's go in the whatever way. Everything else. It's good. Goodbye. You've all of us, my life. Into all of us. I'm going to dye ourselves more