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**All Leaf, But No Fruit!**

**Mark 11:1–26**

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Six days sandwiched between Sundays. Some of us call it Holy Week. When we open the gospels to this last week of Jesus’s ministry, we see that it is so important that Luke devotes twenty-five percent of his gospel to this last week, Matthew, twenty-nine percent, Mark, thirty-eight percent, and John, forty-eight percent of his gospel speaks of just eight days in the life of Jesus. Absolutely amazing…

If you are like me, you are excited. Traditionally, we call today Palm Sunday. Jesus, just outside of Jerusalem near Bethpage and Bethany, sends two of His disciples to a nearby village with the instructions that they would see a colt tied on a street, and they were to just untie it; take it. Can you imagine what was going through those disciples’ minds when He told them to take a colt that belongs to someone else? He said if someone sees you untying and asks what are you doing, just say that the Lord has need of it and He will return it immediately, and they will let you take it. And just as He said, they did, and it happened. Now, Matthew and John tell us that Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of this donkey is going to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah, and potentially that of Genesis. They are clear. Those two disciples brought that little colt to Jesus and they laid their cloak on it. Many began to lay their cloaks in front of the animal, and others begin to lay leafy branches that have been cut from the trees in the field. John is the one who identifies these leafy branches as palm branches.

Now, this animal has never been ridden. Do any of you ride animals? That is just strange to me. I mean, if you are going to ride an animal into a big city during a feast where there is going to be hundreds of thousands of people, you don’t want to get on that animal its first time. Agreed? Yet the Old Testament law said that if you were going to designate an animal for a sacred purpose, it could never have been used for an ordinary purpose. This is the sacred moment. I think it goes back to the original intention of God’s creation of man –– to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth and have dominion over it. The Son of God, Son of Man, with perfect dominion over the animal world…when He throws His leg over that colt, that colt’s will immediately yields to the wishes of Jesus.

Mark is clear that there is a crowd in front of Jesus and there is a crowd behind Jesus. John tells us that while this is happening the disciples have no idea of its true significance, and they won’t understand its meaning until Jesus is glorified. John also notes the crowd. It’s not a Jerusalem crowd; it’s a crowd that has been following Jesus because of the many signs that He has done, especially the sign of raising Lazarus from the dead. But Mark says there is a crowd in front, a crowd in back, and Greek scholars tell me they are almost like a choir –– to where the crowd in front says, “Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna.” When they pause, the crowd behind Jesus and the donkey say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our father David.” As soon as they finish those two verses, the front crowd again says, “Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest,” and they do this all the way into the city to the point that it captures the attention of the city. The gospels say the whole city is stirred, the city of Jerusalem. They are asking the question who is this. For see, they have said blessed is the son of David, blessed is the king, so they are wondering the identity of this person on the back of this donkey. They see the road lined with cloaks, lined with branches, so He must be somebody. When the crowd answers the question to the crowd that stirred, they say this is Jesus, a prophet. A prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.

Now, I just summarized the first ten verses of Mark chapter 11. for our reading and text this morning, we are going to look at two verses as we prepare our hearts to celebrate Holy Week, six days sandwiched between two Sundays.

**Scripture: Mark 11:11–12**

***“And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.”***

To be transparent, I have spent a lot of time the last two weeks just reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and asking the Holy Spirit to guide me to which of these gospel narratives I am to share. Now, I want to be honest with you, I wanted to do the narrative I’m now doing, and I pray the Holy Spirit’s in agreement. I love Mark is gospel. See, I am out of my element. I love books of the Bible. I love just starting at a place and then finishing that place the next week and just continuing the story. But the last two weeks, I have had four options. Here is why I love Mark…I think many of us have this perception that Palm Sunday starts with Jesus riding in Jerusalem on the back of a donkey because He is coming in Jerusalem to ultimately go to a cross and die, take our sin, and pay that sin debt so that we ultimately wouldn’t go to Hell but go to Heaven when we die. I don’t think that is true. I mean, it’s true –– Jesus came in Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, went to a cross to pay our sin debt, so that ultimately when we die we wouldn’t go to Hell, we would go to Heaven –– but that wasn’t the priority. I think Mark reveals this. I think it’s clear if we will just slow down and listen to what Mark said.

After painting that glorious picture, Mark says, “And He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple.” He looked around, and because it was late, He went back to Bethany. Did you get it? I’m going to ask you a question. If you saw me somewhere in Murray and asked me where I was going next, and I told you that I wasn’t going anywhere next that I was going home, would some of you get the idea that maybe I left my home and went to Murray for that very reason to go to that one place and that one place only? Yes. That is what Mark is doing here. He is telling us why Jesus is coming into Jerusalem the way He does. And that is not to go to a cross yet, it is to go to the temple. Now, I want you to see Jesus getting off that colt (because nobody ever talks about this) and walking into that temple, and possibly many, but especially His disciples following Him. He is not there to make a sacrifice. He is not there to teach. He is there just to look around. Now, if you are like me and you believe all four gospels were ultimately inspired by the Holy Spirit through four different viewpoints, you know that John’s gospel had Jesus go into the temple three years earlier, didn’t like what He saw, tried to make some changes, and got rebuked for it. They asked Him of what authority He did this and He told them. Three years later, possibly, on Palm Sunday, He goes in, looks around, doesn’t say a word, and He leaves. The stage is now set for Mark’s message to you and me. Mark is not just writing a historical narrative. He has just one point and he wants us to get the point so that we understand how to get ready to celebrate the rest of this week as the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, do you remember three years ago when we us through the book of Mark? Mark has a technique of teaching. Jesus had that technique where He used parables. He pulled something out of the world around Him, held it up, and said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like…” and He drew a spiritual comparison. Mark had a technique personally. It is a technique where he starts a story then interrupts the story and starts telling another story. When he finishes telling that story, he comes back and finishes the first story. Does that makes sense? Scholars call this a technique of sandwiching, where you sandwich something between two other things. For Mark, it’s a story, the main story. But to get you ready for the main story so that you can interpret it correctly, he inserts it in another story that he divides in half. It is this other story that is split in half that lets you know how to understand the main story, so they go together. It’s called a Markan sandwich.

I love sandwiches. As a matter of fact, my family has heard me say this many, many times. It is the truth. If I can’t sit down to a filet mignon, I just as soon to have a sandwich, because to me, a sandwich done right is just a little below a filet mignon. Now, you know me. If it’s summer season and we have homegrown tomatoes, I want a homegrown tomato on my hamburger, salted with mustard, and nothing else, on a freshly-grilled bun. If it’s not homegrown tomato season, I just want it plain with cheese, nothing else. Now, those of you who put all that other stuff on a sandwich, you don’t really know what a true good sandwich is because all of that other stuff just takes away from the taste of the bread and the meat. I know a good sandwich. There are places I have been that I have made this comment, “This sandwich would be really good if it had…” and I will name another place’s bread. Sometimes I have been at that other place where the bread is really good and I would say, “If they had the meat from…” and I’ll name this other place. Then, there are a few places (I won’t name them) that it’s like, hmm…bread and meat, glorious!

So, get this picture of a sandwich –– two pieces of bread with meat. We are now going to feast on a Markan sandwich. Here is the breakdown of the sandwich. The top slice is Mark 11:12–14. The meat is Mark 11:15–19. The bottom slice is Mark 11:20–26. Here is what Mark is going to do. He is going to tell a story about Jesus, and then interrupt the story with another story. When he finishes that story, he is going to come back and complete the first story. The purpose of the first story being cut in two is so that you can hold in your hands, the meat, which is the second story. Why can’t we just strip away the bread and have the meat? Mark doesn’t believe you will understand it. Mark believes you will misinterpret it, and unless you see this sandwich, you will misinterpret why Jesus came into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

Are you ready? Palm Sunday is over and Jesus goes back to Bethany, and the next day He is hungry. That is kind of strange –– the Bible is talking about Jesus being hungry. So, He is leaving Bethany and we know He is going to go back to Jerusalem, He is hungry, and He sees a fig tree in the distance full of leaves. Because He is hungry, He goes over to the fig tree and pulls back the leaves to look, and there are no figs. Now, Mark adds this, and if Mark hadn’t added this we would be cool, but he added that it was not season for figs, or fruit. And then Jesus talks to the tree. Now, I have seen people with hunger pangs do strange things. Jesus is hungry, so He is talking to a tree. He says to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again,” and the disciples hear it. I don’t know about you, but I get the idea that Mark is throwing Jesus under the bus! He is talking to a tree –– He is just cursed a tree because a tree doesn’t have figs, but it is not season for figs. It would be like me going out into my yard and cutting down my apple tree because it didn’t have apples on it, and then taking a backhoe and digging up all the roots. As a matter of fact, this passage led Bertrand Russell, that great atheist, to believe he was right in being an atheist, because who could follow a man who would curse a tree out of season. Who would follow a crazy fanatic like Jesus?

Is Mark throwing Jesus under the bus? Of course not, but what is he doing? He is using this story to get us ready for the real story, and in this story, Jesus is hungry so He sees a tree in the distance that has leaves, and when He goes to check out the tree and pulls the leaves back, there is no fruit. Mark says it’s not the season for the ripe fruit to satisfy Jesus’s hunger, but do you know what Jesus expected to find on the tree? Pre-fruit. If you know anything about a fig tree, and we don’t have a lot of fig trees in Dexter, but a fig tree puts out pre-figs before it leaves. Once the pre-figs arrive, then the leaves arrive, the pre-figs grow and mature, and then produce another fig that matures and grows, and that is what you harvest. So, if you were to look at a fig tree and there be all leaf but no fruit, it means that tree is not going to produce fruit. So what is the purpose of a tree that doesn’t bear fruit? If it is a fruit tree, there is no purpose, so Jesus curses it. The disciples hear it.

Okay, do you feel the freshness of this top bun? Now, watch this… there is a word flip. Earlier, Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and now, He goes into Jerusalem but enters the temple. You caught that right. Do you see it? See, you have to remember Mark is writing a fast-paced gospel, no wasted words. Why did Jesus come into the city? He came into the city to go to the temple. When He comes into the temple, He doesn’t make a spontaneous decision, He doesn’t react in the flesh to what He saw, because He had seen the same thing the night before. He went home, He slept on it, He prayed about it, He thought about it, and He came back the next morning prepared. Have you ever had to do that? You see something and you know you had better not react. You even tell somebody that you can’t deal with this until you go home, pray about it, think about it, and then you will get back with them. And then, you come back. See, this is carefully thought out by Jesus. This is not impulsive. You know what He does –– He drives out everybody who is selling animals and buying animals. He just drives them out. Then He goes over to the tables of the money changers. See, if you came from outside Jerusalem and did not have a Jerusalem coin, your coinage probably had a false emperor’s picture on it so you couldn’t bring that into the house of the Lord. You had to convert it so you went to a money-changing table, and were charged a fee. Jesus just turned the tables over and coins go everywhere. He sees people passing through the temple and He bars them from bringing things through the temple. Now, I don’t know how one man could have done this on his own, so He probably had the apostles helping Him, but anybody who was using the temple as a shortcut, He barred them. He went over to where the pigeons were being sold –– these were for the poor people.

Now, you need to remember what is going on here. Years earlier, when you came to the temple, you brought your animal with you, an animal that was without blemish and had been carefully scrutinized, selected, and you offered it to a priest who offered it to God. But now, you can’t bring that animal, because if you brought your animal from home they would find the defect in it. Years earlier, you could stop in Jerusalem, and outside the walls of the temple you could buy an animal that was blameless and spotless and offer it to God. But now if you bought one on the outside, when you brought it, it would be rejected too. So the only animal you could offer was one that was bought inside the temple. Now, do you know about this little thing called supply and demand? Well, because of supply and demand, price was six to ten times higher than normal. Get this picture. A man knows what the price of a lamb is. He is now buying his lamb and it’s six times higher than it should be. Are you going to just pay? No, you are going to haggle. So, there is haggling going on, and Jesus drives all of that out.

**The Temple**

 

Now watch this…Jesus was at the temple. That temple is about thirty to thirty-five acres in area. There is a wall all the way around it. In the center is the Court of the Israelites. If you were a Jewish man or Jewish woman, you could go into this court, but it was divided between men and women. Now, only an Israelite priest could go into the court area around the tall part, and only a few priests could go daily into the Holy Place. Only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies inside the Holy Place behind that curtain. Now, all the yard area around that center structure is called the Court of the Gentiles. This area is where all this (buying and selling, the money changers) is taking place. So, the temple had two primary courts –– the inner court, which is the Court of the Israelite, and the outer court, which is the Court of the Gentiles. The inner court was for God’s chosen people and the outer court was for all peoples. It is not the actions of God’s people inside the Court of the Israelites that Jesus took issue with. Please hear me. It is the actions of God’s people outside their court, in the courtyard of the Gentiles that has Jesus upset because He considers all of this His temple. Are you with me?

Now, while doing this, Jesus says to somebody, “Is it not written…” referring to the Bible, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?” See, the reason it tells us about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, fulfilling Old Testament prophecies, is because we now know He has the authority to deal with what is going on in His house, because He owns the house. Amen? You may can do some stuff in your house that I won’t do in my house, and I may never stop it in your house, but I can stop it in *my* house. Jesus stops it and (quoting Isaiah) says is not my house supposed to be a house of prayer. Have you ever looked Isaiah chapter 56 up in the Old Testament? The context is God saying He wants foreigners coming to His house, and when they come to His house, He wants them to find a house of prayer. When somebody doesn’t know God shows up to God’s house, God wants them to have such an experience in the house that they realize His house is a house of prayer where people are in communion with God, fellowshipping with God, talking with God. In Jesus’ day, Gentiles weren’t experiencing that because of the haggling, the buying and selling, the trading, and people running through the temple as a shortcut to get from one side of town to the other side because they didn’t want to walk around a thirty-five-acre field so they just went through the middle of it.

Now, some don’t realize this, but Jesus puts two Old Testament verses together, and the other verse isn’t from Isaiah, it’s from Jeremiah 7:11 where God said to Jeremiah (talking to Israel) you have made my house a den of robbers. But here is the context. Oh, please hear this! The context was God’s covenant people were coming to the temple to worship God. But the week before? They were stealing, committing adultery, lying, bearing false witness, dishonoring their mom and dad, profaning the Sabbath, and then showing up in the temple. God says…*are you kidding me!* *This isn’t a place of worship! This isn’t that a place of prayer! This is a den of robbers. This is a den of thieves.* He did not judge them based on their actions in the temple; He judged them based on their actions outside the temple. Whoa! Now, the Pharisees are going to step in. They are going to question Jesus’ authority. The story is going to end and Jesus going to leave.

Now, we have the top bun, we have the meat of the story, but before we get to the bottom bun, the bottom story, I think you already get it. Why should people go to the temple? Because they are hungry. In our story, when Jesus was hungry He found a fig tree that was all leaf but no fruit. So, do you know what Jesus just did? I want to read the man part of my ESV Bible. I love ESV Bible, but to help me out, it’s got some man stuff in it, like little headings telling me what this paragraph is going to talk about. Before verse 12, it says, **Jesus curses the fig tree**. Does everybody agree that Jesus cursed the fig tree? Before verse 15, the heading says, **Jesus cleanses the temple**. No, no, no…He didn’t cleanse the temple; He revealed the temple was cursed. Just as the fig tree was all leaf, no fruit, no reason to have it around, the earthly temple was all leaf, no fruit, no reason to have it around. As a matter of fact, in a few days Jesus prophesy that this very temple is going to be destroyed and every stone will be moved out of its place. What Mark is telling us is that there never be a purpose again for a physical temple standing in Jerusalem. I know that messes up a lot of theology and a lot of eschatology, but it’s gone forever, no purpose for it. It’s cursed.

Now, the bottom bun. Verse 20 says, “As they passed by in the morning…” Okay, they started out on Sunday, we just had Monday, and now it’s Tuesday. Can I have a little credit here? I have preached three days of activity in thirty something minutes so far. Amen! Now, watch this. The next morning, they passed by, meaning they are going back to Jerusalem, and Peter says, look Lord! He had Jesus look at the fig tree because the fig tree was withered to its roots. Wow! I have cut a bush at my house before, and if I just let it fall down and remain standing, you don’t know the next day I cut it. This fig tree, the next day, was withered, not just leaves all the way to the root. The temple? Withered, all the way to the root. If there was some life in the root, Jesus may have cleansed the temple, but there was no life in the temple all the way down to the root. This is why He is coming into Jerusalem because the temple, the place of prayer, has become the den of robbers all the way down to its roots, just like that fig tree. Peter brings the fig tree to Jesus’ attention, and Jesus answered.

Now, His answer doesn’t even make sense to a lot of people. He goes into this discourse about praying in verses 22–25, “Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in Heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” I can’t tell you how many people I read who take these verses on prayer and take it completely out of context because they don’t understand this is the bottom bun that couples with the top bun to hold the meat of the story together so that we can digest why Jesus came to Jerusalem. If your place of prayer is a den of thieves and it’s withered to the root, where are you going to pray? Jesus is saying…*I don’t want you guys to have faith in a place, I want you to have faith in a person, and that person is God*. Amen! Today, we have so many people who want a place to go. They want to be in a place, and they want safety and they want security in that place. When that place lets them down, woo wee, are they critical! No. Jesus didn’t come into Jerusalem to establish a place; He came in to Jerusalem to establish this fact –– our faith must be in God, and the basis of the relationship is faith. You don’t have faith in a man or religion associated with men; you have faith in God. Where the temple was supposed to be that place of prayer, Jesus is saying just talk to Him, approach Him in faith. See, if you are hungry, come to Him in faith. Got this big mountain in your life? Talk to Him about it. Don’t doubt…believe, and guess what? That mountain can be removed. It could be drowned in the depths of the sea so you don’t even see it anymore if you don’t doubt and have faith. He is not trying to establish a place of prayer; He is trying to establish a people of prayer, people who are in a relationship with God, people who are hungry for God!

In that last verse, 25, Jesus says, whoa, whoa…now when you catch yourself praying make sure you have forgiven. Many of you have heard me say this before –– the forgiven forgive. If you have been forgiven by God, you will forgive others because you must forgive others. The reason you forgive is because you have been forgiven. I fear for those people who say, “I’m going to take that to my grave” and they are talking about what somebody did to them. They are never going to release them. They are never going to let it go. They are going to hold it over them. They are going to hold them accountable. Ultimately, because they believe there was a core motive of why they did what they did, and it was to hurt them. So they have decided they are never going to forgive. I fear for that, because if that is true and you do, it reveals that you have never been forgiven.

Why did Jesus let this be the bottom bun? I was enjoying those top bun and that meat. What is He ultimately trying to do? He is trying to reveal this truth. Three years earlier, according to John, when He went in the temple and saw what He saw and tried to cleanse the temple, they asked Him by what authority He does this. They asked for a sign and He said well, here is my sign –– destroy this building and in three days, I’ll raise it up. And they said it has taken us forty-six years to build this building, and you are telling us if we tear it down, you can put it back together in three days? But the Bible says that He wasn’t speaking of the physical temple. He is talking about His body. See, that temple in Jerusalem that Jesus walked into and saw all of that ungodliness in the Court of the Gentiles –– people hungry, Gentiles coming to God not seeing Him because of God’s people and what they were engaged in, therefore their hunger could not be fed –– Jesus knew that He was the perfect house, while that was just a prophetic house that pointed to the perfect house that was coming, and that was Jesus. But the perfect house would take His blood into the presence of God and offer an atoning sacrifice making it possible for God’s permanent house, His church, to be built. That is why He came. He came to build His house, the church, and that is you and me, a people who live in relationship with God and approach God in faith on the basis that we know we have been forgiven. And if we have been forgiven, then we are going to forgive others! It doesn’t flow because of what they have done to us or what they have done after what they did to us. It flows from and because of what our God has done for us in Jesus. We are God’s house. What Jesus coming in Jerusalem is about, and what it is all about is Him redeeming us so that we could be a block, or a brick, or a stone in God’s permanent house, the church, and us be a people who live in fellowship with Him.

Here is what I want to end with based on this story…you have an inner court and an outer court. You have a court where you commune with God, and sup with God, and you fellowship with God. But then, you have an outer court. Your outer court is where you have a relationship with other people…people who don’t know Jesus Christ, people who do know Jesus Christ. They are hungry, and then they meet you. You say what you say to them and you do what you do to them and think it’s okay. Jesus believes the inside and the outside should match.

Here is a false premise I think we have in the church, but I pray it’s not in Hardin –– you can come to church for an hour or two on Sunday morning and somehow that cancels out all the wrong you do for the rest of the week. How dare you be a dad or mom and believe you can live the way you live before your kids, and then think coming to church for a couple hours on Sunday and dropping them off at First Fruits Farm is going to change their life. How dare we believe we can go to work, work with somebody forty, fifty, sixty hours a week and talk like we talk, tell the jokes that we tell, undermine people the way we undermine people, do the business dealings we deal, and then believe we can come in on Sunday morning and somehow that cancel all that out. I don’t need to talk about going to ball games. I don’t need to talk about our extracurricular activities.

What got Jesus’ attention wasn’t the inner court but the outer court. I really think He is more worried about what we do out there than what we do in here. What the world wants to see is a match. Does your inside and outside match? Paul reminded the Corinthian church that they were the temple of God and the temple is holy. It has been set apart and it has been bought with a price –– the blood of Jesus. Therefore, the body, the church, the temple, should glorify God in our body, not in our soul/spirit, in our body. That body that we use to relate to people all around us. That body that we use to make a living. That body that we use to entertain ourselves. That body that is in the presence of others, people who are hungry. When they see you and they see me, do they see all leaf and no fruit, or fruit? Do you see the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit –– love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, faithfulness, self-control? Do you see that in your life –– at home, at work, with your friends? We are His permanent house.