

Mark 11:20-33 ~ Scripture Verses

The Withered Fig Tree

¹² The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

[Verses 15 to 19: Jesus clears the temple]

²⁰ In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹ Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

²² “Have [a] faith in God,” Jesus answered. ²³ “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. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 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.[b]”

The Authority of Jesus Questioned

²⁷ They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ²⁸ “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ³⁰ John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!”

³¹ They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ ³² But if we say, ‘From men’...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

³³ So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Footnotes:

a. Mark 11:22 – Some early manuscripts: If you have

b. Mark 11:25 – Some manuscripts do not include Mark 11:26 – But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins.

Mark 11:20-33 ~ Discussion Questions

1. Why did the fig tree have no fruit? What did Jesus say to it? What happened to the tree? (11:12-14, 11:20)
2. How did this event differ from every other miracle Jesus performed?
3. Why do you think that Jesus cursed the fig tree? Is there a connection between cursing the fig tree and clearing the temple grounds?
4. The fig tree had leaves but no fruit. Is there an area of your life that looks good but is not producing the fruit that God wants? What is it?
5. Jesus used the withered fig tree to illustrate two important truths about prayer. What are they? (11:22-25)
6. Why is it necessary for us to forgive others for what they have done? Why is it difficult to forgive others? What will happen (or not happen) if you don't forgive others? (11:25; some translations add 11:26)
7. In the temple courts, who confronted Jesus? What were "these things" to which the religious leaders referred? (11:27-28)
8. How did Jesus answer the challenge put to him? What condition did Jesus place on answering the challenge? Why do you think he decided not to answer them directly, but instead posed a question in response? (11:29-30)
9. Why was Jesus' question so difficult for the religious leaders to answer? (11:31-32)
10. In what ways today do human authorities challenge God's authority? When have you questioned or challenged God's authority in your life?
11. How can we ensure that we follow God's authority rather than the "authorities" who challenge his word?
12. When is it most difficult to submit to God's authority? Is it easier to say you'll submit (or you want to submit) to God than to actually do it?
13. With respected teachers, managers, and leaders telling you to depend upon no one but yourself, how can you find it in yourself to rely on no one except God?

Mark 11:20-33 ~ Leader's Guide

1. Why did the fig tree have no fruit? What did Jesus say to it? What happened to the tree? (11:12-14, 11:20)

Adapted from the Oxford Bible Commentary, we read, The two incidents which now follow, the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig-tree, constitute the most famous example of Mark's 'sandwiching' technique: the story of the incident in the temple is sandwiched between the two halves of the story of the fig-tree. By this device, Mark clearly wants the one story to interpret the other. Hence for Mark the fig tree incident provides the interpretation for the temple account. Thus, Jesus' action in the temple is probably not a cleansing (as it is traditionally described), but a 'cursing,' a final and definitive act of judgement against the temple and, perhaps, Israel.

The fig-tree incident has always raised questions. Jesus' action seems highly arbitrary, and a pointless act of gratuitous destruction. It is compounded by the fact that the tree has leaves earlier than it should, but has no figs, which is not unreasonable as it is not yet the season for figs. Given all these problems, it is very hard to trace any such incident back to Jesus' own ministry. Probably we have here a symbolic narrative, acting as some kind of acted parable, the historical roots of which are lost completely.

What lies behind it may be passages in the OT which speak of God looking for figs from his fig-tree, a metaphor used to refer to Israel and her proper response to God (cf Jer 8:13); also the image of the fig-tree in fruit is used to represent Israel in the messianic age. The fruitless tree thus represents Israel who should have welcomed her Messiah, Jesus; yet when Jesus comes to the heart of Israel, Jerusalem and the temple, he is rejected, and the tree has no fruit: the result is inevitably judgement.

2. How did this event differ from every other miracle Jesus performed?

All of his other 36 miracles could be interpreted and generally understood by those around him as being beneficial and done out of compassion: healing, restoring sight, speech and hearing, bringing a person back to life, exorcizing demons, providing food and wine, calming the sea, causing a coin to be in a fish's mouth, and walking on water. This clearly was not beneficial or compassionate, and it required an explanation from Jesus as to why he did it; an explanation that actually seems to have little to do with the miracle itself.

3. Why do you think that Jesus cursed the fig tree? Is there a connection between cursing the fig tree and clearing the temple grounds?

See discussion of Q 1.

The NIV Study Bible says that because the destruction of the tree was total and no one in the future would eat fruit from it, that it served as a vivid warning of the judgement to come on Jerusalem in 70 AD. It is to be taken as a sign of the end of the age. Possibly, but that seems like a stretch to me.

More likely, it is simply an ‘incident’ that provides the occasion for further teaching on the importance, and power, of faith and prayer. (See Q 5)

4. The fig tree had leaves but no fruit. Is there an area of your life that looks good but is not producing the fruit that God wants? What is it?

5. Jesus used the withered fig tree to illustrate two important truths about prayer. What are they? (11:22-25)

First, you must pray with faith, confidence, and absolute belief that God not only *can* do anything (that’s easy) but that he *will* do anything. This is really difficult and we so often give ourselves wiggle room by saying things like, “Lord, if it be your will” or “if it is in your plan.”

Second, the Lord requires that we forgive others before approaching him with our prayers.

6. Why is it necessary for us to forgive others for what they have done? Why is it difficult to forgive others? What will happen (or not happen) if you don’t forgive others? (11:25; some translations add 11:26)

As stated in the discussion of Q 5, the Lord not only wants us to forgive others as he forgives us, but he requires this forgiveness in order that our prayers be answered.

Some manuscripts add verse 26: But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins. This is not found in the earliest (and best?) manuscripts and was probably inserted from Matthew 6:15 by a copyist. Nevertheless, the phrase does appear at the end of the Lord’s prayer and is not inappropriate here.

7. In the temple courts, who confronted Jesus? What were “these things” to which the religious leaders referred? (11:27-28)

This time Jesus was confronted by quite a group: the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders. Other times it was often just the Pharisees or teachers of the law, but here we have all the Jewish leaders on the stage.

‘These things’ (11:28) in Mark’s context probably refers to the temple incident, though it may have had a much wider reference, referring to Jesus’ teaching and other activity in general.

8. How did Jesus answer the challenge put to him? What condition did Jesus place on answering the challenge? Why do you think he decided not to answer them directly, but instead posed a question in response? (11:29-30)

Jesus replies with a counter-question (a feature typical of many debates among Jewish teachers), throwing the issue back and asking his questioners what they thought about John the Baptist. This is somewhat surprising: in Mark's narrative John scarcely figures as a person in his own right with his own 'ministry' among the Jews of the time: rather, he simply comes on to the stage to point forward to Jesus (Mark 1:3-8). Similarly his fate prefigures Jesus' coming fate (Mark 9:11-13). Perhaps we have here a reflection of Jesus' own strong belief that his work was very closely tied to that of John (as probably his decision to be baptized by John also indicates).

9. Why was Jesus' question so difficult for the religious leaders to answer? (11:31-32)

The Jews' musings indicate John's great popularity among the masses (Mark 1:5). Many people were already listening and responding to Jesus' message and the religious leaders didn't want to lose any more to him by appearing to be hostile to John the Baptist.

And, of course, the other problem the leaders had is that they if they believed that John was foretelling the coming of Jesus as a savior and king, then they would have to believe Jesus' teachings too. Some of them actually did believe in Jesus and some perhaps partially believed, but the vocal majority feared losing their power and were thus caught in a dilemma and essentially couldn't (or refused to) answer Jesus' question.

10. In what ways today do human authorities challenge God's authority? When have you questioned or challenged God's authority in your life?

11. How can we ensure that we follow God's authority rather than the "authorities" who challenge his word?

12. When is it most difficult to submit to God's authority? Is it easier to say you'll submit (or you want to submit) to God than to actually do it?

13. With respected teachers, managers, and leaders telling you to depend upon no one but yourself, how can you find it in yourself to rely on no one except God?

Mark 11:20-33 ~ Additional Discussion Questions

1. What did Peter note when he saw the fig tree the next day? (11:21)
2. Jesus didn't explain the withered fig tree at all. Rather he used it as an object lesson regarding a strong prayer life. In review, what are the two aspects of prayer that he said were vital?
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
3. Why do you think he emphasized these two truths about prayer? Are they easy? Do they come naturally?
4. When have you experienced frustrations or doubts in your prayer life?
5. What do Jesus' actions tell you about his attitude toward the religious leaders of the day? (11:28-33)
6. How did Jesus challenge his accusers to stand up for the truth? (11:30-32)
7. Why do you think Jesus did not want to directly reveal the source of his authority to the religious leaders?
8. What does this passage tell us about Jesus' attitude toward people who reject his authority? Does that say anything to you personally?
9. What *specific steps* can you take *this week* to obey God's authority in one area of your life?
10. Look ahead to the parable of the tenants (12:1-11) and see if you can identify two major messages of it. (We will discuss this somewhat complex parable next week but if you've thought about it in advance, you'll get more out of it.)