

“Leaves but No Fruit”
Mark 11:12-25
January 18, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark, with Jesus in Jerusalem.

He’ll visit the Temple once again, but on the way, he’s going to look for something to eat.

Let’s turn now to our text: Mark 11:12-25.

And as we do, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{11:12} On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.

¹⁵ And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹⁶ And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ And he was teaching them and saying to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” ¹⁸ And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came they went out of the city.

²⁰ As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹ And Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” ²² And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. ²³ 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. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ 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.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we do believe that your word

is firmly fixed forever, with you, in the heavens.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations.
Help us to never forget your precepts,
because by them you have given us life.
Lord, we are yours, save us,
and help us to seek your ways.
Grant this we ask in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:89, 90, 93, 94]

Introduction

We have two stories here.

And there's a couple things we need to note as we come to them.

One is that, if you remember from our past sermons on Mark, we encounter again this morning a unique feature of Mark's Gospel: we have here another "Marcan Sandwich."

This is a format where Mark starts one story, pauses it to tell a second story, and then he returns to the first story to conclude it. And so the first story is kind of like the bread of the story, on the top and the bottom, and the second story is like the meat, in the middle.

And the two stories are meant to work together, so that each helps interpret the other. So, the cursing of the fig tree is meant to help us understand Jesus's clearing of the Temple, and Jesus's clearing of the Temple is meant to help us understand the cursing of the fig tree. [Wright, *Mark*, 150-151; Witherington, 312]

And that's helpful because it also means that Mark wants us to see that Jesus's cursing of the fig tree was not just some random and odd thing that Jesus did. But we're supposed to see it as an "enacted parable" – an action that's meant to teach us and Jesus's disciples, through metaphor. [Edwards, 339; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 421; Horne, 149; Leithart, 150]

And when we take these two stories together, we see a common message.

What we see is that: God wants us to bear fruit for him. But often we're tempted to try to look healthy, without actually bearing fruit for God. Jesus judges that approach to things here, and he calls us instead to fruitful faith.

Let me repeat that: God wants us to bear fruit for him. But often we are tempted to try to look healthy, without actually bearing fruit for God. Jesus judges that approach to here, and he calls us instead to fruitful faith.

Let's take that one piece at a time.

God Wants Us to Bear Fruit for Him

First, God wants us to bear fruit for him.

We see this both with the fig tree and with the Temple.

With the fig tree the theme of fruitfulness is somewhat obvious ... though it may also be a bit puzzling.

Because on a first read, Jesus can seem kind of unreasonable here. Verse 14 says that Jesus cursed the tree for not having any fruit. But verse 13 says that it was not yet the season for figs. So what's going on there?

Well, it makes more sense when we understand the agricultural cycle of these fig trees around Jerusalem. In the fall, a fig tree would sprout buds. In the spring, which is when Jesus is there, these buds would swell into green fig knops. These fig knops were not fully matured summer figs, but they could still be eaten, and they often were eaten by the locals.

So these edible fig knops came in in the spring. And then, after the fig knops came in, the leaf buds on the tree would sprout. So the edible fig knops came in before the leaves came in. [Edwards 339-340]

Which is why, when Jesus saw that the tree was in leaf, in verse 13, he could rightly expect that the branches of that same tree would be loaded with edible fig knops. They wouldn't be the fully mature summer figs yet – and that's the point Mark is acknowledging at the end of verse 13 – but it was clearly the right time for the edible fig knops, as Mark notes at the beginning of verse 13, when he points out that the tree was in leaf. [Edwards, 340]

But instead of finding the tree filled with fig knops, Jesus finds nothing. No fig knops. No fruit at all. Only leaves. There was the appearance of fruitfulness from a distance, with no real fruit up close.

And then, Jesus finds the same thing at the Temple.

But for that to make sense, we first need to realize that just as Jesus could reasonably expect to find physical food when he came to this fig tree, God, in the Old Testament, reasonably expected to find spiritual food when he came to the Temple.

Now, what do I mean by that?

We talked about this back in Mark 9 ... but that was over a year ago for us, so let's review.

In the Temple, God called on his people to perform animal sacrifices. Some of those sacrifices – like the purification offerings – especially symbolized the future work of Jesus – who died to cleanse us from our sin and guilt.

But those weren't the only kind of sacrifices God called for in the Temple.

In fact, the most common form of sacrifice that God called for in the Temple was the ascension offering – translated in the ESV as the “burnt offering.” And the main emphasis of that sacrifice was how the animal, burned on the altar, was transformed into smoke, and ascended into the presence of God.

The Bible speaks of this kind of offering as a “food offering” to Yahweh – a “pleasing aroma” to God. It's not of course that God needs food to live. But rather that he can delight in it, as a gift.

But it wasn't really the animal that God delighted in. The animal was meant to point to something greater. Just as the purification offering represented Jesus, and his offering of himself for us, so the ascension offering, in many ways, represented the worshipper, and their offering of themselves to God.

As one theologian puts it: “By offering an animal [...], the Israelite worshipper is [really] offering himself to God. And this is the ‘gift’ that God really wants. [...] That's the sacrifice that pleases Him [...] God wants to eat *you*.” [Leithart, *House*, 87-88]

By his grace, God cleanses us and forgives us of our sins. But he doesn't do that so that we can then just go off and do our own thing. He does that so that we can then present ourselves – our hearts and lives – as fruit for God – as food for God – as a tasty meal that the Lord could delight in. [Leithart, *House*, 89]

That's what's at the heart of Temple worship. What God wants is for his people, who he's saved by grace, to offer themselves to him – their hearts, their lives, their goods, and their efforts. That is a “pleasing aroma” to him – a delightful meal, good fruit that he is pleased with.

And this idea comes up repeatedly in the New Testament as well. Over and over again Jesus speaks of a life of faithfulness to God as one that bears good fruit for him. [Matthew 7:16-17, 12:33, 13:23; Luke 6:43-44, 8:15; John 15:5, 15:8]

The same language and imagery of fruit also comes up in the writing of the Apostle Paul.

Paul exhorted the church in Rome, telling them that God has saved us “in order that we may bear fruit for God.” [Romans 7:4] Paul called on the church in Galatia to bear the “fruits of the Spirit” in how they live [Galatians 5:22-23]. He told the Philippians to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” [Philippians 1:11]. He explained to them how he longed to live a life of “fruitful labor” [1:22] and to see fruit in their lives as well [4:17]. He exhorted the Colossians “to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work” [Colossians 1:10]. James the brother of Jesus uses the imagery of fruit as well. [James 3:17].

Fruit seems to be one of God's favorite ways of describing how he views faithful hearts, faithful lives, good works, and loving, sacrificial acts, when they are offered to him by his people. They are like good fruit – delicious fruit – that we offer up to God in love.

And it's worth reflecting on that imagery. Because I think it's meant to say something about God's delight in our faithfulness and good works. Fruit is something to be enjoyed. It's delivered, ultimately, to a diner who will delight in it, not to an accountant who will put it in a spreadsheet.

And that's important because I think, for many of us, when we think of how God receives our good works, our faithfulness, our sacrifices, I think we tend to think of him more like a scrupulous accountant. We place our deed on a scale. He measures it. Scrutinizes it. Writes it down in his book.

And to be sure, God does take an accounting of our lives.

But in our text here, and in so many other places, the way God speaks about how he receives our good works, our sacrificial acts, our loving deeds, our faithful hearts – so often the way he describes it is not like an accountant receiving a financial deposit ... but instead, he speaks of it as delicious fruit ... as a sweet dessert that he is going to enjoy.

Do you ever stop and consider God enjoying and delighting in your faithfulness, your good works, your loving sacrifices for others?

Because the implication of this is that God delights in these kinds of things like a child delights in tasty fruit on a warm summer day. Our faithfulness and our good works ... give God pleasure.

That's the first thing we see here. God wants us to bear fruit for him – fruit which he will then delight in.

Often, We Are Tempted to Try to Look Healthy, Without Actually Bearing Fruit for God

But then, the second thing we see here is that instead of bearing fruit for God, we are often tempted to try to look healthy, without actually bearing any real fruit.

And we see that here both when it comes to the fig tree, and also when it comes to the Temple.

Look again at the fig tree.

Remember what we said a few moments ago. This tree, since it was “in leaf” [v.13], it was giving the appearance of a healthy tree that should at that time be filled with edible fig knops. That's what it looked like from a distance. But up close, Jesus saw that it had no real fruit. It had the appearance of fruitfulness from a distance, but no real fruit when Jesus got up close. [Edwards, 339-340; Keller, 175]

And the Temple was the same.

The Temple was very busy with spiritual-looking activity. But there was no actual spirituality there. [Keller, 175-176] People were offering animals to God. But they weren't really offering themselves to God – their hearts, their lives, their good works.

And Jesus makes this point starkly. He says that far from being a place of spiritual fruitfulness, the Temple had become a “den of robbers.”

Now, people often read this as if Jesus's primary critique is that the business practices going on in the temple are unjust – as if people are using the currency exchange and sale of animals as a way to rob or exploit others. But there are several reasons to conclude that this is not Jesus's main point.

First, Deuteronomy 14 called for some kind of market and exchange system in Jerusalem for those traveling from far away to acquire animals needed for sacrifice. So the existence of such exchanges can't be the main problem. [Horne, 150; Leithart, 144; See Deuteronomy 14:22-26]

Second, Jesus called the Temple a “den of robbers,” but robbers don't rob in their den. The den is their hideout. It's where they go for safety, not where they carry out crimes of robbery. If Jesus

calls the Temple a robbers' den, the comment seems to be less about robbery taking place in the Temple, and more a statement that the people are living as rebels and outlaws out in the world, and then looking to the Temple to keep them safe from the consequences of their lives. [Edwards, 340] In other words, they're hypocrites. They come to the Temple and do many religious-looking things. But in real life they are outlaws – they rebel against God with impunity. They grow a lot of healthy-looking leaves in the Temple. But they bear no real fruit in their lives.

Third, the Old Testament supports this interpretation. Jesus is actually drawing this phrase “den of robbers” from the prophet Jeremiah, who uses the same phrase in Jeremiah 7 for a situation in which Israelites are living lives of sinfulness – lives with no spiritual fruit – but then they come to the Temple to appear faithful, and presume that that will put them right with God. [Jeremiah 7:8-11]

That's what Jesus is judging here: people trying to look spiritually healthy by all their activity in the Temple, and trusting in that outward appearance, but in truth, in their actual hearts and lives, they are not bearing fruit for God.

And we are often tempted to do the same.

It makes me think of a scene from a movie where a woman is trying to convince someone she's very domestic, and so she takes steps to make the house smell like she's baking something ... rather than doing the work to actually bake anything.

We're often tempted to do something like that to God. We try to create the aroma of good works ... but if God looks at us closely ... we haven't actually produced the real fruit for him to receive and enjoy.

What God really wants from us – the fruit he desires – is our love for him and our service to him: the love we have for him in our hearts, and the things we say and do to serve him and serve others – those good works are our fruit for God.

But so often we're tempted to create the appearance those things, without the real substance. Like lighting a candle that smells like cookies baking in the oven, rather than actually baking cookies.

Maybe we work to make sure our family looks happy and shiny and all put together on Sunday morning ... but we refuse to actually take the steps and seek the help we may need to make our marriage or our family life healthy, and a delight to God.

Maybe we serve in obvious and visible ways while we're here at the church ... but then at home, or at work, or out in the community, we don't serve others, but we demand and expect them to serve us.

Maybe we engage in prayer and worship here on Sundays, but prayer is absent from our lives from Monday through Saturday.

Maybe we loudly denounce the sins of the world when we gather with other believers ... but then when we leave here, we hold on to a hidden and secret life of sin, and rather than bringing it to light, and seeking help in order to repent, we work instead to make sure no one else knows about it.

Whatever the details, what does this tendency look like for you?

Now ... to be clear ... none of us are perfect. We all have areas of inconsistency, of failure, of sin – those places where we don't live up to our ideals. But remember, Jesus went to the fig tree not expecting perfect figs – he knew it was not yet the season of such fully-formed figs. He was merely looking for the tree to be working towards the goal of growing such figs – he was looking for early fruits, fig knops, that might be imperfect, might still be immature, but even so, it was real fruit that the tree was putting its efforts towards. Jesus would have delighted in such fruit, even though it was still far from perfect.

Are you working to grow such fruit for God in your life? Or are you often satisfied with the appearance of spiritual health, rather than the reality?

God wants us to bear fruit for him. But often, we are tempted to try to look healthy, without actually bearing fruit for God.

Jesus Judges that False Spirituality

And what we see here is that Jesus judges that kind of approach to our relationship with him. Jesus judges that kind of false spirituality that grows a lot of leaves – that does a lot of pious-looking things ... but that doesn't actually bear fruit for God.

We see that judgment, obviously, with the fig tree.

Jesus pronounces a curse, and the fig tree withers.

We see Jesus's judgment also with the Temple.

Though verses 15 through 19 are often referred to as Jesus "cleansing" the Temple, many commentators point out that Jesus does no such thing. A "cleansing" removes impurities and restores something to its proper function. [Edwards, 345] Jesus doesn't do that here. Instead, Jesus symbolically judges the Temple, and points to God's future judgment that is coming to it if the people don't repent.

Jesus enacts this symbolic judgment by disrupting the marketplace in such a way that it would likely have stopped the flow of sacrifices, slowing or even temporarily bringing to a halt the activity of the Temple itself. [Edwards, 342-343] This was a way of declaring that the Temple was under God's judgment. [Wright, *Mark*, 152; See also Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 416-422; Horne, 152; Leithart, 144]

Jesus also proclaims this judgment on the Temple in verse 23, where "this mountain" almost certainly refers to the Temple Mount [Wright, *Mark*, 153; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 422; Leithart, 151; Witherington, 318], and the "sea" likely refers to forces of a foreign army [Horne, 149; See Daniel 7; Isaiah 8:7; Jeremiah 47:2]. Jesus is pointing forward to the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 AD [Witherington, 312], and God's judgment on those first-century Jews who have misused it.

Jesus, in verses 15 through 19, is symbolically judging the Temple, and pointing to God's future judgment when he will end all sacrifices within it. Like the tree, the Temple will wither. Because, like the tree, the Temple is already dead within. [Horne, 150]

And with this text, Mark warns us that Jesus will judge us in the same way, if we choose to seek just the appearance of spiritual health, rather than the substance of bearing fruit for God in our hearts and lives.

Man may see the outward appearance. But God sees the heart. Whatever we may do on the outside, God knows if our hearts are far from him. He knows what we do when we leave the church building. He knows our secret lives. He is not as easily fooled as others are.

And what our text reminds us is that while we're all imperfect – while imperfections in the Christian life are inevitable in this life – if we embrace an approach to spirituality that is more concerned with the appearance than the reality ... if we are truly characterized by a hollow and image-based approach to our faith ... if we're covered with leaves, but producing no real fruit ... then he warns us here that if we persist in that way of relating to him ... he will judge us.

If we don't repent, we will wither like the fig tree. If we don't repent, we will be condemned like the Temple.

God wants us to bear fruit for him. But if instead we seek primarily to look healthy, without actually bearing real fruit for God, then Jesus will judge us.

Jesus Calls Us Instead to Fruitful Faith

But before such judgment comes, he calls us to repent.

In many ways that's what Jesus's actions are here – they are a call to repent, for the people to change their ways.

In the Bible, when a prophet pronounces that judgment is coming, the implication, more often than not, is that that judgment can be avoided if the people repent. Jonah declared to the people of Nineveh: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" But when the people of Nineveh repented, God showed them mercy, and did not bring judgment upon them. The same is likely true here – if the people heeded Jesus's warning, and repented, and bore true spiritual fruit, God might relent of the coming judgment. [Witherington, 316-317]

And though they didn't respond that way as a whole, we still can.

And so, the last thing we need to see in all of this is that Jesus calls us to repentance, and to fruitful faith.

And that comes out in a few places in our text.

First, it comes out in verse 22 and 23, where Jesus exhorts those who are following him to place their faith in God above all else: above our own abilities, above our own resources, above even the Temple Mount. [Edwards, 347] Faith in God is central.

Second, Jesus calls his followers to heartfelt prayer – to call out to God, to speak to him. We see that in verse 24.

Third, Jesus calls us to bear the fruit of forgiveness in our lives: to forgive other people. We see this in verse 25

That verse might seem random to us – but it’s not. Even as Jesus pronounces that God’s judgment is coming to some, even as Jesus anticipates further oppression from the Jewish leaders, even so, Jesus reminds his disciples that even when his disciples are facing mistreatment and persecution, they are not to become vindictive and hateful, but are to forgive others as they have been forgiven. [Horne, 150]

But finally, Jesus also exhorts his followers to bear the fruit of loving service and ministry to others.

And we see this in the middle of verse 17. There Jesus reminds his followers that God’s house is meant to be “a house of prayer for all nations.”

Now ... why does Jesus make that point there?

Well, commentators seem to agree that the tables Jesus overturned and the buyers and sellers that Jesus drove out, and the place where he was teaching – all of this would have taken place in what was known in Herod’s Temple as “The Court of the Gentiles.” [Keller, 170] This court was supposed to be the one place in the Temple designated for Gentiles who wanted to know Yahweh, the God of the Bible. But then, in the year 30 AD, the Jewish leaders moved the marketplace for purchasing animals for sacrifice from the Mount of Olives, and into the court of the Gentiles. [Witherington, 314-314] This may have been beneficial for the Jewish leaders, and convenient for the Jewish worshippers, but in effect it seriously hindered the ability of believing Gentiles to come and worship. [Keller, 171]

Where God had said, through the prophet Isaiah, that the Temple should be called “a house of prayer for all nations,” and where God had told Abraham that his descendants were called to bless all the nations of the earth [Genesis 22:18], the people instead had placed their own convenience over the call to serve those on the fringes – those who were outsiders, those in need of God’s love and grace. By quoting from Isaiah 56:7, Jesus is calling his disciples to repent of that, and to bear the fruit of ministry and service towards others: towards the outcast, the outsider, even the one who might be their political or cultural enemy.¹

There are many ways to grow fruit in our hearts and our lives for God. Jesus here points us to some of the most obvious. We can bear fruit for God – fruit he will delight in – by having faith in God,

¹ It’s worth noting that this call would have been a shock at the time. As Tim Keller writes: “It was popularly believed [in Jesus’s day] that when the Messiah showed up he would purge the temple of foreigners. Instead, here is Jesus clearing the temple *for* the Gentiles – acting as their advocate.” [Keller, 171; Edwards, 343]

This may have been a shock to Jesus’s contemporaries, but it shouldn’t have been. All the way back to the books of Leviticus and Numbers, the Lord provided ways for Gentiles – for outsiders – to draw close to him and to even offer sacrifice to God in the tabernacle, God has explicitly made provision for that in his law. [Horne, 153-154; See Leviticus 22:18-25, Numbers 15:14-16]

God has always called on his people to a faith that bears the fruit of ministering to and caring for the outsider – the Gentile, the foreigner, the unlikely convert. That wasn’t new with the coming of Jesus.

by speaking to him in prayer, by forgiving those who wrong us, by serving and ministering to others around us.

In short, we bear fruit for God by loving him, and loving others.

That is the fruit that Jesus delights in – that he longs to receive from us.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is not a God who stays far off. And so, how good we may look from a distance is of little importance to him.

Instead, he wants to draw close our hearts and our lives, and it's there that he wants to find good fruit that he will delight in.

And so, let's not try to fool him with just the appearance of spiritual health – with a lot of leaves, but no real fruit.

Instead, let's embrace Christ from the heart by faith. Let's call on him in sincere prayer. And let's love those around us, just as Christ has loved us: by serving them, caring for them, and forgiving them.

Because that is the fruit that Jesus will delight in.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
- Leithart, Peter. *A House for My Name*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000.
- Witherington, Ben III. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.