

WEEK 6: JESUS CURSES THE FIG TREE

Mark 11:12–25



The Place of the Passage

The exchange of rings in a wedding ceremony is a well-known symbolic act, an act that represents something else. The giving and receiving of the rings express the covenantal commitment into which both the groom and the bride commit themselves. The act is recognized as a symbol of marriage itself. The strange miracle of Jesus' cursing the fig tree is also a symbolic act. The Gospel of Mark makes this clear by telling the miracle in two parts (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25) that surround the account of the cleansing the temple¹ like a frame (11:15–19). By intertwining the two stories in this way Mark merges them so that they form a unified message. And this message is reflected in this type of miracle, a miracle of destruction, that reflects God's judgment. As an "old creation" miracle, the cursing of the fig tree expresses God's judgment in this world—in this case regarding the religious practices of God's people. In this miracle Jesus reveals a primary purpose of his ministry and how he serves as the judge of the world.

The Big Picture

Jesus Christ is the judge of the world who purges religious profiteering and hypocritical self-gain and calls his people to repentance and faith in God.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Mark 11:12–25. Then review the following questions and record your responses. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 1918–1919, or visit esv.org.)

The Setting (Mark 11:15–19)

Notice that this account takes place in the middle of Mark 11:12–25. How does the surrounding account of the cursing of the fig tree help us understand Jesus’ actions in the temple?

Jesus’ anger is directed toward those who are commodifying worship in the temple, turning a holy place into a place of business. What would be some modern-day equivalents of this in our churches or Christian organizations and activities?

Jesus still cares about his followers’ having the correct posture of religious devotion. Are there any parts of your personal or public worship that you perform or are tempted to perform for personal gain?

The Miracle (Mark 11:12–14)

Sometimes the simple details of a text can teach important truths. Jesus is drawn to the fig tree because he is hungry (11:12). What does this teach us about the humanity of Jesus and his experience of life in general?

Jesus approaches the fig tree expecting fruit but then observes that it is out of season (see *ESV Study Bible* notes for 11:13–14 on page 1918). This is an enacted parable² wherein Jesus uses a physical item to teach a lesson. What is the theological lesson of this miracle of destruction?

What does Jesus' curse of the fig tree ("may no one ever eat fruit from you again," 11:14) teach us about how seriously we should resist hypocrisy in religious practice?

The Conclusion (Mark 11:20–25)

Shortly after Peter discovers the miracle (11:21) Jesus teaches the disciples about faith and forgiveness (11:22–25). How are these lessons from Jesus connected to the enacted parable of cursing the fig tree?

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Jesus encourages his followers toward faith as a means of bearing fruit. What areas of your life currently lack faith? Whom in your life do you need to forgive? How are these words from Jesus both a warning and an encouragement?

Christians may be tempted to take verse 24 out of context and think our prayers are blank checks from God to get whatever we want. How does a Christian's faith not only allow us to make petitions to God but also provide us with guidelines and postures for our prayers?

In light of the purpose of miracles, what does this miracle teach Christians about the person of Jesus (who he is) or the work of Jesus (what he has done for us)?



Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

JESUS CLEANSSES. The unique structure of this miracle connects Jesus' words against the fig tree (11:14) with his actions in the temple after his entrance

into Jerusalem (11:15–19). The crowd’s response to Jesus’ halting the selling of pigeons in the temple is that of fear and astonishment (11:15–16, 18–19). In Romans 3:1–20 Paul reiterates the universal uncleanness of all people, Jew and Gentile alike. This miracle invites the reader to respond in astonishment at the truth that Jesus has the authority to cleanse the unworthy areas of our hearts. Those profiting from religious devotion for personal gain are like the fig tree that will bear no fruit, but those who respond in faith (Mark 11:22) can do mighty things (11:23–24) and approach the Father confidently in prayer (11:25).

A FORGIVING FATHER. The final section of teaching concerning this miracle connects the act of faith (which produces fruit) with the practice of forgiveness. It is contradictory to be a faith-filled follower of Jesus and to live with an unforgiving heart. Because the life of the Christian is one that has been won ultimately through grace by the forgiveness of sins, forgiveness is then the default posture and practice of the believer. Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness in the miracle account connects the act of forgiving with the ministry of the heavenly Father. When the believer forgives, their “Father also who is in heaven” forgives trespasses (11:25, cf. Matt. 6:14–15). Said simply, the forgiven are forgivers.

Whole-Bible Connections

THE TIME OF THE GENTILES. Jesus’ cleansing of the temple regards the perverting of a place of prayer to a place of business and prosperity. The outer courts of the temple were to be a “house of prayer for all the nations” (11:17; i.e., the Gentiles). Jesus is intentionally using prophetic language in this rebuke to evoke the imagery of Isaiah 56:7. In Isaiah 56 the prophet communicates a vision of the kingdom of God in which all people, foreigners included, will have access to the covenant Lord (Yahweh). The mission of Jesus is to make a people from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev. 5:9–10), and this mission begins during his earthly ministry and is handed to his disciples in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20).

THE FIG TREE AND ISRAEL. Jesus’ selection of a fig tree is not random, although figs were a common tree in the ancient Near East. Throughout the Old Testament, specifically in the writings of the prophets, the fig tree stands as an image for the people of God (see Jer. 8:13; Hos. 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7). This enacted parable is a pronouncement of judgment on the proud and wicked religious leaders who have twisted the law of God and are actively challenging the mission and message of Jesus.

Theological Soundings

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD. In this miracle we see demonstrated Jesus’ role as judge. The miracle of destruction is functionally a miracle of judgment, wherein Jesus

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rules over the religious leaders through an enacted parable. This parable presents a stark picture of Jesus the Lord for all of Jesus’ disciples, past and present, and the role that Jesus will play as judge. Paul reflects a similar theology in 2 Corinthians 5:10: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”

PRAYER IN FAITH. Jesus’ depiction of the undoubting faith of the Christian could easily lead a person to assume that the power of prayer is our faith. But Jesus uses hyperbolic language (e.g., moving mountains) to make his point strongly, as when a coach says to give 110 percent. But the text itself reveals two important theological qualifications. First, the faith that empowers the prayer of a Christian is “in God” (Mark 11:22). This simple phrase means that prayer is empowered not from within the Christian but by God. Faith is not the Christian’s source of power but the Christian’s submitted position before God. It is trusting what God alone can do. Second, the Christian can have no control of the prayer if it is “done for him” (11:23). Prayer must be an asking, not a commanding, for God alone is the one who must act and will. As Jesus similarly taught us to pray elsewhere, “your will be done” (Matt. 6:10). None of these qualifications should minimize the power of prayer; they simply serve to make our prayers acts of faith and therefore biblically faithful.

Personal Implications

Take some time to reflect on what you have learned from your study of Mark 11:12–25 and how it might apply to your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Mark 11:12–25

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Jesus the just judge will always do what is right. Those who come to him in faith receive the Father's forgiveness. Reflect on this beautiful truth in your own life and respond to the Lord in prayer.

Definitions

¹ **Temple** – A place set aside as holy because of God's presence there. Solomon built the first temple of the Lord in Jerusalem to replace the portable tabernacle. This temple was later destroyed by the Babylonians, then rebuilt by Herod and destroyed again by the Romans.

² **Parable** – A story that uses everyday imagery and activities to communicate a spiritual truth. Jesus often taught in parables (e.g., Matthew 13).