



Love on Fire: Jesus' Anger & Our Prayers

Twenty-One Days of Prayer Series, Part #3

Mark 11:11-25

David Sunday

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We worship on Palm Sunday remembering a Savior Who was meek and humble and Who came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. He was a humble King. We also see in this passage that He was angry. I wonder if you believe in the wrath of Jesus. Do you give thanks to God for a Savior Who is both Lamb and Lion, merciful and mighty, tender and fierce, gentle and angry? Do you give thanks to God for the holy anger of Jesus?

Charles Spurgeon said:

I never could believe in the Jesus Christ of some people. For the Christ in Whom they believed is simply full of affectionateness. I believe there was never a more splendid specimen of manhood, even in its sternness, than our Savior. His was not anger that desired evil to its object. It was simply love on fire.

I think that is a wonderful description of the anger of Jesus—love on fire. We see Jesus' love starting to catch fire the night of the triumphal entry. Look at verse 11. The object of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was not just the city but the temple. He is Immanuel, God with us, and He wanted to go to where the people lived and worshiped. In verse 11, the night of Palm Sunday, we read, *"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."*

His love was starting to burn. He looked at the temple and was not pleased with what He saw. There was plenty in need of cleansing and correction, but it was late at night, so He returned with His disciples to lodge at Bethany. On Monday morning, we then find that Jesus' anger was ablaze. His love was on fire. Mark gives us two incidents of the holy anger of Jesus. First, there is the cursing of the fig tree in verses 12-14, and then the cleansing of the temple, which is in verses 15-19.

The Cursing of the Fig Tree

The cursing of the fig tree in verse 12 is the only miracle of destruction recorded in the four Gospels. Cynics, skeptics and critics of Jesus see this as a very unsavory incident in the life of our Savior. He has been accused of vindictive fury here and wasting His miraculous power to curse a fig tree and make it barren, as if He was just selfishly reacting to the lack of fruit on that tree. However, those who speak like this show that they do not understand the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ. They have no room in their theology for the holy anger of Jesus or for a love that burns with fire at times.

It was late March to early April, and Mark tells us it was not the season for figs (verse 13). However, at this time, a fig tree would be blooming with leaves and, along with those leaves, one would expect to find nodules. The nodules were signs of the figs that would ripen in June and be fully ready for harvest. These nodules were edible and were known to nourish travelers. When Jesus saw a tree that was full of leaves but no nodules or evidence of fruit, He saw signs of disease and decay. He thought, "This is a good object lesson for what I saw in the temple last night. This fig tree that is not doing its job represents all who claim to be God's people but do not bear any fruit for God in their lives.

When Jesus cursed the barren fig tree and said, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again," it was a symbol of the curse that is going to rest upon the barren religion of God's people at the temple in Jerusalem. His love was on fire against religious ritualism, against religion that fails to bear fruit and against hollow hypocrisy. Timothy George said, "Jesus' love is not sentimental but holy. It is tender but not squishy." His anger here is against barren religion. What makes Jesus angry? He is angry when He looks for fruit among those who are called by God's name and finds barrenness instead.

The Cleansing of the Temple

The second incident of Jesus' anger was the cleansing of the temple in verses 15-19. "*And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple...*" The temple was a massive structure made up of four sections.

- Outermost was the court of the Gentiles, which was in the open air and enclosed by a portico. There were columns 30 feet high and so wide that it would take three people to put their arms around them at the base. This open-air portico was 35 acres. It was a huge area! That was the court of the Gentiles.
- The next one was the court of women, where women were permitted to enter.
- After that was the court of Israel, which was only for circumcised Jewish males.
- Finally, the innermost part of the temple was the Holy of Holies.

The court of the Gentiles was separated from the rest of the temple by a partition. Posted on that wall were warnings in Greek, Latin and Aramaic that said, "No foreigner may enter within the railing and enclosure surrounding the temple. Anyone apprehended shall have himself to blame for his consequent death." So this was serious.

There was only one place for foreigners to worship. And what happened there? For one thing, there was a currency exchange. If you wanted to offer a sacrifice in the temple, you had to buy your animals there. You also had to pay your temple tax once a year, but you could not use Roman coinage to pay that tax because it had the imprint of Caesar's face on it. They had to exchange their currency for Tyrian shekels, which was the closest equivalent to Hebrew coinage at that time. So there were moneychangers and, along with that, they sold animals for sacrifices. You didn't have to bring your own animal all the way to the temple because you could just get one there on arrival.

Picture the New York Stock Exchange at the busiest hour of trading. There are people everywhere shouting, buying and selling. Add in a few thousand cattle, lambs and doves flying around, and that is what happened in the court of the Gentiles. It infuriated Jesus because of His heart and love for all people. He knew God's heart was to welcome people to worship Him, not to drive them away or separate them. He knew this because Jesus knew the Word of God.

Turn to Isaiah 56. Jesus would have had these words of the prophet imprinted on His mind and heart. He quoted from this portion of Scripture when He rebuked the moneychangers and those who were buying and selling sacrificial animals in the temple. Hear the heart of God for all people in Isaiah 56:3-5:

*Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,
"The LORD will surely separate me from his people":
and let not the eunuch say,
"Behold, I am a dry tree."
For thus says the LORD:
"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give in my house and within my walls
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.*

Oh, what that must have meant to people who felt cut off from the worship in the temple in Jerusalem! They heard the Lord saying, "I will give you an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

Isaiah continues in 56:6-8:

*“And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.”*
*The Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares,
“I will gather yet others to him
besides those already gathered.”*

This is the heart of God: to gather in people from all the nations without exclusion. When Jesus looked at the temple, He found the exact opposite of God's intention. Instead of welcome, He saw exclusion. Instead of gracious invitation, He saw separation. Instead of God's people on mission, He saw a noisy marketplace of extortion. Instead of prayer, He saw pandemonium. His love was on fire about all of this.

Picture Jesus in Mark 11:15 barging into the temple, overturning tables of moneychangers and seats of those who sold pigeons. Pigeons are flying all over the place. Animals are running. Marketplaces are shut down and everything comes to a screeching halt. This did not just take place in a corner of the temple. Commerce came to a standstill. Verse 16 says, *“And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.”*

Jesus was showing Who is boss. He is the Lord of the temple and He is in charge. He was also showing what makes Him angry. When the Lord looks to His people and sees exclusion instead of welcome, obstacles instead of outreach, religious pandemonium instead of prayer. His love is on fire. He becomes angry with this.

Look at verse 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?”’”* In other words, “Have you not heard the heart of God in Isaiah 56 to gather people to Him? Look at what you are doing here. How is this gathering the nations? How can anyone worship God in this place? He said, *“But you have made it a den of robbers.”*

We need more context for this from Jeremiah 7. When God's people gather for worship, God is looking for transformation of character and conduct. Worship that does not result in transformation of life is not pleasing to the Lord. It is reprehensible to Him. The problem with

God's people is that many of them were looking to the temple like it was a talisman, a safe place. "If we can just get to the temple, we will be regarded by God as acceptable and special because we are in this wonderful place."

Listen to what God says through the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah 7:1-4 says:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'"

It was like they went around saying, "Look at how special we are! Look at where we get to worship: the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." God said, "The aim of worship is that your life is transformed. Your heart must be transformed from within."

He drives this home in Jeremiah 7:5-11:

"For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD."

In other words, the Lord said, "How can you worship Me here and not have your life be transformed?" The Lord Jesus went into the temple in Jerusalem in Mark 11 and said, "I have seen what is happening in this place. My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers." The word for "robbers" is a violent word that provoked a violent response from Jesus' heart. When people are robbed of their right to worship and are hindered from drawing near to God, Jesus says, "It is a violent action whenever religion keeps people from coming to God." If we are busy with religious activity but our character is not being transformed, God is not pleased. He is looking for radical heart change.

Verses 18-19 show the response of the chief priests and the scribes. They sought a way to destroy Jesus. The crowds were astonished at His teaching, but the priests and scribes wanted to kill Jesus. It was a sinful response, but it was also sensible. At least they were not saying, "Well, He's an interesting guy." They recognized that He claimed authority. They saw Him take over the temple and understood that He is not mild.

He may be gentle, but He is not harmless. He is tender, yes, but He is not tolerant of whatever we want to do or think. He is full of love, but it is a love that can rage like a fire. Furthermore, He is not to be trifled with or treated as optional or insignificant. All must bow to the authority of King Jesus.

Have Faith in God

The application is in verses 20-25. We have seen His anger against hollow, fruitless religion, against worship that does not transform and against a place of prayer becoming a place of pandemonium. What are we to do with this? The application in verses 20-25 is "have faith in God."

The next scene was Tuesday morning. Verses 20-22 read: "*As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.'*" So we started with a fig tree; then we went to the temple; and now we are back at the fig tree. In order to understand Jesus' anger in the temple, we must look at the illustration of the fig tree.

Peter looked at the withered fig tree. Listen to Jesus' response to Peter in verse 22: "*Have faith in God.*" I can just imagine the disciples scratching their heads. "Have faith in God? What does a withered fig tree have to do with having faith in God? How are we to put these two things together?"

What does faith have to do with a withered fig tree? I love how the ESV Study Bible answers that question: "Jesus' point is that we should trust God to remove whatever hinders us from bearing fruit for God." Excellent! I read that and the lights went on. Aha! I can now see how all of this fits together. Jesus' point is that we should trust God to remove from our lives whatever hinders us from bearing fruit for God.

This can get traction in our prayer time together because we all have many things in our lives that hinder us from bearing fruit for God. There are areas in our lives that need radical transformation. There are behaviors we feel are impossible to change in our lives. All of us have tendencies toward sinful addictions and, if the Lord did not change us, we would be a mess. It does not matter how long we have walked with Jesus or how old we are, the best of men are men

at best. We need the Lord to remove from our lives whatever hinders us from bearing fruit for God.

We all have people in our lives whom we want to see come to God, but we can see that their hearts are hardened. Jesus is telling us to have faith in God. What looks like barrenness to us, God can make fruitful. God is able to remove whatever hinders us from bearing fruit for God. Sometimes, these obstacles feel like mountains in the way.

In verse 23, Jesus said, *“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.”* Sometimes, these obstacles are like mountains in the way. When we need to bear fruit but are barren, it is like a mountain in the way. When we need to reach out but there are obstacles in our lives, they can be like mountains. When we need to be a people of prayer but are distracted with all the busyness of our lives, prayer can seem like moving a mountain. But Jesus said, *“God is able to move those mountains.”*

I love the words of Isaiah 40:3:

*A voice cries:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

Valleys are the places where we are low, despondent, discouraged and defeated. God's glory is going to come and lift up those valleys. The mountains are our places of pride, self-sufficiency and arrogance. God is going to come and level those mountains.

Whenever we doubt God's ability to remove whatever hinders us from bearing fruit for Him, we are becoming blind to the beauty and power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. Friends, we are not stuck in bondage to sin. We have been delivered, liberated and freed from the dominion of sin. We are not predestined to spiritual barrenness. We are predestined to become conformed to the image of Christ. He said to His people, *“If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you will bear much fruit”* (John 15:1-17).

We are going to pray for fruitfulness in our lives together as God's people. We are going to pray that Jesus' love on fire would refine us, purify us and make us abundantly fruitful. Verse

24 assures us that if we are praying for things that God has revealed to be His will, we can be confident that we have received these things. Before we even speak, He hears us. He is pleased to do in us what He has promised in His Word.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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