



We've all had bad days, and as the adage goes, we usually take it out on those closest to us--our colleagues, spouses, children and even our pets that bear the brunt of our misery. I have even seen grown men take out their frustrations on garage door openers or lawn mowers (as if our appliances are up all night thinking of ways to make our lives miserable).

Most of the time someone is there to talk us down. Cooler heads prevail; we take a deep breath, put everything in perspective, make a few feeble apologies and move on.

In Mark 11:12-25, it seems as if Jesus is having a bad day. He has unrealistic expectations of a fig tree, and then curses the tree for failing to live up to his expectations. He seems capricious, hotheaded and even a bit petty. Mark feels obligated to tell us, "It was not (even) the season for figs."

The little incident with the fig tree is nothing compared to what happens in the temple. Jesus walks into the outer courts and forcibly removes those who were buying and selling; overturns a few tables, throws down a couple of benches for good measure and will not allow anyone to pass through unless they are there to meet with God.

There is no one there to talk him down. He leaves the disciples scratching their heads and the crowds in suspended disbelief.

It stands to reason that if Jesus curses fig trees and causes havoc in the temple he does so with good reason. He is once again exercising his prerogatives as our creator and king.

#### A BARREN TREE (vv. 12-14)

1. Mark goes to great lengths to help us connect the dots between the fig tree and the temple by weaving the two narratives together. The barren fruit tree is nothing more than a parable of a barren temple. How do the following passages link the two together?
  - a. Micah 7:1
  - b. Jeremiah 8:13
  - c. Luke 13:6-9
2. What would it have looked like if Israel had been a fruitful nation?
3. What would it look like for a church to be fruitful?
4. What would it look like for each of us to be fruitful?

5. How important is fruit to God?
6. What are the consequences of unfruitfulness?

#### A BARREN TEMPLE (vv. 15-19)

Most biblical scholars agree that there was no real problem with either the selling of sacrificial animals or the exchange of money in order to secure the proper coinage for paying the temple tax. The real problem is not what they were doing, but where they were doing it. The outer court of the temple was known as the court of the Gentiles. It was the only place outsiders could enter into the worship of the one true God. The leaders may have reasoned, "We don't have many outsiders coming here anyway, why don't we turn this place into a market?"

1. How does the fact that the outer court was not overrun with outsiders further demonstrate the Israel's failure to bear fruit?
2. How might turning the outer court into a market place throw up further obstacles to Gentiles who were seeking God?
3. What do Jesus' actions tell us about who he is and what is important to him?

#### BECOMING A PEOPLE OF PRAYER (vv. 20-25)

While the transition seems a bit awkward, the connection between verses 15-19 and verses 20-25 is God's desire for the temple to be a "House of Prayer (v. 17)" and his desire for us to be a "People of Prayer."

1. How had the temple failed to be a house of prayer?
2. What two ingredients, according to this passage, are absolutely essential if we are going to be a people of prayer?
3. While Jesus emphasizes the necessity of faith in this passage, the rest of the New Testament gives us several other keys for answered prayer: we must ask according to God's will (1 John 5:14); we must ask in Jesus' name (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24, 26); we must ask from a position of obedience (1 John 3:21-22) and we must be willing to forgive others (Mark 11:25).
  - a. What are some truths we can draw from these passages to strengthen our prayer life?
  - b. If we are truly walking with God, how are unanswered prayers every bit as much of a comfort to us as answered prayers?
4. How will a vibrant prayer life keep us from being unfruitful?