

This Scripture passage reminds me that Jesus does not claim his Lordship all at once, but step by step, inch by inch. From Mark’s point of view the triumphal entry was a local event, attracting little attention beyond the immediate participants. So, when Jesus goes without incident to the Temple at the end of the day Mark’s view is reinforced. After surveying the scene, he leaves the city and goes to Bethany, where he probably stays at the home of his close friends, Martha, Mary and the “new and improved” Lazarus. The next day Jesus returns to Jerusalem to place another claim upon his Lordship. But on the way, hunger prompts him to look for fruit on a fig tree whose mature leaves promise early fruit. Nearly all scholars admit that this is a difficult scene to interpret. I can attest to that as well. So I hope that giving this scene a three part outline from David McKenna—the prophetic *word*, the prophetic *fulfillment* and the prophetic *future*—might help us to better understand what’s going on here.

1. The prophetic word. Figs have a special meaning in Old Testament prophecy. They symbolized the fruit of spiritual fulfillment, based upon Israel’s promise as God’s chosen people. Yet, most frequently in prophecy, figs represent apostasy, all the more tragic because of unfulfilled promises. Micah 7:1 forecasts Jesus’ hunger and disappointment: “*What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave.*”

Finding nothing but leaves on the promising fig tree, Jesus’ disappointment turns to judgment. Like the fig tree, Israel had been chosen as God’s people and blessed beyond measure. Yet they hadn’t lived up to their potential!

2. The prophetic fulfillment. I honestly think the enigma of the cursed fig tree will never be resolved, short of eternity. Mark’s own narrative tells us the time for figs has not yet come. Why, then, does Jesus hold the tree responsible for something that is out of its nature? Even more, why would he expect fruit to satisfy his hunger out of season? From a human standpoint, it appears as if the cursing of the fig tree is fairly arbitrary and unjustified.

After spending so much time dealing with the selfishness of his disciples, does Jesus now succumb to the same temptation because he is also hungry? It doesn't seem fair to curse a fig tree for failure to bear fruit out of season, even if he is hungry.

What is really going on? A combination of Micah's prophecy and Mark's Gospel sheds some light on the scene. Prophetically, Micah hears the Messiah say, "*there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave*" (Micah 7:1) and, practically, Mark has Jesus seeing the leaves on the fig tree and going over, "*he went to find out if it had any fruit*" (v. 13). On the basis of what Jesus sees in the maturity of the leaves, he has reason to expect the first ripe fruits. The fig tree, so it seems, is cursed for the pretense of its leaves, not for its lack of fruit; for failing to produce what it outwardly promises.

When I was in college I read a little book titled *Something Beautiful for God*, about Mother Theresa. Malcolm Muggeridge, a British journalist and author who died in 1990, wrote the book. He also wrote the book, *Christ and the Media*. In that book he says, "The media in general, and TV in particular, are incomparably the greatest single influence in our society...and without reference to any moral or intellectual, still less spiritual guidelines whatsoever." He also writes about an intriguing fantasy he calls the "Fourth Temptation," where Jesus is approached by the devil with the offer of a worldwide TV network—apparently to become a televangelist. "Future historians," he says, "will surely see us as having created in the media a Frankenstein monster which no one knows how to control or direct, and marvel that we should have so meekly subjected ourselves to its destructive and often malign influence." Mind you, he said that almost 50 years ago! I think messages can be enhanced through media, but the medium can never be the message where the Gospel is concerned. The Pharisees fell into the trap of making religious means an end in itself. Here we learn that leaves are a sad substitute for actual fruit on the fig tree—as is any aspect of our lives if we settle for style over substance.

3. The prophetic future. Jesus' last miracle recorded in Mark's gospel is the cursing of the fig tree: "*May no one ever eat fruit from you again*" (v. 14). All

his other miracles were performed for human benefit. Why would Jesus leave us with a destructive show of power as the final reminder of his miracles? The generally accepted reason is that Jesus chooses the fig tree as a sign of his coming into Jerusalem as the Lord of Judgment—another signpost of his Lordship. Chosen by God, given the Law, protected from annihilation, led to a promised land, disciplined in exile, blessed beyond measure, Israel stands at the center of the world as the source of God’s redemptive hope. But by rejecting God’s Messiah, God’s people resist his coming with a display of empty rituals and meaningless symbolism. God’s righteous nature now leads to his judgment.

And so it begins in verse 15. What Jesus had witnessed in Jerusalem surely broke his heart. Luke’s gospel says that it brought him to tears. The outer Court of the Gentiles had become a bazaar for selling sacrificial animals and taxing pilgrims. When Jesus arrives, all of the merchants and moneychangers were closed for the night, so he leaves the city for an overnight stay in Bethany—but not without firm intentions of returning. As Lord of the Temple, he knows that a therapeutic cleansing of God’s Temple will be required. Let’s follow our three stage outline in this scene too...

1. The prophetic Word. There are strong passages in the Prophets which give authority to Jesus’ actions. As if looking through Jesus’ eyes, Jeremiah writes: *“Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching, declares the LORD”* (Jeremiah 7:11). His intention of cleaning house is also foreseen by Malachi: *“Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.* (Malachi 3:1). Going on, Malachi accurately describes the **anger and indignation** with which Jesus purges the Temple: *“But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap”* (Malachi 3:2). The object of his **indignation**? Malachi lays the blame at the feet of the priests when he says: *“He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites (priests) and refine them like gold and silver”* (Malachi 3:3).

The reason behind Jesus' **rage** is also found in Isaiah's prophecy. Speaking of the Gentiles, God says: "*these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*" (Isaiah 56:7). In accurate detail, the prophetic word sets the stage for Jesus to clear God's Temple.

2. The prophetic fulfillment. In the Court of the Gentiles, Jesus sees violations against the sanctity of the Temple. A Jewish mind might rationalize these violations by thinking that the Court of the Gentiles is the "least holy" among the outer courts of the Temple. As long as the inner court housing the Holy of Holies remains sacrosanct, no harm is done. But Jesus has another view of the Temple. *All of its precincts are holy!* And for priests to choose the Court of the Gentiles for buying and selling speaks loudly of their corruption.

More and more activities are being added to churches today, like day care centers, Christian schools, senior citizen centers, singles activities, counseling clinics, and food pantries. All of these things are good, but isn't it possible they might divert churches from prayer, study, caring, and genuine worship? Or maybe you think more opportunities for ministry may arise from these activities. In the Court of the Gentiles, merchants and priests formed an alliance whose policies and practices countered the main purpose of that holy place. A therapeutic cleansing was definitely in order.

The scene at the Temple looks a bit like a gambling operation. Cheating and crime are often linked with the gambling industry. Likewise, the Temple could not have been corrupted without the collusion of the priests. Much responsibility rests upon those who are called to be keepers of the courts of God's holy place.

3. The prophetic future. Last, any purging must have a purpose. Otherwise, seven devils return to replace each one that is cast out. Jesus has more in mind than just clearing out the merchants and repudiating the priests. Through his *indignation* in the Court of the Gentiles, Jesus restores the space given for

God's purpose, saying, *"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"* (v. 17). Corruption was blocking the Gentiles from worshiping. Newsflash: We are Gentiles. Jesus was giving access to all of us Gentiles.

The next day Peter notices the fig tree that Jesus cursed. Dry leaves and dead branches tell him that the roots have withered. When he calls this to Jesus' attention, he sparks a succession of thoughts that begin with the power of God, leads to prayer, advances to faith, and ends with forgiveness. Jesus' answer to Peter? *"Have faith in God"* (v. 22).

"Moving a mountain" was a common figure of speech among the Jews when describing a situation that was nearly impossible. Zechariah saw the Lord standing on the Mount of Olives, parting it with a valley from east to west, and moving its bulk north and south until the place upon which the mountain stood became as level as a plain—in Zechariah 14:3-10. With an image of something that is impossible fixed in their minds, the Lord of Nature reveals to his disciples the power of prayer that is based on faith in God and backed by the spirit of forgiveness. Can you see how creative the Lord is in this scene? His timing and attitude produce a truly creative moment. Everything surrounding the cursing of the fig tree sounds negative—but Jesus quickly turns to this positive teaching about moving mountains and says, *"Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours"* (v. 24).

Have you ever noticed that almost every time Jesus speaks, he upsets the assumptions by which we live our lives? For example, we usually see creativity as something only for people with special gifts and unlimited power as a thing for God alone. Neither of those assumptions square with the teaching of Jesus. Our faithlessness often comes from a narrow and negative viewpoint, and our spiritual impotency is the result of a failure to *know* the will of God, to *believe* his promises, or to *forgive* those who have sinned against us.

If only we would understand and follow his example. Then the creativity of Jesus and the unlimited power of God would be released in our lives. Amen.