

Withering Words

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. One of my all-time Anglican heroes is George Whitefield. He was a tremendous evangelist, lived in the early part of the 18th century.

At 16 years of age, Whitefield was deeply convicted of his sin. In fact, Whitefield tried everything to become acceptable to God. He wrote, I fasted for 36 hours twice a week.

I prayed formal prayers several times a day. I almost starved myself to death during Lent, but I only felt more miserable. And then by God's grace, he writes, I met Charles Wesley, who put a book in my hand that showed me from the scriptures that I must be born again or be eternally lost.

Whitefield later said, I learned that a man may go to church, say his prayers, receive the sacrament, and yet not be a Christian.

Well, if you were with us last week, you recall that we were looking at the beginning of chapter 11 of Mark's Gospel. And Jesus has entered Jerusalem with clear Messianic symbolism.

[1 : 17] And the crowd had welcomed him using those words of acclamation from Psalm 118. Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

And Jesus, of course, is presenting himself to the nation as the nation's Messianic king, with authority over all, and authority over the ruling elite, known as the Sanhedrin, a combination, a collection of religious leaders.

You recall from Paul's message, if you were here, but Psalm 18 goes on and it anticipates the arrival of the Messiah at the temple. So Jesus comes down the Kidron Valley, he walks a short distance to the northern end of the temple mount, and in verse 11 of Mark chapter 11, if you've got your Bibles open, we can follow that through together.

In verse 11, we read that Jesus enters the temple, he looks around, and he leaves. There are no shouts of praise.

The temple doesn't welcome its high priest. Of course, the temple was the heart of Israel's religious life. It was a symbol of the nation's national identity.

[2 : 35] And in the eyes of the Jewish leaders, Jesus was a threat to the temple. Because the temple was intended to symbolise God's dwelling with Israel, not just for Israel's sake, but for the sake of the world.

So what had happened along the way? Well, the religious elite had so organised the temple that had come to symbolise, in fact, God's exclusion of the nations.

So you would have zealots who sought to bring in God's kingdom by violent confrontation with Rome. Well, they'd look to the temple for their ideology. And of course, the religious authorities of the temple, they'd grown rich.

They'd grown rich as they oppressed the less well-off. So what had the temple come to stand for? Violence towards outsiders and injustice within the nation.

And God will judge it. It's against that context that we come to our passage today from verse 12 on in chapter 11.

[3 : 53] And in understanding this passage, it's vitally important that we think through the structure of it. So let me just outline that and keep it in mind as we work through. See, the first couple of verses, verses 12 to 14, is this curious story, the cursing of the fig tree.

And then 15 to 19, we get into Jesus' action in the temple. Then it comes back again to the story of the fig tree. And then in the last part of our section, verses 27 to 33, again Jesus returns to the temple.

So what you see there is that Jesus' action in the temple is actually bookcase, isn't it? There are two ends of the bookcase, fig tree story, fig tree story, and Jesus performing certain acts in the temple.

The fig tree is actually an acted parable. And this acted parable helps us to understand the point of what Jesus does in the temple.

In fact, if you're going to interpret Jesus' actions in the temple and the cursing of the fig tree, you can't do that looking at them separately, otherwise you'll miss the point. So I want us to first of all look at Jesus' action in the temple, which begins at verse 15.

[5 : 15] Then we'll come back to the bookends. We read, And Jesus entered the temple, and he began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple. And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. Why would Jesus act this way? Now down through the years there's been a great variety of suggestions put forward to explain Jesus' actions.

They range from things like, well, Jesus is acting in wrath against flagrant abuses in the temple. What he's trying to do is simply reform the practices in the temple.

Or, Jesus is angry that commercial activity has intruded into that temple precinct, desecrating it. But actually, there's little evidence that the forecourt of the temple precinct was regarded as a sacred space.

And if you think about it, the market for animals and birds to sacrifice was vital for the operation of the sacrificial system. Because pilgrims would travel great distances to Jerusalem.

[6 : 30] Jerusalem and need to buy an animal to be sacrificed. Now, what we do know is that the high priestly families certainly did gain wealth from the control of the financial affairs of the temple.

They were guilty of corruption. And perhaps that leads us to some understanding of the action that Jesus took. people But I want you to notice in the text there that he actually throws out not only the sellers, he throws out the buyers.

And at the end of verse 18 we read that the crowd was still a spellbound. The idea is they were baffled by what Jesus had done. And it's actually not surprising that they were so baffled.

I mean, here's Jesus. He comes in. He overturns the tables. But these tables have been set up to receive the annual half shekel tax.

Every Jewish male was required to pay that tax. And the money that was raised funded the daily sacrifices in the temple for the atonement of sin.

[7 : 43] Imagine you were there. I mean, if that's the system that you knew backwards, you'd be baffled. So his actions were, well, they were just simply surprising to the average Jewish onlooker.

Sin did need to be atoned for. The sacrificial system, the reason for the temple's existence, depended on money changing an animal purchase.

So, Jesus' actions, see, what he did was he essentially stopped the entire temple process. Albeit, only for a short time, but that action of stopping the entire temple process was deeply symbolic.

If Jesus effectively overturned the current system, what was going to replace it? Is Jesus then seeking to reform the practices or are his actions symbolic of something much more cataclysmic?

I think the answer lies in our understanding what Jesus was teaching as he took those actions. So look with me then at 17. Jesus was teaching and saying, Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?

[9 : 07] But you have made it a den of robbers. There are two Old Testament quotes in that verse and the first one is from Isaiah 56 verse 7. And when you read the first eight verses of Isaiah 56, you'll see that they contain God's promise of blessing for all who might think that they're actually excluded from God's salvation.

the foreigner, the eunuch, the outcasts. And Jesus is expecting the fulfilment of that promise then. It shouldn't have really surprised the onlookers.

I mean, for three years, Jesus had been reaching out to the unlovable. The temple was meant to embody this inclusive love, but instead of Israel being a light to the world, Israel had become narrow, Israel had become hard.

The temple had become the nationalistic symbol. It certainly wasn't a house of prayer for all the nations. Us as readers of Mark's gospel, the readers in the first century, they would not and we would not miss the significance then of events of Jesus' death.

You recall that as Jesus died, the massive temple curtain split from top to bottom and it was a Gentile centurion who declared that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

[10 : 46] That's the first part of what Jesus says in verse 17. The second part of it is a quote from Jeremiah 7. And again, the context is important in Jeremiah 7 in the first 15 verses in order for us to understand what is Jesus actually doing.

See, in Jeremiah's day, the people were going through all of the motions of the required sacrifices. Very religious. But day in and day out, they dishonoured God, Yahweh.

They oppressed the weak. they didn't give their full allegiance to Yahweh. And yet, they actually thought because they came to the temple and they did the right stuff, that they were safe.

So listen to these words of the Lord through Jeremiah in Jeremiah 7. The Lord says, Has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your sight?

You know I too am watching. Do you see the real thrust of Jesus teaching to this baffled, to this spellbound crowd?

[12 : 00] Jesus is teaching with great authority. The principal issue was not dishonest business practices. Certainly there were dishonest business practices.

But Jesus' attack is directed at the temple. The temple being allowed to degenerate into a safe hiding place. A safe hiding place where people think, well if I go along, take part in the ceremonies, then I'll be right with God.

Irrespective of how they lived outside the temple. We read later on in chapter 12 that in fact the religious leaders rob widows' houses and yet they pretend that they're okay with God by performing their temple rites.

But Jesus sees what they're doing. He sees externally what's happening and he knows the state of their hearts just as he knows the state of my heart and each of us gathered here today.

Jesus' words and actions in the temple are those of judgment and that's what brings us to the fig tree. So look with me then at the first bookend.

[13 : 18] Jesus is on his way to the temple and he sees in the distance in verse 13 a fig tree and leaf. He went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it he found nothing but leaves for it was not the season for figs.

He said to it may no one ever eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard it. I mean as many people have thought as they've read Mark's gospel especially for the first time but maybe again as you listened this morning that seems extraordinarily unreasonable.

I mean it wasn't even the fig season. And then the other end of the book case the next morning as Jesus and the disciples passed by verse 20 they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

Then Peter remembered and said to Jesus Rabbi look the fig tree that you cursed has withered. See this is an acted parable.

Mark has carefully structured the passage to help in our understanding. The fig tree of course has all the appearance of life doesn't it? It's full of leafy leaves.

[14 : 32] A tree in full leaf at Passover season is making a promise that it can't fulfil and that's the case for Israel.

The temple you see appeared to be dedicated to God's service. But when Jesus visited the temple what did he find? He didn't find figs.

He found only leaves. In reality the temple was simply profiting, the religious leaders. The fig tree is cursed and the withering of that tree is clearly a miracle.

In fact it's the only miracle recorded in the Gospels where it's a miracle of destruction and not one of life. The fig tree is barren and it portrays the barrenness of the temple worship in Jerusalem.

The nation is simply not prepared to accept the messianic reign of Jesus. And if you've got your Bibles out there notice just as you look across to chapter 12 that the parable of the wicked tenants follows this account.

[15 : 44] God the owner of the vineyard seeks fruit from the vineyard. When fruit from the vineyard is not found or when it's held back then the parable tells us that destruction follows.

Well in verse 21 you can just sort of see in those words the absolute amazement of Peter, Rabbi, look the fig tree that you cursed has wither.

But Jesus' response in verse 22 perhaps looks a little bit strange on the surface. Look what he says. He just simply responds and says have faith in God.

Truly I tell you if you say to this mountain be taken up and thrown into the sea and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe in the what you say will come to pass it will be done for you. I mean cursing fig trees and trusting in God what's the point of it?

There is an explicit link. The Jewish nation but particularly its leadership was putting its faith in everything, indeed in anything but God.

[16 : 55] They were believing that by having our physical temple that they would be safe. They were putting their faith in the temple practices rather than in the God who had actually graciously instituted these sacrificial practices.

They had been instituted for the atonement of sin until the day, the day when the Lamb of God would die. A perfect sacrifice, a once for all sacrifice, a never to be repeated sacrifice, a sacrifice never needing to be repeated.

This was God's gracious provision to them. But they had put their faith in the form and not in the reality.

It's easy for each one of us to put our faith in anything, to put our faith in everything. God himself. We could spend the rest of the morning going through illustrations of where we see that in the world outside.

But tragically, the illustrations are also numerous within the visible church. We can trust that we're right with God because we attend a particular building regularly on Sundays.

[18 : 20] or maybe that we or a family member has donated to that building. Or perhaps we've taken part in some religious ceremony in the past.

Remember George Whitfield's own testimony? He wrote, I learned that a man, brackets woman, may go to church, say his prayers, receive the sacrament and yet not be a Christian.

Finally, of course, in God's grace, Whitfield understood that he had to trust in Jesus Christ. He believed and he was forgiven and absolutely transformed.

And after he became a preacher, he spoke at least a thousand times on the subject, you must be born again. And it was in the early 1700s, 1737, he was just a 22-year-old, a graduate from Oxford, and it says that his voice startled England like a trumpet blast.

He was attacked by clergy, by the press, by the mob, but nevertheless he became one of the most popular and influential preachers of his day. You know, at this time London had a population of about 700,000 people, maybe a little less than that.

[19 : 45] And Whitfield would preach to 20,000 people out in the open. For 34 years, Whitfield's voice resounded throughout England and also America.

Going to church, saying prayers, receiving the sacrament, other forms, none of it will save us. If we think that that's faith, that faith counts for more, it counts for nothing before God.

Saving faith is coming before Almighty God with empty hands, with a repentant heart, and simply trusting, trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation.

He's the only one who can save us. He died, he rose again so that we might be justified. It sounds a fancy word, but simply that we might be put in a right position before a holy God.

So we're justified through faith and as believers we then live moment by moment out by faith. Well that statement in verse 23, Jesus' statement, is likely proverbial.

[21 : 00] I mean, throwing a mountain into the sea is about as useless as causing the death of a fig tree. but the saying makes a most important statement, put your complete trust in the God of the impossible.

See, the point in verse 23 is not that the disciples, if they've got enough faith, can do great things. The point is they need to put their trust in God accomplishing his will in his power.

So if God directs them to move a mountain, then God will supply the power for it to be accomplished. What are they to do? Simply to be obedient and say yes to God's will.

And this same idea then of unwavering belief and trust then flows into verse 24. Now the focus becomes one of prayer.

prayer. And this verse, as with every other verse in Scripture, it's critically important that we don't just simply take it out of context but read it in relation to all of Scripture.

[22 : 16] You see, in prayer we don't change God, but what we do do is we align ourselves with God's will. So don't treat prayer like a magic wand, which is tragically so common today.

one commentator has rightly said, prayer is not an engine by which we overcome the unwillingness of God. Jesus taught that God is ever ready to ground what's good for us.

So when we pray as Christians in Jesus' name, we can be confident of God's response. But what we ask must be compatible with Jesus' teaching, with his life and with his death.

So look out in the congregation I can see faces with us a couple of weeks ago for the parish prayer night on the Tuesday night. We had a lovely time, a great time of fellowship and prayer.

It would be great next month to see this number of people there. We had a great time of fellowship and prayer and what a great privilege it is to come both individually and corporately before God.

[23 : 24] And every Sunday morning at the close of the 10 o'clock service there are two people just in the first or second row of the old church that are always available for prayer ministry. Let me encourage you to avail yourself of that.

Not that their prayers are more effective than anyone else, but just the joy of being able to join in in fellowship together, corporately bringing our prayers, our concerns, our supplication, our praise and thanksgiving before a holy God.

Well, Jesus concludes his explanation with this promise in verse 25. Whenever you stand praying, forgive. If you have anything against anyone, so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

You see, relationship with God is simply one of faith and forgiveness. There are clearly many things as Christians that we ought to do and many things that we ought not to do as Christians.

But what we ought to do and what we ought not to do, neither and both will save us. Our motivation for the things we ought to do and the things we ought not to do simply should be our loving response to a God who first loved us.

[24 : 46] So, observing ceremonies, attending certain meetings on a particular day, such things will not and they can't save us. We're only saved by God's grace through faith and then scripture goes on and says, and even that is God's gift.

Otherwise you'd turn around and boast. Well, as we come to the end of the passage in verse 27, we see that Jesus and his disciples, they return to Jerusalem.

I want you to try in your mind's eye to imagine the scene. So, Jesus has done these actions, he then comes back and he walks into the temple. Take a little bit of license and imagine what the religious leaders are saying.

I mean, the cheek of him. I mean, who on earth does he think he is? We're the ones who run this place. This is our right. We've actually been doing this for hundreds of years.

By what authority are you doing these things who gave you this authority to do them? That's what the religious leaders ask Jesus. And of course, we as readers of Mark's Gospel, we know that answer, don't we?

[25 : 55] Because back in chapter 9, the voice from heaven boomed, this is my son, the beloved. Listen to him. So, Jesus has come to Jerusalem.

He's come to the temple. He's come there as the rightful, albeit unexpected king. But he doesn't spell this out. In words of one syllable.

Jesus, in fact, responds to these religious heavies who have again confronted him with a counter-question. Look at verse 29. I'll ask you one question, answer me. And I'll tell you by what authority I do these things.

And then he asks the question, did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? Answer me. And he says, straightforward, isn't it?

Now, as we read Mark's gospel, we know the answer. Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power at the time of John's baptism.

[27 : 02] John had pointed to him as the coming one, the one who would act with power. And that voice of the baptism echoed the words of the royal psalms declaring Jesus to be the king.

Jesus was the one, in fact, that Israel had been waiting for, waiting for more than a thousand years. The spiritually blind religious leaders, they should have immediately grasped what was happening at John's baptism.

but they were blind. Far blind, more blind than blind Bartimaeus. They were blinded by their obsession for power, by their obsession for prestige, by their obsession to control the temple and exert control over the nation.

They totally missed the kingdom values that the first will be last and the last will be first. And so now with a divinely constructed counter-question, these power-hungry leaders, they've got nowhere to turn.

Verse 31, they argue with one another, if we say from heaven, he will say, then, why then did you not believe him? But shall we say of human origin? They were afraid of the crowd for all regarded John as truly a prophet.

[28 : 24] So they answered Jesus, we don't know. And Jesus replies, neither will I tell you by what authority I'm doing these things.

See, the question of Jesus' authority has come full circle, hasn't it? Back in those early chapters of Mark's Gospel, it was the authority of Jesus that so impressed the people up in the region of Galilee.

And now, the authority with which he taught, the authority with which he healed, has turned into explicit authority over the highest institution in Judaism.

You need to capture this strongly in your minds. The temple was sacrosanct. It was the central institution of Israel's religious, political and economic life.

And the temple had taken centre stage. You see, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been pushed. pushed. He'd been pushed to the side.

[29 : 31] And as we think about that, how easy it is for me, how easy it is, I'd suggest for each of us to move the Lord to the side. See, even Christian practices, Christian institutions can become sacrosanct to us.

And we can end up worshipping the form rather than the reality. John the Baptist had been sent by God, graciously sent by God, calling the leaders, the nation, to repentance.

This is what God had been doing for hundreds of years, graciously calling on the people to repent. But there was no turning around by the religious elite. And worshipping anything other than God is idolatry.

And Jesus, the God-man, certainly wasn't being worshipped, was he? We read in verse 18, in fact, that the leadership was trying to find ways to kill him. Worshipping anything other than God is idolatry and God judges idolatry when it's not repented of.

And so, this judgment on the temple would actually lead to a new temple, a living temple, a temple who would die and rise again, opening a way for all men and women to come to God.

[30 : 59] Opening a way for you and I to have a personal, intimate relationship with Almighty God by the blood of the cross. So, these curious words to the fig tree are God's words to each of us, the words that Jesus spoke to the disciples as they looked at that withered victory.

The words were simply, have faith in God, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Nothing else will save us, nothing else can save us.

That's why the writer of Hebrews writes in chapter 10, therefore my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he's opened up to us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Father, we thank you that in your extraordinary love and mercy, you sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die for us.

A perfect sacrifice, a once for all sacrifice, a sacrifice never needing to be repeated. Father, by the Holy Spirit, we pray that you would challenge each one of us, yourself, each person that's gathered here this morning, to be sure that our faith and trust and our worship is in you and you alone.

[32 : 53] Lord, we acknowledge that it is so easy for lots of things in our life and even parts of our Christian practice to take centre stage. Lord, if that's the case, we repent of that.

we ask your forgiveness. May our worship, may our focus be solely on you. And Lord, if there's anyone here this morning hearing these words who knows through the conviction of the Holy Spirit that in fact they're not trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, I pray that they would continue to be uncomfortable and unsettled until they come to that point of understanding that in your grace and mercy that you've sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die for them.

Father, through the rest of the day and this week, may we continue to meditate on, reflect on, may we continue to respond to your words brought alive to us by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

And we ask this for Christ's sake. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Gentlemen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thanks. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 25] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.