

- Prayer -

Some of you here today are very skilled at making things with your hands. You know how to build things, repair things, take them apart and put them back together again.

I really admire people like that and I've learned a great deal from watching them over the years.

I have a brother-in-law who is a home-builder and renovator. Over the years I have noticed that sometimes Steve is able to renovate by fixing the old and making it better, but at other times he demolishes the old completely to create something brand new from the ground up.

Two years ago we built an addition onto our home so that my mother & father-in-law could live with us. In order to do that Steve demolished our garage, and my office of many years, in order to make room for a completely new living space for mom & dad.

Today, we are going to look at a text of Scripture where Jesus (the carpenter) tells us about a massive renovation that is going to require a complete demolition of the old, in order to make way for something brand new.

This is the second message in our **gospel foundation series** and today we are going to be speaking about the priority of making the church into **a house of prayer**.

Please open your Bibles to **Mark 11:12-25**.

These events occur just after Jesus enters Jerusalem on his way to the cross. The shadow of the cross looms large in these verses as the urgency of Jesus' mission presses down on him.

Now you need to know something important about the way the 4 gospels were written. Matthew, Mark, Luke & John were not written as historical biographies in the same way we write them in modern times. **Rather**, each gospel takes the historical story-line of Jesus and weaves the incidents together in away to make important theological points.

In our text today, Mark weaves together the cursing of a fig tree, the cleansing of the temple, and teaching about prayer & its priority into one teaching unit. These three seemingly unrelated incidents converge together to teach us something most important.

The main point of the passage before us today is to clearly teach us that:

God's Purpose for the Church is for it to be a House of Prayer

The miracle of the Fig tree is unique among all the miracles in the gospels for it is the only one that ends in destruction.

If you read this in the wrong way, you will miss the point of what Jesus is seeking to teach us. Jesus doesn't curse the Fig tree because he's annoyed that there wasn't fruit on it. **Verse 13** tells us plainly that it was not the season for figs.

The way the text is put together by Mark shows us that this incident is intended to teach us an important spiritual lesson.

Why does Mark place the incident of Jesus in the temple **between** the **cursing** of the Fig tree, and its **withering** to its very roots the next day? Because the Fig Tree incident acts as an **illustration & interpretation** of what's going on in the temple incident.

Both events have a symbolic meaning. In both places, Jesus was **looking for fruit** but found none. And in both places, the lack of fruit resulted in God's judgement.

In the book of Revelation churches are referred to as lampstands—a place that is intended to display the light and presence of God.

But lampstands can be removed by God if they drift away from their intended purpose—and **the great church of Ephesus**—the church the NT book of Ephesians was written to—was in danger of this very thing. Within one generation, the one time powerful church began to drift away from its foundational values. So in **Revelation** this warning is given to it:

*Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. **Revelation 2:5***

Both my father & grandfather were pastors. I remember my grandfather telling me that most churches & denominations will eventually drift from orthodoxy every 50 years or so.

To prevent this decay & decline, there is a **warning** and an **encouragement** in our passage today.

Notice first the warning in this passage regarding God's purposes..

I. The Danger of Neglecting God's Purposes for the Church

I have always found it interesting what gets a strong reaction from Jesus. In the gospels we don't see Jesus angry very much—but when we do, I notice that it almost always involves religious leaders and

the way they treat people. He never gets angry with the ordinary people. I think that's most significant.

Most of the anger in our lives is sinful. It leads to unkind words and often cruel actions that damage relationships. But there is a kind of anger that is righteous—the kind that God expresses. It is His settled opposition to all sin and his commitment to judge it fully and justly.

Righteous anger is an emotion that leads to action. Without righteous anger, most of the injustices in our world would never be addressed or righted. In **verses 15-17** we see an angry Jesus. Let's not forget that this isn't just Jesus' personal opinion being expressed here—he is revealing the heart of God to us:

*No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us. **John 1:18** NLT*

What exactly was so offensive to Jesus? On first glance his actions may even seem to us like an over reaction. But are they?

Jesus tells us what the issue was—that the sellers were taking advantage of the people who needed sacrifices and were charging them exorbitant prices—**vs 17**—“You have made it a den of robbers”.

Some historians estimate that the markup for sacrificial animals was 16 times the regular rate. **Verse 15** tells us that that they were selling **pigeons**—the mention of pigeons is significant because pigeons were the sacrifice of the poor who couldn't afford lambs for sacrifice.

The sacred space of the temple reserved for prayer & worship had deteriorated to the level where people were being exploited and taken advantage of. Where money was being worshipped rather than God.

The people had forgotten what the sacrifices were for. The animals were killed as a death penalty for their sin because the wages of sin is death. Yet the animals not the humans sinners were dying—because God in his mercy had set up **a substitution system** so that the sinner could go free.

These sacrifices pointed to Christ's death on the cross—the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The meaning of the gospel **concealed** in the sacrifices, would soon be **revealed** in Christ's death on a cruel cross.

The very essence of the gospel was being perverted by the way the animals were being sold. The temple had become a man-centred religious centre without any sense of God's holiness. The sense of the sacred had been lost.

Just as the **Fig tree** was judged when no fruit was found on it, so also the **temple sacrifices and the temple** would be judged because no fruit was found in it.

Jesus' action against the temple would reach its climax when the temple was completely destroyed 35 years later. The neglect of God's purpose for his people led to God's judgement on his people:

*For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? **1Pet. 4:17***

My friends, what is the significance of all this for our church today?

The Scriptures make it clear that the church is the new temple:

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?..For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. **1 Cor 3:16-17***

Jesus visits the church and looks for fruit. He looks for sacred space. Where God is loved, where people are loved, and where the gospel is not just correct theology but something believed & celebrated.

So there is a warning for all of us in this passage. Its possible for us to drift away from the central purposes of God for the church into a form of religion that denies its power.

That should sober us and make us take stock of our lives. Has the gospel of Christ become common to me? Have I lost the sense of God's holiness, my sinfulness, and the wonder that Jesus came from heaven to save me from my sin?!

When I am more aware of other peoples sin than my own, I will be less aware of Gods grace for me and my need of it.

This is the warning we all need to hear. But locked in this text is not only a warning but an encouragement as well. It has to do with our priorities....

2. The Importance of Prioritizing God's Purposes for the Church

At the dedication of the first temple, Solomon clearly expressed what the temple was made for:

*If your people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against you, and they turn again and acknowledge your name and pray and plead with you in this house, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people. **2 Chron 6:24-25***

In Solomons dedication of the temple, there are 19 references to prayer. **It is the dominant theme.** From the start, this is what the gathering of God's people has been for!

So in **Mark 11:17** Jesus tells us clearly what fruit God is looking for when his people gather—**prayer!** The church is to be a gathering of all the nations praying together.

*Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence. **Ephesians 3:12** NLT*

The book of Acts makes it clear that this is how the early church functioned. They were devoted to prayer—not just individually, but as a community:

- The day of Pentecost & Holy Spirit birthing of the church came in answer to **a prayer meeting** (Acts 1-2)
- The courage to face threats when proclaiming Christ came after a corporate **prayer meeting** (Acts 4)
- The growth of the church continued powerfully after its leaders **committed themselves to prayer** and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6)
- The breakthrough in the church from one ethnic church to a multi-ethnic church came as **a result of prayer** (Acts 10-11)
- The spread of the gospel to the nations began in **a prayer meeting** of the church (Acts 13)
- The church in Philippi was birthed in **a prayer meeting** (Acts 16)

God's power is released through the church to the degree the church is a house of prayer!

So why do so many believers in Christ neglect prayer meetings when they are such a vital part of God's plan for the church?

I think the number one reason is that many believers have never understood God's purpose for the church. They see the gathered church as a place where they are taught about God, rather than a place they talk to God.

Truth is impersonal but prayer is personal. The teaching of the church is not just to give us more spiritual information. God's grand purpose isn't to make us smarter Christians.

My friends, it to lead us to abide in Christ, to know Christ, and to talk to God in his name. All teaching is to bring us closer to God and **prayer is the greatest expression of that closeness**.

To attend church on Sundays but neglect prayer meetings is like tasting the food at the dinner table but not swallowing it— you forgot the last step.

God's not just trying to educate us and help us to know more about him. Church is not just a place where you meet your friends each week—you can do that at the gym, or Tim Hortons, or the movie theater.

No—He wants us to know HIM personally & talk to him. **He wants to give himself to us**—and he especially wants to give himself to us as we collectively gather together as a house of prayer. We wants to answer our requests as we pray about them together.

Some of you have children who have wandered from the faith. I know what that feels like. How will we reach them? I'll tell you how —by raising our voices together with desperate pleading and asking God to show mercy on our children! By reminding God of promises like:

*Thus says the LORD: “Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.” **Jeremiah 31:16-17***

Yes—our sin is great. But God’s grace is greater still. Our God is inviting us not just to learn about him, but to **meet WITH Him**—To meet with him together with his people in prayer.