

Clears
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Mark 11:12-25

Ever watch the show “Hoarders?” I find the show both disturbing and yet somewhat fascinating. What is disturbing about it? What is somewhat fascinating? Often a hoarder hangs on to things that are broken, obsolete, no longer useful. I’ll admit I struggle with tossing outdated TVs or computers (I have 500 power cords if you need one.)

If I took a poll (I won’t) I wonder who among us are the “neat freaks” with organized spaces and who needs to clean out the closet, garage, or attic. I think most of us are a mixture of both. Perhaps the part of the house people see is tidy and organized but whatever you do don’t open that closet door! (Some doors will be locked at the party!)

When our daughter Annie was a teenager, if she was feeling stressed, she would organize her closet. I can cite multiple studies that document how clutter causes stress. When things are not in their proper place, we can’t be productive and effective. That can also apply to our relationship with God. The clutter in our heads and hearts can keep us from enjoying the fellowship and power of a “closer walk” with Jesus.

Israel had a spiritual clutter problem before Jesus came to earth. Things looked righteous on the outside, but on the inside things were a mess. Jesus said Israel’s religious establishment was “...*like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with...bones and all sorts of impurity.*” [He told the Pharisees] “*Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.*”ⁱ Their spiritual clutter wasn’t just an overscheduled calendar but unconfessed sin.

The Point: Sometimes the clutter in our hearts is unconfessed sin. Sometimes it’s hanging on to trash like unforgiveness. Sometimes it’s simply not keeping things (even good things) in their proper place so we can enjoy our relationship with God. In this text Jesus used a fig tree and a flea market to teach us about faith and forgiveness. Just as Israel needed to deal with their spiritual clutter, we Christ-followers sometimes need to “tidy up” our hearts and minds to make room for worship and fellowship with Him.

It was the week before Jesus’ crucifixion. He came into Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna” and by Friday He would be reviled. On Monday He spent the day in the temple observing some troubling things. On Tuesday morning as He headed back to the temple, a tree on the side of the road became an object lesson for Israel’s problem.

Mark 11:12–25 (ESV) — **12** On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. **13** And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the

season for figs. **14** And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. **15** And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. **16** And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. **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'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

- Reading this we might have several questions. Why would Jesus curse a poor, defenseless fig tree? Why did trading in the temple provoke such a passionate response? What did this mean for Israel in that day and for His followers today?
- Mark's readers would have known a lot about fig trees that we don't know. Even if it wasn't harvest season for figs, the little immature (but edible) figs show up before the leaves. If there were leaves, there should have been figs.
- In the Old Testament the fig tree was a symbol for Israel. Just like this fig tree, Israel's religion looked good at a distance but spiritually there was no fruit.
- Another indication of Israel's spiritual condition was what was going on in the temple. The religious leaders had allowed buying and selling in the temple.
- Specifically, these merchants and "money-changers" were set up in the "Court of the Gentiles" which was the only part of the temple a non-Jew could enter to worship. *"Who cares if the Gentiles don't have a place to worship God, we need more space for our selected merchants to sell doves and exchange currency."*
- Merchants sold animals for sacrifices to those who traveled too far to bring their own. Doves were the cheapest acceptable sacrifice for poor people. Money-changers exchanged Roman coins for the acceptable temple coins so these pilgrims could pay their temple tax. On the surface these were helpful services.
- Quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus declared that the temple which was to be a "house of prayer" had become a "den of robbers."ⁱⁱ
- Some scholars argue that Jesus was indignant because the merchants were over-charging people and the religious leaders got a cut. While that seems plausible and Jesus certainly would have condemned corruption, if that was their main offense He could have just said, *"Stop ripping these people off!"*
- What was the larger issue about what the temple leaders were allowing?
- If the merchants and money-changers had been located outside the temple would Jesus have been as offended? We can only speculate but here is what is clear: The temple was to be a place of reverent worship to God. By allowing the "house of prayer" to become a marketplace, the temple leaders were also robbing people of the spiritual refuge where they could approach God in prayer.
- Jesus was offended by the conduct of the religious leaders; the religious leaders were threatened by His interference and His growing influence over the people.

18 And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

- Jesus stayed all day at the temple ministering to people. Then it was back to Bethany to rest up. Another lesson was waiting on the side of the road.

19 And when evening came they went out of the city. **20** As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. **21** And Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.”

- The disciples were astonished. How could the tree have died so quickly?
- Jesus used this as a teachable moment on praying with faith.

22 And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. **23** 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. **24** Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. **25** And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

- After emphasizing the importance of prayer and worship by saying the temple was to be a “house of prayer,” Jesus gave a mini-seminar on how to pray.
- A couple of weeks ago we said verses like this can be taken out of context by “name it and claim it” teachers. Mountain-moving faith means I BELIEVE God CAN move that mountain, but that may not be what He knows is BEST.
- **1 John 5:14 (ESV)** — **14** And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. (emphasis mine)
- We said, Jesus is not a genie. He said, “*All things are possible*” but He didn’t say “*Your wish is my command.*”
- Faith in God is believing He can do ANYTHING but trusting Him to do the BEST thing because He knows more than we do about EVERYTHING.
- We need to bring our request and trust Him to do the BEST.
- Jesus also identified one of the most common obstacles to effective prayer: unforgiveness of others. He said in His model prayer: **Matthew 6:12 (ESV)** — **12** *and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* [Two verses later Jesus said,] **14** *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*
- One of the greatest examples of “prayer clutter” is clinging to unforgiveness.
- If we want an open line of communication to the Father, we must forgive.

- Let’s summarize what this text said about Israel in that day and us in our day.
- Regarding Israel, Warren Wiersbe summarizes: “*Our Lord’s condemning of the tree and cleansing of the temple were both symbolic acts that illustrated the sad spiritual condition of the nation of Israel. In spite of its many privileges and opportunities, Israel was outwardly fruitless (the tree) and inwardly corrupt (the temple). It was unusual for Jesus to act in judgment (John 3:17), yet there comes a time when this is the only thing God can do (John 12:35–41).*”ⁱⁱⁱ
- That was Israel as they rejected Christ. What about those of us who follow Him?
- What would it mean for a Christ-follower to be like a tree with leaves but no figs?

- The Apostle John wrote in **John 15:5 (ESV)** — *5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*
- How can we apply that to our lives to prevent having leaves but no fruit?
- Before Christ's death, burial, and resurrection people had to go to the temple to approach God's presence and power. Where is His temple for us today?
- How can the temple of our hearts become like that scene in the temple court?
- What are some common obstacles to one-on-one time in prayer and worship?
- Talking and texting with Susan while traveling – An illustration on making contact with God a priority.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Physical clutter can cause stress and hinder our being productive and effective.
- Spiritual clutter can make our hearts like the fig tree or the temple. They look healthy on the outside but there can be a problem on the inside.
- We need to beware of allowing the temple of our hearts to become cluttered with things that hinder prayer and worship.
- Sometimes the clutter in our hearts is unconfessed sin. Sometimes it's hanging on to trash like unforgiveness. Sometimes it's simply not keeping things (even good things) in their proper place so we can enjoy our relationship with God.
- Just as Israel needed to deal with their spiritual clutter, we Christ-followers sometimes need to "tidy up" our hearts and minds to make room for one-on-one, "abiding" worship and fellowship with Him.
- This week let's ask our Heavenly Father to help us clear out the clutter in our hearts and minds and make personal time with Him a priority to prevent having leaves but no fruit – appearing outwardly faithful but having a faith without fruit.

ⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Mt 23:27–28). Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Jesus quoted two Scriptures to defend what He did—Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [The Bible exposition commentary](#) (Vol. 1, p. 149). Victor Books.