

Pastor Kyle Mercer
Jesus, the Tree, and the Temple

November 6, 2022
Series: Unexpected
Mark 11

**BIG IDEA – JESUS IS A SERVANT KING WHO EXPECTS HIS
PEOPLE TO BE FRUITFUL AND FAITHFUL**

Would you want to know the day you're going to die? What if it's far away? What if it's a couple of decades away? Someone said, "No" right away. "No, I don't want to know." Okay. Do you want to know the *way* you're going to die? No also, right? We don't all die the same way, if you didn't know that. I know all of us want to die at 95 years old, taking a nap, with a Bible on our chest, heading to heaven. It doesn't happen for most of us.

So, we don't want to know the day we're going to die. We don't even think we want to know the way we're going to die. We certainly don't want to know the day *and* the way, but guess what: that's what Jesus knew about himself. Turn to Mark 11. Today, Jesus knows where he's headed. He knows the day he's going to die: five days from where we pick up the story. He knows the way he's going to die: by crucifixion and betrayal.

What we're picking up today is on the triumphal entry. Here's the whole outline. We're going to see the triumphal entry and then a bunch of *Ts*. What do I mean by that? In other words, we're going to see the triumphal entry, and then he's going to go to the temple, the tree, the temple, the tree, and the temple. I'm serious. That's the whole outline. Here we go.

What we're going to see today is Jesus is coming and what's called the *triumphal entry*. This is Passover week. This is the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life. It would have been unbelievably busy in Jerusalem because it was Passover. They say the population in Jerusalem tripled during Passover.

Here's what I want you to think of: High Point during the furniture market. You can't get a hotel. You can't get a reservation. All of these people are here from out of town. That's exactly what's happening. Today, here's the big idea. Jesus is going to show up as a servant king riding on a colt. We're going to see that. He's going to tell us the type of king he is, and then he's going to judge the tree (we'll talk about that), and he's going to judge and cleanse the temple. So, *tree* and *temple* after the triumphal entry.

Here's the big idea: *Jesus is a servant king who wants you to be faithful and fruitful.* What does God want from your life? Well, I don't know every idiosyncrasy of you and your individual life, but here's what we *do* know. What does God want from every Christian? To be faithful and fruitful.

01 THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY (SERVANT KING)

So, that's where we're going today. Let's pick up with the triumphal entry. Look with me at Mark 11:1. ***"Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples..."*** We're going to return to that. Notice Jesus always sends his disciples out two by two.

"...and said to them, 'Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it.'" That's interesting. Jesus is showing that he's a king. How do we know that? Well, if you know the time period back then, he does two things that only kings do.

First, a king could commandeer any animal at any time for his purposes. So, Jesus is showing his kingship that way. Also, when a king would ride into a village or a town or an area, he would only and always ride on animals no one else had ever ridden on. That's why this is important. Jesus is showing his kingly nature.

Look at verse 3. It kind of sounds strange. ***"If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it...'"*** By the way, Jesus calls himself *Lord*. ***"...and will send it back here immediately."*** A couple of things. First, why does Jesus send people out two by two? Think about this.

Back when he has the twelve disciples, and he has his first short-term missionary trip and sends all of the disciples out, he sends them out two by two, which is not very efficient. I guess Jesus must care about something more than efficiency. I'm not very good at math, but if you have twelve disciples and send them two by two, you can only send them to six places. If you send them one by one, then, all of a sudden, you could send them to twelve places.

I just want to say this every time it comes up in Scripture, because it's against the individualistic spirit of the American, which is the American spirit: You need other people. You need community. Why do you go two by two into a village? Because a guy could get in trouble going to a village by himself. Does it take two guys to get one colt? Obviously not. There's something deeper here. I need encouragement. I need accountability. I need partnership. I need fellowship.

Then how about the commands? It's a little strange, isn't it? "Go to this village." Okay. "There will be a colt." Okay. "Untie that colt." Okay. "There will be a guy who probably asks you a question." Okay. "Tell him the Lord needs it, and he'll be okay with that." It's like, "What?" Here's the principle, I think: Jesus tells us just enough information to take our next step.

Jesus will tell you a bunch of things. This is why the Bible says the Word of God is a lamp to our feet, not a high beam. Theologians call it the *dimmer switch principle*. It's like turning on the lights slowly. He gives you just enough information, just enough light to take your next step, and then when you take your next step you understand it a little bit more.

I'll show you. Look at verse 4. They have to see, "Is Jesus telling the truth?" Here it is. **"And they went away and found a colt..."** He said there would be a colt. There's a colt. **"...tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it."** So they obeyed that. **"And some of those standing there said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go."**

This is what I call the *Kevin McCallister moment*. Do you remember in *Home Alone 2* when Kevin McCallister... He's at the hotel, and he has his parents' credit card. He walks up there, and he does what he sees his parents do. He gives their credit card. They swipe it, and he goes, "It worked." That's what the disciples are like.

Guys, this is the adventure of your life. The adventure of your life is listening to what Jesus has told you to do, taking your next step, and seeing what happens. Here's what's really cool. They don't know what Jesus says is true until they do it. How many people look at what the Bible says, look at what Jesus says, and just critique it? "That's so silly. That's so primitive. That's so ancient. That's so [whatever]." Then they never try it.

There are certain things that cannot be explained, they can only be experienced. Jesus says it's better to give than to receive. Try explaining that to a 5-year-old. Try explaining it to an adult who's selfish. It's really hard to explain it. "No, no, no. It's better for me to get things." No, no. It's actually better for you to give things. You won't know it's true until you do it.

If you lose your life, Jesus says you're going to find it. Try explaining *that* to people. I tried a couple of weeks ago. It's very hard to explain. But the people who have lost their life and given it to Christ have found a whole new life. Try explaining that to be a servant is the way to greatness. People have to know these things by experience.

Now here's what we do. I know church is no place to be honest, but just for a minute, can we talk about what we do instead? What you and I are tempted to do is we try to manufacture... Maybe that's too soft of a word. Maybe we try to manipulate all of the relationships and all of the circumstances in our lives. We try to organize them to get what we want. "What do I need to say to my boss so that I'll get the desired outcome? What do I need to do with my spouse so that he or she will do what I really want?"

What about *this* principle instead? How about the adventure of your life is to obey what Jesus has said in that area of your life and see what happens? You won't know what happens. Instead of "I'm going to try to get my wife to do exactly what I want," how about I love her, nourish her, cherish her, sacrifice for her, and love her as my own body, like Ephesians 5 says? And the adventure of my marriage will be seeing how that affects everything.

How do you know what's best in your marriage? You don't know what's best in your marriage. Oh, I know you have to talk to your boss, and if you learn how to negotiate, then you... What if you worked at work as if working for the Lord? What if you just started saying, "That's it. I'm going to obey what God says. He has only given me a little lamp in this area of my life. I'm going to do what he said in this area of my life."

It's literally an act of faith, and here's what faith says: "Across a long enough period of time, I believe good things will happen. The adventure and joy of my life is going to be to obey Jesus, take the next step, and see what happens." Well, that's what the disciples do. "What an adventure. He said there would be a colt. He said people would ask us. He told us how to deal with it. When we said that, they listened." Okay. Now we get to the triumphal entry. That was all kind of intro. Let's see the triumphal entry. Verse 7:

"And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!'"

Now, Mark 11 is the beginning of the end of the messianic secret. If you remember, we talked about this. If you're reading the gospel of Mark, it's kind of strange. Jesus, whether he casts out a demon or helps a disciple, as soon as it's over, goes, "Don't tell anyone who I am." You're like, "Huh?" Today in the triumphal entry is the first time

he's going to allow the crowds to publicly praise him for who he really is as he's heading to the cross.

Here's what we see. This is Passover week. This is the triumphal entry. A Roman triumphal entry was done for military kings who had killed at least 5,000 people in battle. That's how you officially got a Roman triumphal entry. So, you had to fight a big battle. You had to kill a lot of people. Jesus is going to have a triumphal entry not for taking lives but for giving his life.

We see that Jesus is a humble servant king. How do we know that? Well, first of all, he's riding on a colt. This is, by the way, a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. Zechariah 9:9 basically says, "Look, O Israel. Here is your king, humbly riding on a colt." You can tell a lot about a person by the vehicle they drive. Still today... Your house and the neighborhood you live in can be status symbols, but people don't know where you live. Your car is your portable status symbol.

We're not saying it's bad to have a nice car. We're saying that everybody's car tells us something. "Oh, you drive an F-150. The working man. I like it." Right? "Oh, you drive a minivan. You're in that soccer mom season. We get it." "You drive a Prius. You're vegan. We understand." "You have a Subaru Outback. Liberal." Every vehicle tells us something about the person.

So, Jesus rides in on a colt. It's humble. He's saying, "I'm here to serve. I'm a king, but I'm a servant king." Then we see they give him this... We would call it the *red-carpet treatment*. Today we give people honorary doctorates. We roll out the red carpet. Back then, it was to lay down your cloaks. It was palm branches.

Then they say, "Hosanna!" literally transliterated, "God, save us!" That is the prayer Jesus loves to answer. Christianity is not "God, educate me. God, make me the best version of me. God, reform me. God, rehabilitate me." It's "God, save me from myself and my sin and Satan's lies and the consequences of my sin."

Well, that's the triumphal entry. He comes to Jerusalem. This is a nine-month journey. He goes through the triumphal entry. Look at verse 11. Look at where he goes. He's going to go here three times in one chapter. No doubt the temple is the center of chapter 11.

Verse 11: "***And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.***" So, he goes to the temple. What does he see? Well, we'll see, in verse 15, he's going to cleanse it and overthrow the tables. He sees that people are using God's things for man's selfish purposes, but he doesn't immediately act. Maybe this is a lesson we need to learn.

Do you ever get angry and act right away? We call that *regret* usually. There's you, and then there's angry you. Angry you is impulsive. Angry you says things like, "Never!" and "Always!" Angry you does things and says things and makes promises and makes threats. Anyway, we'll see, Jesus is angry, but he goes home and makes... We don't know all that he does, but he prepares to go back to the temple the next day. But I told you it's temple, tree, temple, tree, temple.

02 THE FIG TREE (JUDGE)

So, let's look at the tree. He goes to this fig tree. Look at verse 12. ***"On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry."*** You see the divinity and then the humanity of Christ. The divinity of Christ accepts worship. The humanity of Christ... "I'm hungry. I need a snack." Here's what he does.

"And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it." Just anything. Is there any fruit? "When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it."

What is *this* about? Well, he's doing what the prophets would do. Prophets would teach things through object lessons. This tree represents something. It represents the nation and the religion of Israel. How do we know that? Because in the Old Testament, many places, God talks about Israel as a fig tree.

In fact, God loves to talk about the nation of Israel as a wife (implication: she should be faithful), as a son (implication: he should follow), and as a garden and a tree. Those are used interchangeably. What does that mean? That they should be fruitful. What's interesting is Jesus comes in, and he's the humble, lowly, servant, suffering king, and the rest of this chapter is two acts of judgment: one act at the tree (the fruitlessness of Israel), and one act at the temple (the faithlessness of Israel).

This is a tough word. God is saying to Israel, "I'm basically done working through you." By the way, this is a warning to every church. Basically, here's how we would say it: "You're useless. You don't bear any fruit anymore." Notice it says it was not the time for figs. You're like, "Then what's the problem with there being no figs?" Because even when it wasn't the time for figs, there would be some firstfruits of the figs. There would be some sign of future fruit. There was not even a sign of future fruit.

Here's what happens sometimes. A church becomes unfruitful and unfaithful to Christ. They stop teaching the Word of God. They stop preaching the gospel. They

stop talking about the cross. They stop talking about repentance and faith, and they become fruitless. I have a buddy who's pastoring in a global city.

When you're in a global city... This is kind of a big deal in Winston-Salem. It's nice to have a building. But when you're in a global city, you're like, "I need a building," and they're very hard to come by. It's very hard to establish yourself. It's very hard to do kids' ministry and student ministry and midweek things and good weekend services if you don't have your own building.

He has been there for 15 years, and he still is renting. He doesn't have a building. He said, "Kyle, I walk the streets of my city and pray Matthew 21." In Matthew's account, after the fig tree, Jesus goes to the Pharisees and says, "The kingdom is being taken out of your hands because it's not bearing fruit, and I'm going to give it to people who will bear fruit."

He said, "Kyle, I walk the streets of my city, and I see all of the churches that are theologically liberal and have left the gospel, and I beg God to give me their buildings." He said this to me. He goes, "Kyle, I make a sacred vow to God." I said, "I don't know if I've ever done that." He said, "I say, 'God, if you give me a building and it does not bear fruit in a few years, I will give it to somebody else.'" He understands the principle.

What does God want in your life? He wants you to be fruitful. What do we settle for? Leaves! Do you see that? By the way, you can only see fruit once you get up close. Leaves can be seen from a distance. Do you know the Greek word for *leaves*? *Instagram*. I couldn't believe it.

It's interesting. What do we do this time of year? We get in our cars and go up to the Blue Ridge Parkway and drive around. Why do we do that? To see leaves. Leaves are beautiful on the outside. They're very different than fruit. The temptation in our own lives is to settle for leaves...how we appear versus how we really are. The temptation with our kids is to settle for leaves.

I remember when I had my daughter Addy, my first child. Someone told me... It's probably important with both guys and gals, but they particularly said, "When you're raising a daughter, compliment her character more than you compliment her appearance." Okay. Because appearance can... It's not that it's not important, but it can be leaves. Character is the fruit of our lives.

I think the temptation is to settle. If our kids are polite and have a decent personality and get good grades and know how to shake someone's hand and say their name and look them in the eye, we think our kids are okay. We need to look for fruit. Now, what

is fruit? The Bible speaks of fruit in two ways. It's the character of our lives and our impact on other people.

The best way to think about fruit is the fruit of the Holy Spirit...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That's very, very important. The temptation in churches is to try to emphasize the gifts of the Spirit. I'm not talking about the miraculous gifts. I'm talking about teaching. I'm talking about discipleship. I'm talking about administration. I'm talking about just the gifts of the Spirit.

Where churches fall apart is where people are growing in the gifts of the Spirit but not growing in the fruit of the Spirit. You've seen that. You see pastors' lives that fall apart, and you're like, "How did that happen? He was such a great leader. They were so good at leading worship. The teaching was so good. Their systems were so great." What happens in those situations is somebody has the gifts of the Spirit, and they're not growing equally in the fruit of the Spirit.

Secondly, your fruit is your impact on other people. What's it like to be on the other side of you? Fruit is for other people. Right? The reason a tree grows fruit is not for it to eat its fruit. It's for other people to have that fruit. How fruitful is your life? Here's what it means to be fruitful: you make everybody and everything around you better. I don't mean that in some shallow way. I mean that in a meaningful way. That's just what you do.

I remember there was this girl from college. I saw her, and I said, "Hey!" She had this great lady who was discipling her in college. I said, "Whatever happened to Ashley? She was such an unbelievable... She was discipling you in college, and you were growing so much. Where is Ashley now?" She goes, "Oh, Ashley got married. Now she has two kids," and she said where she lives.

I go, "What's Ashley doing?" She goes, "Making everything better." She was like, "That's what she did when she discipled me. She just made me better and every girl who ever was around her better. She's currently making her husband and her kids better." She told me, "She lives in a neighborhood, and she's doing something there. She's very involved in her church, and everything is getting better." It's like, "Wow!"

Some of you just need to stop making things worse. That's the beginning. Stop making things worse, and then start making them better. Bill Bright, the guy who started Campus Crusade for Christ... I talk about him often. When he died, at his funeral a senator got up and said, "Bill Bright reminded me in a crazy world that God still reigns." Wouldn't you love to have that be your legacy?

How is fruit formed? Let me say a few things. First, you can only see fruit up close. Jesus couldn't see if there was fruit or not until he got very close. Do the people closest to you love you the most? Is the fruit in your life easy and obvious to see to those who are closest to you? Or if we asked your parents or siblings or spouse or friends or coworkers, "Is there any fruit in Joe's life?" would they be like, "Four years ago he invited me to a Christmas party"? We need some more fruit than just that.

Some of us... This is always interesting. The role of a preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I think most of us probably think there's more fruit in our lives than there is. Some of you, your spouse has already hit you in the side a little bit today. Then there are others of us... There are a few of us at least in here. You're just really hard on yourself. "I don't have any fruit. I'm a mess."

Let me just encourage you. It takes a while for fruit to grow. Two principles on how fruit grows: formational and relational. I'm going to talk each of these. Fruit is formational. So, if the illustration is a garden or the illustration is a tree, it takes time. *FDIE* (*frequency, duration, intensity, environments*) is a helpful way to think through if you are growing in an area of your life. That might encourage you. Here's what I mean by that.

A lot of people, especially men, only think about their life in terms of *frequency*. "How much am I doing something? How much am I not doing something?" Well, that's a good place to start. You may talk to someone, and they say, "You know what? I'm not growing very much. I still fight with my wife five times a week." It's like, "Well, how much did you fight with her last year?"

"Seven days a week."

"Praise the Lord. That's two whole fewer days. That's 100 fewer days a year if you do some math. That's a lot less fighting. Praise God." But sometimes you talk to someone, and the frequency stayed the same, so you're looking for some grace. You're looking for some way to stoke the fire. "Okay. You're fighting how often?"

"Seven times a week, and we fought seven times a week last year too."

"Okay. What about the duration?"

"Oh yeah. Now we're able to fight, and we're able to get through it in about 15 minutes."

"Praise the Lord. What did it use to be?"

"Oh, two hours, and we had a headache. I'm more flight, she's more fight, and it was a mess."

"Praise the Lord." *Duration*. It's different.

How about *intensity*? We know how *that* feels. That's "How does it feel?" That's subjective a little bit. I've heard it said that an alcoholic (or maybe this is any addict) who feels tempted to drink wants a drink in the same way someone at the bottom of a 50-foot pool wants up to the top for air. Wow! That kind of gives you a picture of what an addict might feel like. What if eventually an addict says, "You know what? I guess I'm tempted, but it's not the same. It's more like I'm at the bottom of a five-foot pool." Okay.

Then *environments*. I can be with more people and be in more places and not give in to that sin. I think sometimes... Some people just need to be challenged. "You have no fruit." Some people just need to be encouraged. "Hey, I see a few figs. They're really small, but I think, across time, this could grow."

Then *relational* is it happens in community, guys. It happens in community with other people. It happens with God. I think sometimes we think that, somehow, the way we become more godly is we download something from the sky, like an iCloud download. "I need more love. I need more kindness, please." Actually, it doesn't work that way. It's in relationship.

First John 4 says God gives us love, *his* love. Oh, it's relational. Jesus says in John 14, "I give you my peace." Oh. Romans 14 says we get the joy of the Holy Spirit. Oh. So, I actually have to watch God do these things to me. That's why we say, "Served people serve people, loved people love people, and hurt people hurt people." What you've experienced is what you end up giving to other people.

03 THE TEMPLE (FAITHLESSNESS)

So, he curses the tree, and then he goes back to the temple. Let's see this. He deals with their fruitlessness, and now he's going to deal with their faithlessness. "***And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple...***" Second time...verse 11, now verse 15. He does four things.

"...and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple..." That's the first thing. It's like, "Well, that's dramatic." ***"...and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons."*** That's the second thing. ***"And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple."*** That's the third thing. Fourth thing:

"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.' 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. And when evening came they went out of the city."

So, Jesus goes to the temple. We're going to get to exactly what he did in a minute. I just read it, but let me just tell you the history of the temple. If you understand the history of the temple, you understand the history of God's people. The story of the temple is the story of every Christian life.

Where was the temple located? Mount Moriah. Where was Mount Moriah? Where Abraham walked up with his son Isaac ready to sacrifice him. King David knows this. Later it comes for sale, and David is a wealthy guy. He says, "I'll take that piece of land." So he buys that piece of land. He has a heart to build a temple. God says, "You're not building it." So he says, "Fine. Can my son build it?" God says, "Your son can build it." So, his son builds this massive temple.

They commit. They say, "God, you blessed us. We want to love you. We want to put you first in our lives." Then, over the course of 300 years, they fall into idolatry and superficial religion. What ends up happening is the Babylonians come. God tells us in the Old Testament the Babylonians come to judge, and they destroy the temple. The people get driven off into slavery.

Has that ever happened to you? You dedicate yourself to the Lord. You say you're going to do all of these things. Things start going well. You forget God. You fall into sin. Sin enslaves you. They come out of sin. They go, "God, I'm so sorry. Thanks for getting us out of this. Can we rebuild the temple?" God says, "You can rebuild the temple." They say, "Okay. It'll be small. It'll be modest. It'll be humble." They do it.

They say, "We're going to rededicate our lives to you, Lord." The Lord says, "That's great. Sounds good." A couple hundred years later, they fall into rebellion and sin and folly and idolatry, and God sends Antiochus as judgement on them. Antiochus puts the god Jupiter in the center of the temple, and he slaughters pigs on the altar, which would have been the worst thing you could do.

The people cry out. They repent and say they're sorry to God, and God raises up another man. His name was Herod (not the same Herod in the New Testament). Herod builds them a third temple, which is basically an expansion of that temple. Now Jesus comes and sees what's going on at *that* temple, and he cleanses it, and in AD 70 *that* temple is going to be destroyed.

This is what we call the *sin cycle*. This is what the whole book of Judges is. God saves a people. We say, "Oh, thank you, Lord." Then God makes us fruitful. What happens when people get fruitful is they forget God. Then what happens to their kids is their kids forsake God. That's it. One generation is fruitful. The next generation forgets. The next generation forsakes. The story of the temple is the story of Christians.

So, Jesus comes in, and it says he drives them out. Do you see it says they were selling pigeons? You go, "Why is that in there? Every word matters. They're selling a lot of animals. Why are you mentioning pigeons?" Because pigeons were what you sold to the poorest of the poor. It was what Mary and Joseph, because they were poor... Jesus grew up poor. It's the offering they would make.

God said, "We all make different amounts of money, but it's equal sacrifice. So, if you're poor, you just buy a little pigeon, and I'll count that as your sacrifice." This is well documented. What happened at the temple was that people would come at Passover. They'd come from all over. When they would come from far distances, they wouldn't bring their animals. I mean, it's a long walk. It might take you days or weeks to get there.

The temple said, "No problem. I know you couldn't bring your pigeon, but we'll sell you a pigeon. I know a pigeon normally costs a dollar, but here it costs \$10." It's like being stuck at a football game. It's like, "Oh man! A hot dog is \$14?" It's like, "Yeah, we've got you here now." This is what they were doing. It's like, "Ha-ha! You can't go anywhere."

They had the religious thing. "You want to sacrifice to the Lord, right? Okay. It'll be \$10." Then they would reach in to get their money out, and they'd say, "Sorry. That money is not good here. We need to do currency exchange. Don't worry. We have a really good deal on currency exchange." *Not*. It was a terrible deal. It was, like, four times what it should have been to exchange currency.

Here's what happened. The church became the exchange of religious goods and services. The temptation is for churches across time, for you guys to view yourselves as customers, clients, and consumers and that we have a role here, that we provide you a religious service.

"Do you want to be entertained a little? Do you want to laugh? Do you need some life hacks? What do you need? I'll give you that, and in return, why don't you give the church some money? Is there a new program you want us to start? Well, we'll start it if you give." The church becomes religious goods and services. We use God's things for man's purposes.

There are gross versions of this, where pastors use their church to completely platform their lives. They're almost preaching over the people to everybody else, hoping that somehow their Instagram followers or something else is going to get big. It happens in weird ways through mainline churches that leave the gospel.

This happens all the time. If you ever see churches in our city... I love our city, but you see churches in our city, and you drive by, and you go, "How does that church still exist? Nobody goes there. There's no gospel. There's no mission. There's no repentance. How is that building still there?"

I know how the building is still there. They turned it into a day care. I see this all the time. They're renting their parking lot out to the businesses around them to pay their bills. We're not saying those things are wrong to do. Those things are wrong to do when you've left the gospel and that's the only way you're paying for everything.

So, Jesus gets unbelievably... Could you imagine turning over tables? Do you see what he calls it? He said it's a den of robbers or a den of thieves. A den of thieves was a place where thieves could hang out before they caused harm. Maybe you don't think about it this way, but the church is sometimes where bad people (we believe everyone is bad and needs to repent of their sin; I'm talking about a different type of bad) try to hang out.

I'm not picking on churches, but churches are usually nice people... A lot of church people are nice and naïve. "We need help in the kids' ministry. We need more volunteers. We're desperate for people." This is why it's hard to get connected here. It's easy in one sense. Come to the Weekender. But we want to get to know you.

A church becomes a den of robbers when people in a church feel safe in their sin. This is a helpful clarification: The cross makes sin forgivable. Nothing makes sin safe. What we sing about is, "Thank goodness. Across time, as we head to heaven through the final judgment, the cross makes sin forgivable." Yes. Nothing ever, not even the cross, makes sin safe.

This happened to me recently. I was talking to a lady in our church, very connected in our church, kids in our student ministry, just a great family. I'm talking to them the other night, and the lady looks at me and says, "You know, when I first came to this church, I didn't like you." I thought, "Well, thank you very much." She said, "I didn't like you. I'd get in the car, and I'd just be angry."

She said, "Then I realized it was because you were telling us the truth from God's Word, and I wasn't used to that. I never had that happen before. Once I realized that, I

actually realized that's a chance for me to grow. That's a chance for me to repent. That's a chance for me to change. So thank you."

Jesus preaches a really short sermon. Do you see this? He gets in there, he does all that, but he preaches a short sermon. He says, "My house should be a house of prayer for all nations." That's it. It's the two things they were forgetting. Here's what's interesting. In Jewish tradition (not Jewish Scripture), what they said was going to happen was they said, "The Messiah is going to come, and when the Messiah comes, we know what he's going to do. He's going to cleanse the temple." This is what they believed.

"The Messiah is going to cleanse the temple of all of the Gentiles." Oh, the irony. He cleanses the temple of all of the religious people because they forgot about the Gentiles. There was an outer court. You can go look this up sometime. Just Google what the tabernacle looked like. There was an outer court called the *court of the Gentiles*.

The Old Testament Jewish religion was a "Come and see" religion. Today we have a "Go and tell" religion. Now, every "Go and tell" eventually becomes a "Come and see." You're out, and you might say, "Come and see my family. I want you to see a Christian family. Come and see my Community Group. Come and see my church." But primarily, in the New Testament, Christianity is internal and portable. It's "Go and tell."

In the Old Testament it was "Come and see." That's why it was geographically based. That's why they dressed a certain way. That's why the temple was so central. They'd forgotten about the Gentiles. So, he says, "You forgot it's to be a house of prayer for all nations." Then he says, "You forgot the first part, a house of prayer." Why prayer? What is prayer? There are a lot of long definitions. A short definition of *prayer* is personal communication with God.

This is a temptation in any church. We could get here. He said, "Guys, you forgot. The church exists to be a house of prayer for all nations." You exist, church, Two Cities, to connect people to God through Christ. That will be most clearly expressed in prayer. They'll talk to God. They'll repent of their sins. The church exists for those who believe and those who will one day believe, and they forgot that.

04 THE TREE EXPLAINED

So, Jesus goes to the tree and condemns the fruitlessness. He goes to the temple and condemns the faithlessness, and he goes back to the tree. Look with me at verse 20. ***"As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its***

roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.'"

By the way, this is the only destructive miracle Jesus does in all of the Gospels. Every other time Jesus does a miracle, he uses his power to restore, to heal, to cleanse, to get rid of the demonic. This is the only miracle in all four gospels that's destructive in nature.

It said it got to the roots. Here's what I want us to see for a minute. You know this. I just want to say it out loud. If you want new fruits, you need new roots. This is speaking of the radical nature of Christianity. We, as a teaching team here, are trying to teach about Christianity in such a way you say, "Jesus, I need you to change me from the inside out," because if you don't...

If you walk out of here and just think, "I need more fruit in my life..." If you just think you need more fruit, the temptation in your life is going to be to try to duct tape fruit on a dead tree. Isn't that a weird picture? Some of us try to do that. You're trying to staple fruit onto a tree that has no life. What would be better is for you to get the right root system so you can grow your own fruit that's going to be a blessing to you and everybody around you.

So, Jesus curses the tree, and then he teaches on the opposite of faithlessness and fruitlessness. I want us to see this. He just gave us two counter-visions. "Don't be like this tree, and don't be like that temple." Okay, I don't want to be like that. What does vibrant, faithful, fruitful Christianity look like? Here it is. He gives it to us in verse 22.

"And Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. 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. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 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.'"

I love this. He's saying, "What does it look like for you to have faith in God in the midst of a society that's fruitless and faithless?" Here's what faith in God means. It means I trust God. That's what faith means. We've talked about that before. We talked about that in the James series. *Faith* means literally I trust God. It's I have confidence in God.

This is something I'm going to try to work on. What I do a lot in my teaching here (I think rightly so) is I try to critique the wrong things about our culture. It's just part of

my role up here. "Here's how the culture is thinking about this wrong." Sometimes it's warning, "Here's where the culture is going."

I don't take anything back. It's all true, but I don't want anyone getting in the car going home, going, "Oh, our culture. Our culture is going to hell in a handbasket. I hate this culture. We have some dark days ahead of us. It's terrible." I want people to leave here like cork in the ocean. "You can't push me under. I'm just bouncing right back up. I am so unbelievably hopeful. Yeah, it's a dark world, but what a chance to be light. Oh yeah, there's suffering, but God is going to be in it with us."

Let's start praying some mountain-moving prayers. We don't do this. "God, I want to pray for big things." He says, "Pray with faith," and then do you see the other thing you have to pray with? You're not going to like this one. The faith is the fun one. It's like, "Oh yeah! Let's believe God for a bunch of stuff." The other one is hard: "Forgive." Do you see that?

Jesus teaches there are two components to living a fruitful, faithful, powerful, vibrant life in Christ. First is I have faith. Second is I forgive other people. How many lives are not fruitful? That's what's choking the tree of your life: bitterness and unforgiveness. C.S. Lewis said everybody thinks forgiveness is a great idea until they have something needing to be forgiven. As soon as they have to forgive somebody, it's like, "I don't know. Forgiveness isn't a great idea anymore."

Here's what this reminds us: there's a moral component to our prayer lives. When you don't forgive, you become bitter. Here's what bitterness says: "God, you got it wrong in my past." Anxiety says, "God, you're going to get it wrong in my future." Faith says, "God, I can't change the past, and I can't control the future, but I trust you." Jesus is saying, "I want you to have that vibrant faith."

05 THE TEMPLE AND BEING QUESTIONED

Then he makes one last move back to the temple to confront the religious leaders one last time. Verse 27: "***And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple...***" Again, third time...verse 11, verse 15, and now verse 27. "***...the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him...***" That represents the entire leadership, what would have been called the *Sanhedrin*.

"...and they said to him, 'By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?'" What are they talking about? Well, a lot of things, but obviously, the cleansing of the temple. I mean, you can see the assertive nature of Jesus Christ, going back to the temple the next day after flipping tables

there. "I have nothing to fear. I have nothing to hide. I'm going to go back." Look at what they do.

"Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.' And they discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But shall we say, "From man"?'—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'"

What keeps a people faithless and fruitless? We see it with the Pharisees. You go, "Why is this passage in here? Why does he go back to the temple? Why is this kind of the final condemnation of the Pharisees and the scribes and the teachers and the elders?" It's because there's one thing Jesus can't work with: people who won't be honest with him. No matter where you are today...

The good news is you can be like, "I have so little fruit in my life, and I'm not even very faithful. I need to grow in both of those." How do you grow in both of them? You be honest. That's what we tell people all the time. If you ever come to our Weekender, we say, "Here's what we want you to do. If you'll come consistently to our worship services and get in a Community Group and be honest, you're going to make it."

You can't just do the first two. You can't just say, "I show up each week, and I go to a Community Group often." It doesn't work. "I'm even in a DNA Group." It doesn't work unless you're honest. You're only as healthy or strong as you are honest. The beginning of Christianity starts with an honest confession. "Jesus, I need you. Jesus, help me."

Here's what I want us to end with: the precursor to fruitfulness is faithfulness. I remember I was brand new. I went into full-time ministry for the first time. I was working on a college campus, and it was so intimidating. I went to Elon University, and before I went to Duke to do ministry, I went over to UNC Greensboro for a few years. UNC Greensboro at the time was 16,000 students and high-rise dorms, which I wasn't used to.

I remember I worked for this college ministry, and they said, "Go to the campus." I would walk up to the campus, and I'd see these 10-story dorms. I was like, "I don't know anyone here, and I don't go to school here. I'm the old weird guy hanging around. I'm eating in the cafeteria. I'm working the night shift." I remember being so scared. I had all of these big dreams.

I was like, "I want to see people come to Christ. I want to see a movement. I want to see disciples made." I'll never forget. My boss, my first day going to the campus, said, "Kyle, just be faithful. You're worried about fruitfulness. Worry about faithfulness. The gospel goes forward one conversation at a time, one praying with your kids at a time, one sharing of your testimony at a time, one Bible study at a time, one good deed at a time."

So, let me just ask you. What has God given you to be faithful with that over time will be fruitful? You may say, "It's very little. It's a little house and a little job and a little money." Be faithful. God will be fruitful. How about *who*? Who has God put in front of you to be faithful with? You might say, "Well, it's my wife and my kids. It's an employer too." What would it look like if everyone here said, "We want to be faithful. We also want to be full of faith, and we believe on the other side of faithfulness is fruitfulness." Let's pray.

Lord, we lift up our lives to you, our servant King who comes riding humbly on a colt. What a picture of service to us. We thank you that in the gospel we know that the firstfruits, Jesus, are what you have done for us in the gospel, living the life, dying in our place, and rising from the dead. Those are the firstfruits, what you've done for us.

We also know there are two other things. There's something you want to do *in* us, and there's something you want to do *through* us, Lord. Would you do something in us, Lord? Would you increase the fruit of our lives, the fruit of the Holy Spirit all over this room, that people would go home and would make their families and their lives and their businesses better because Jesus is in their lives?

Lord, would their lives be so fruitful that other people around them can taste the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and goodness in their lives. Would you just keep us faithful? Faithful is just what we saw the disciples do at the beginning of the chapter. We take you at your word, and we take our next step. Please help us to do that. In Jesus' name, amen.