

64 Mark 11:12-25

All Leaf and No Fig

Text

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." **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. **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."

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."

Note to the Critics:

Textual

We are now in the final section of Mark - His Jerusalem ministry. He made his triumphal entry last week, and this week we consider his cursing of the fig tree and his cleansing of the temple. Before we get too far into the text I want to do a bit of apologetics here. One of the things I have heard repeatedly from Bart Ehrman in debates is that he never knew that there were variations in the biblical text until he went to seminary. As a result he went through a big crisis of faith and apostatized. He has written several books now, and is constantly on speaking tours and is a favorite writer and speaker for atheists and secularists in general, all for making the point that there are variations in the text.

I have a hard time seeing why this is such big news for everybody. I truly don't understand why this would make a splash at all. Yet each time people act as though he has just unearthed Christianity's dirty little secret. The whole interviews read like a bad Dan Brown novel complete

with a conspiracy on the Knights Templar. The only account I can give for it is deliberate ignorance. Christian leaders have been saying this kind of thing for a long long time - centuries actually. All they or anyone has to do is pick up a book and read. I suppose part of the problem is that people are just not that interested in reading a book on textual transmission and criticism. Still, Ehrman makes the point that pastors should tell their people about such things. So, although I am sorely tempted to say more on the matter, and in the interest of laying bear the facts, you should note that verse 26 is probably not in your Bible. I have dealt a bit with the issue of textual transmission in a previous sermon so I will not repeat all of that here. Suffice it to say that verse 26 is actually a copy of Matthew 6:15. Thus no information is lost, nor does any doctrine hinge upon it. It has poor manuscript support and is not original.

Stylistic

The second thing that I wanted to discuss briefly is the cleansing of the temple from a critics point of view. Some critics, like Ehrman, consider the account of Jesus cleansing the temple to be contradictory because it occurs here in the book of Mark at the end of Jesus' ministry, but in John it appears at the beginning of the book. You may think I am picking on Ehrman since I mention him a bit, but for good or ill he is the spokesperson for the modern-day Bible skeptic. If he will be set forth frequently by the media, then I may frequently refute him. Ben Witherington has said:

If you actually bother to read ancient biographies (see e.g. Tacitus's Life of Agricola, or Plutarch's famous parallel lives) you will discover that the ancients were not pedants when it comes to the issue of strict chronology as we are today. The ancient biographical or historiographical work operated with the freedom to arrange their material in several different ways, including topically, geographically, chronologically, to mention but three. Yes they had a secondary interest in chronology in broad strokes, but only a secondary interest in that.¹

This is actually an important part of proper Bible study. On a broad level you want to discern the literary structure of the book. The book of Judges would follow the life of a judge to the end and then start with a new judge. Whether they were contemporaries or separated by a long span of time did not really matter. Genesis 2 is a recapitulation of Genesis 1. Proverbs are arranged thematically. Revelation is composed in a recapitulation framework. Psalm 119 is arranged alphabetically according to the Hebrew alphabet. The first 8 lines all begin with the Hebrew letter Aleph, then next 8 lines all begin with the Hebrew letter Beth, and so on through the whole alphabet. Knowing this little fact will greatly aid in your understanding of a book. Thus it should cause no one consternation to discover that in the dictionary, "finish" come before "start." This is not a contradiction.

Nor is it a contradiction for the synoptic gospels to present a more chronological picture of Jesus' ministry while John takes a more thematic approach. There was one temple cleansing, and it occurred at the end of Jesus' ministry. There is no contradiction.

Now, on with the text.

1. Ben Witherington, "Bart Interrupted --- A Detailed Analysis of 'Jesus Interrupted' Part 1", Ben Witherington, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2009/04/bart-interrupted-detailed-analysis-of.html>, (accessed 5/4/09).

Anger at Fruitless Hypocrisy

Speaking of literary structure, take a look at how Mark has interwoven these accounts.

Temple Observation
Fig tree Cursing
Temple Cleansing
Fig tree withered
Temple Teaching

It may seem as though they are separate events, but they are related to one another. Jesus is foreshadowing, by his actions, the destruction of the the old economy.

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.

Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey and he went to the temple and looked around. He went back out to Bethany for the night and is now on his way in again and our text says he was hungry. Why didn't Jesus eat before they left? Bethany was very close to Jerusalem, why could Jesus not wait until he got into the city? We are not told. However, our Lord did nothing on a whim. This cursing of a fig tree was for a reason. I suspect that Jesus just wanted an excuse for acting out this parable.

An acted parable was not uncommon for the prophets of God. There was the acted parable that Jeremiah did with the loincloth, and also one with the pot. There. You may remember the scroll that Ezekiel ate, or the burden he carried to symbolize captivity. Perhaps the most famous was Hosea and his wife Gomer. Now Jesus, as prophet par excellence, acts out a parable.

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.

This tree had the signs of life, but was missing the fruit. It promised much but delivered nothing. It had signs of life and fruitfulness but with no substance. The religious establishment, like this tree, had all the signs of life and godliness, but it was all empty. All the sacrifices, all the rites and rituals were mere show with no attending fruit of the Spirit.

Isa 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness,

but behold, an outcry!

Luke 13:6-9

6 And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. 7 And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' 8 And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. 9 Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Matthew 21:43

43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

It is hard to miss the significance of this event. It is truly astounding that some people can read a passage like this and think that Jesus was throwing a fit because the fig tree did not produce fruit for him. That is nowhere close to the point of this text. Yet many critics, and even some Christians really struggle with this text. Why did Jesus get mad at a tree? Its not as though trees are sentient beings you know. Moreover, it was not even the season for figs, so that makes this all the more unreasonable.

I recently read an article by Roger Ebert who had previously posted a Q&A on creationism. That post, in his own words:

inspired a firestorm on the web, with hundreds, even thousands of comments on blogs devoted to evolution and science. More than 600 comments on the delightful FARK.com alone. Many of the comments I've seen believe I have converted to Creationism. Others conclude I have lost my mind because of age and illness. There is a widespread conviction that the site was hacked.

Ebert further says that he has not "received any praise from Creationists, which speaks well for their instincts; they're apparently more canny than the evolutionists who believe I have lost my mind."

But the purpose of this blog entry . . . is to discuss the gradual decay of our sense of irony and instinct for satire, and our growing credulity. . . .These days, there is no room for ambiguity, and few rewards for critical thinking. . . .The adventure with the Creationism article has been enlightening, and a little depressing. I expected better from evolutionists.

The kind of credulity of which Ebert speaks is the same mental plague that infects our Bible reading. This event was orchestrated by Christ to make a point. Read in the correct light, it means that the end is coming. The end of the age of the Jews as God's unique people. Understand what I am saying here. Some may accuse us of teaching replacement theology. That is not what I am advocating. It is expansion theology, not replacement theology. God's people are expanding, not being replaced. Jews may still have a place in Christ just the same as any people group. It is just that the Jews are not longer uniquely God's people; Italians and Germans, and Americans can also be God's people. We will discuss all of this in greater detail in the coming weeks.

Application

Ladies and gentlemen, by way of application, this world needs authentic Christians. This world needs real Christians. There is plenty enough show and precious little substance. There is plenty enough leaves, but very little fruit. But it is not a show of religiosity that the world needs. It needs people who are willing to get dirty. It needs people who are willing to get into the muck and mire to help them out. The world needs people who will sacrifice much to make a difference. More than all that, however, God desires authentic followers. God does not desire the self righteous pharisee that stands in the temple praying to God for all people to hear. God desires the honest tax collector that pounds his chest and cries, "Have mercy on me a sinner!" It is not the rich young ruler that God desires, but the poor blind man that cries, "Son of David have mercy on me!" It is not the miserly follower who worries about the cost of the perfume that God desires but the broken woman who weeps for forgiveness and anoints Jesus' feet.

Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. There is never so much joy and fulfillment when one is doing what he has been designed to do. Fish do not operate well out of the water. Birds were meant to fly. Deer, I imagine, would not enjoy being forced to walk on their hind feet. They were made to run swiftly and gracefully and you can almost feel their exhilaration when they run like that. And you dear Christian were designed to bear much fruit and to rejoice in God. Augustine wrote, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee." Until we operate as we were designed to operate, as fruit bearing, authentic Christians, we will be depriving ourselves of joy.