

A Savior For All Nations: Do Southern Baptists Really Get It?!

Mark 11:12-25

Introduction: 1) Southern Baptists are an interesting and fascinating people. I think most people who know us would agree whether they are in the family or not! Like most of our Christian brothers and sisters we thrive on controversy and are very hesitant to run from a fight! I have certainly observed this in my own lifetime with the CR, the GCR, and now the consideration of a “name change” for our 44,000 plus Convention of churches.

2) The name change issue: should we, again, at least study it? I think that is easily answered with a yes. Should we actually change our name? I believe the answer to that is a bit more complex but personally, I again believe the answer is yes.

3) However, whether we change our name or not of one thing I am certain: we desperately and definitely need a “heart change.” We need an inward transformation that will result in an outward transformation that will result in our churches on earth looking more like The Church in heaven! We need churches that gladly proclaim Jesus as a Savior for all nations! As of this moment “the SBC remains a mostly middle-class, mostly white network of mostly declining churches in the southern United States of America.” Those are the undeniable facts and that must change or we will die. Even more important is the reality that we must change or God will judge us for neglecting and even hiding the truth that we have “a Savior for all nations!” If the arms of God’s people do not reach around the whole world then they are too short. God judged His people Israel for this sin. Why would we think He would deal with us any differently?

4) Now, if we are to understand how this text should speak to us today we must embrace the “temple theology of the Bible.” It is crucial for a right understanding of this passage. God once had a physical temple located in Jerusalem. He now has a perfect temple located in heaven. That

temple is Jesus as He Himself said in John 2:18-22. As God once had a physical temple located in Jerusalem He now has a spiritual temple which is the church (1 Cor 3:16). As God once had a physical temple located in Jerusalem He now has a personal temple scattered all around the world as a witness that he is indeed a Savior for all nations. That temple is you and that temple is me (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Indeed that temple is anyone who recognizes that they are not their own, for they were bought with a price, the precious blood of Christ, our Passover “lamb (1 Cor. 5:7) without blemish or spot” (1 Pet 1:19).

5) Context: Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (11:1-10). He then goes (11:11) to the magnificent temple begun by Herod the Great in 19 B.C. and not completely finished until A.D. 64. Sadly, it would be totally destroyed just 6 years later in A.D. 70. He looks around at everything and since it is late in the day, He leaves (v. 11). It would soon be evident that Jesus did not like what He saw. A people and a place that was to be a light to the nations had become “a den of robbers” (v. 17), a hideout for religious outlaws. The status quo was not acceptable and He would make that abundantly and painfully clear.

Transition: How would our Lord respond to those who, though recipients of His grace and goodness, had failed in the assignment and calling He had given them? How will He respond to us today if we are likewise disobedient? That is a good and important question to ask.

I. Jesus will curse those who put on a show but do not produce. 11:12-14

- The day after the triumphal entry and his visit to the temple, our Lord and the disciples leave Bethany, a small village about 2 miles from Jerusalem and head back to the temple. It was the home of his close friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Apparently they, or at least Jesus, skipped breakfast because the text says, “he was hungry.” This will set the stage for one of the most controversial miracles performed

by our Lord, the cursing of a fig tree. Joseph Klausner in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* wrote it was “a gross injustice on a tree which was guilty of no wrong...” T.W. Manson said, “It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill-temper (for the supernatural energy employed to blast the unfortunate tree might have been more usefully expended in forcing a crop of figs out of season) and as it stands is simply incredible.” (Garland, *NIVAC*, 433). William Barclay said, “The story does not seem worthy of Jesus. There seems to be a petulance in it” (Hughes, vol. 2, 85). And the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell in his book *Why I Am Not a Christian* accused Jesus of “vindictive fury” and wrote of our Lord’s character, “I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history” (17-19). Jesus, however, was not acting like a spoiled brat who did not get His way. There is no anger. There is no malice. This is no out of control burst of a temper tantrum. It is, as we will see, an object lesson, an acted out parable of our Lord’s judgment on Israel and on those who claim to be one thing but are actually another, who put on a show but do not produce. In the immediate context it is a curse on the temple and the nation of Israel. By application it could be a curse on you and me, and on the churches of the SBC. Note two crucial truths we must see and get!

1) Our Savior curses hypocrisy.

11:12-13

- Walking from Bethany to Jerusalem works up an appetite in Jesus (v. 12).
- He sees in the distance a fig tree in leaf (v. 13). Though it is not yet “the season for figs” (v. 13), the presence of the leaves would indicate this tree would have

fruit on it, if not full figs, perhaps, and more likely, *paggim*, small green figs (knops). Though not all that tasty, they were edible and could relieve His hunger.

- However, the tree was barren. It bore no fruit. Its leaves promised one thing but it had not produced. It was a hypocritical fig tree. The leaves, the outward appearance, said “come here I have fruit that will satisfy and meet your needs.” However, when you come you realize you have been deceived. It was a show with no substance.
- Sadly this is what Israel had become, especially the Temple and its religious leaders (the Sanhedrin) who oversaw its operation. Here was a people that gave an outward and visible appearance of great spirituality and devotion to God but on close inspection was exposed a hypocrite. Gentiles were denied the opportunity to come close to God being restricted to the outer court and subjected to a religious carnival. The poor were exploited by money-changers and merchants. The temple culture had grown big and impressive but it was all a sham. Empty religiosity was there actual condition, and Jesus cursed them for it (v. 14). There was no gospel and no God to be found for those needing to find salvation. Once a beacon of light, it was now only a faint flicker that was about to be extinguished.
- Question: If our Lord did that then to His own people (John 1:11) what makes us think He would not do it to us today? Professing the fruit of righteousness and devotion to God, could it be we are nothing more than the dry and dying leaves of sterile religion, ritualism, and profession? Charles Spurgeon well said, “The great majority of persons who have any sort of religion at all bear leaves, but they produce no fruit.” (Nothing But Leaves, #555, 2-21-1884). “Oh, Southern

Baptists may not be much but we are the best God has!” “Oh, we may be in decline but at least we are not losing ground like the Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians.” “Oh, don’t forget, we are the largest Protestant denomination in America with the largest mission force in the world.” Don’t mind asking, we will be glad to tell you. Never mind we are in decline there too in terms of financial support, total numbers and especially men! Hypocrisy always equals self-deception. We think we are one thing when we are actually another. And our Savior curses hypocrisy.

2) Our Savior curses unfruitfulness.

11:13-14

- The prophets often spoke of Israel by the symbol of a fig tree (Jer 8:13; 29:17; Hos 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7; Micah 7:1-6). Jeremiah 8:13 especially stands out and I cannot help but wonder if this text in particular was in the mind of Jesus and His actions its fulfillment? Just listen to what the prophet said in verses 8-14, “How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us’? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken; behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD, so what wisdom is in them? Therefore I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD. When I

would gather them, declares the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.” Why do we sit still? Gather together; let us go into the fortified cities and perish there, for the LORD our God has doomed us to perish and has given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against the LORD.”

- Jesus arrived at the fig tree to find “nothing but leaves.” Mark informs us that “it was not the season for figs” (v. 13), but the tree with its leaves said, “come to me. Others may be barren but not me. I have fruit for you.”
- Jesus responded (v. 14) by simply saying. “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” Mark informs us that “his disciples heard it.” They were there and eyewitnesses to what happened. This is no tale, myth or legend conjured up only to make a theological or moral point. Oh, there is theology to be sure and there is history too.
- There is a point without a doubt. Fruitlessness now may result in fruitlessness forever. Lose your usefulness for Jesus and He may curse you and move on! After all, it is not He who needs us. It is we who desperately need Him. We need Him to save us. We need Him to make us useful and fruitful. Turn our backs on Him and His gospel, turn His church into a religious club of idolatry, hypocrisy and unfruitfulness and you will receive not His blessing but His curse. Protest all you want about how good you are. Nationalism, regionalism and ethnocentrism are an abomination in His eyes. And mark my words; He sees it, He sees it all. His eyes which are a flame of fire (Rev. 19:12) will expose you for who and what you really are.

- III. Racist and bigoted churches that pervert and deny the heart of the gospel.

Those who worry more about their neighborhoods filled with churches than those who have none!

II. Jesus will condemn that which promises one thing but delivers another. 11:15-19

- On September 6, 1520, Martin Luther wrote in *An Open Letter to Pope Leo X*, “The Roman church, once the holiest of all, has become the most licentious den of thieves, the most shameless of all brothels, the kingdom of sin, death and hell. It is so bad that even Antichrist himself, if he should come, could think of nothing to add to its wickedness” (Gartand, *NIVAC*, 446).
 - We call what we read in vs. 15-19 the cleansing of the temple and in one sense it is. But, it is actually much more. It is actually its condemnation. It is Jesus’ critique of false religion. It is not too strong to say He hates it.
 - John’s gospel records a temple cleansing in 2:13-22. While some believe he has taken the event in our text and placed it as the front of his gospel for theological purposes, I am inclined to believe there were actually two cleansings: one early in His public ministry (recorded by John) and one at the end of His ministry recorded by the synoptic gospel writers (Matt. 21:12-16; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-47).
 - The acted out parable of the cursing of the fig tree now finds its fulfillment and reality in our Lord’s assault of those he identifies as a “den of robbers” (v. 17), “a hive of spiritual thieves!”
- 1) Our Lord will deal with our wickedness. 11:15-16
- In typical Markan simplicity he tells us that Jesus 1) comes into Jerusalem, 2) enters the temple (the outer court of the Gentiles [500 yds. x 325 yds. or 35

acres]), and 3) makes havoc of those who sold the animals for sacrifice (specifically mentioning pigeons, the sacrificial animal for the poor, v. 15) and exchanged money. Further, he blocked the thorough-fare (v. 16) that may have become a sort of “short-cut” for those who wanted to get from one side of the temple mount to the other without having to go the long way around. No respect. No reverence. None!

- Let’s summarize:
 - People come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover in the Spring of the year. The population would grow to ten times its normal size. Hundreds of thousands with no hotels, not even a “Motel 6.” Family, friends and fields would be their accommodations. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that in one Passover year (A.D. 66) 255,000 lambs were bought, sold, and sacrificed in the temple courts. (Edwards, 341).
 - Pilgrims were requested to bring an acceptable (perfect!) sacrifice that had to pass a rigorous inspection. Most chose, were really forced, to buy an approved animal certified by the Mafia of temple priests backed by the powerful and corrupt Sanhedrin. The mark up was shameful and immoral. Some estimate the mark up was 16 times the normal price (2 pigeons normally sold say for \$0.25 now sold for around \$4.00).
 - Money changers would exchange foreign currency, that was unacceptable for transaction in the temple, into Jewish currency, again for an outrageous fee. Think airport exchange rates!

- Thus Jesus saw extortion, bribery, greed and dishonesty at every turn in this religious bazaar and He had enough. He got physical in righteous rage and indignation and He cleaned house! His holy wrath burned with passion and purity as He restored, at least for a moment, the temple of God to its rightful purpose. Here is God's greatest High Priest exercising His rightful authority over His temple. I like the way pastor Sam Storms described what happened, "According to v. 15, He 'drove out' the merchants. The word is the same used often of exorcising or expelling demons. Jesus suddenly became a bouncer! He grabbed them by the scruff of the neck, kicked them in the seat of the pants, overturned their tables, and knocked them from their perches. When the time comes for His crucifixion, he will permit them to lay hands on Him and carry Him off. But not now!"
- All wickedness is an abomination to our Lord. But religious wickedness in His name; He finds it especially detestable. And, He will deal with it. You can count on that!

2) Our Lord will judge concerning our witness. 11:17-19

- Verse 17 brings us to the heart of our Lord's anger over what His temple has become. The text says by His actions and His words, "He was teaching them." He then quotes from Isaiah 56:7, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations." However, now citing Jeremiah 7:11 He declares, "But you have made it a den of robbers." So much is here!

First, only Mark includes the crucial phrase "for all the nations." In fact listen to the context of Isaiah 56:7 beginning with Isa 53:3 and reading through

53:7: “Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people;” and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” God’s temple is to be a house of prayer, a place of worship that attracts and is for all the nations! It is not a shrine to be admired and praised. It is to exhibit no geographical, national, racial or ethnic segregation or discrimination. None! I love the way John Piper puts it in *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian*, “Over and over, Jesus shows that the people of God will no longer be defined in an ethnic way...The new people that he is calling into existence is defined not by race or ethnicity or political ties, but by “producing the fruit of the kingdom”...This will mean a new global family made up of believers in Christ from every ethnic group on the planet. And it will mean that those who love that vision will work toward local manifestations of that ethnic diversity. Jesus is the end of ethnocentrism – globally and locally. Not color but faith in Christ is the mark of the kingdom. But it is a mighty long journey. And the price

is high. Jesus was on the Calvary road every step of the way. He knew what it would finally cost him. It would cost him his life. But his heart was in it. To the end.” (119). Israel missed this and too many of our churches do as well both at home and in their concern for the nations. And, as the chief priest was mainly at fault so are many pastors today. A genuine GCR will succeed or fail on the back of the pastors, our religious leaders.

Second, the context of Jeremiah 7:11 is painfully instructive. Jesus is declaring the fulfillment of that ominous prophecy by his symbolic act on this very day. It is a long passage but Jeremiah 7:1-29 is worth reading!

- It was popularly believed that when the Messiah came He would cleanse and purge the temple of Gentiles. Instead, Jesus comes and clears and cleanses the temple for Gentiles. Israel’s religious show with all its glitz, glitter and fan-fare was an empty embarrassment. Instead of bringing people into God’s presence they hid and obscured it to such a degree that no one could find Him. Jesus said enough! Your charade is over.
- Jesus’ protest caught the ear and attention of the Sanhedrin (see also 11:27!) He had called them out and they did not appreciate it one bit. Little wonder that the religious elites wanted to destroy Him (v. 18). And the stakes are now much higher. It was one thing for Jesus to tick off the country lay preachers called the Pharisees. It is something else to take on the chief priest and the powerful Sanhedrin. Galilee was like the minors. Jerusalem is the major leagues! A showdown is on the horizon. However, fear paralyzed them on this day. As for the crowds they were “astonished”, astounded, struck out of their senses, and not

sure what to make of all this teaching. Jesus would, with sadness and grief, leave and go home to Bethany (v. 19). Tomorrow would bring another day of teaching.

He would press on.

III. Jesus will challenge us to believe in God but knows doubt is an ever present danger.

11:20-25

- Andrew Murray well said, “Christ actually meant prayer to be the great power by which His church should do its work and the neglect of prayer is the great reason the church has not greater power over the masses in Christian and heathen countries... The power of the church to truly bless rests on intercession: asking and receiving Heavenly gifts to carry to men.”
- Mark concludes the fig tree/temple story with lessons on faith, prayer and forgiveness, the very things the people should have found through God’s temple. The fig tree event brackets, serves as bookends to, the temple story and interprets it for us. It clearly reveals that Jesus did not just cleanse the temple. He cursed it. It had failed in the divine assignment given to it by God and it would be destroyed. With no fruit found, its use was at an end. God would remove it and do so in a dramatic fashion in less than a generation when the Romans invaded under the general Titus (A.D. 70) and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.
- Jesus uses all of this as an opportunity to teach his disciples two more valuable spiritual truths that should be our constant companions. They are simple and not profound. They are also essential and important.

1) Put your faith in this Savior.

11:20-24

- When the disciples and Jesus passed the fig tree the next day it was dead (v. 20). Jesus' last miracle in Mark (prior to the resurrection) brings death not life! Sympathy for a soul-less tree in our day is badly misplaced and says much about our sloppy sentimental culture and its tragic perversion of real values. God had told Jonah to weep over lost people not a plant! Jesus says weep over a dead temple not a dead tree.
- Peter, an eyewitness to all that has happened the previous two days remembers our Lord's words recorded in v. 14 and notes they have come to fruition immediately (v. 21), "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." It is dead. John 15:6 warns us, "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." Sinclair Ferguson is "spot on", "the question of our spiritual fruitfulness is one of immense seriousness which we ignore at our peril....Jesus means what He says! (*Let's Study Mark*, 185).
- Jesus' response in vs. 22-24, as well as verse 25, is somewhat surprising and at first glance seems out of place: "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." Now, what are we to make of all this?

1) vs. 22: "Have faith in God." The great missionary Hudson Taylor said, "God uses men who are weak and feeble enough to lean on Him." He is faithful

when the religious establishment and its institutions fail. Trust the One who judges with severity and extends amazing grace to those who do not deserve it but seek it in faith.

- 2) vs. 23-24: Have mountain moving faith that 1) does not doubt 2) believes and 3) ask in prayer. “Truly” is *amen* which gives self-authenticating authority to the words of Jesus. “The mountain” is a hyperbole that may play on the fact that the city of Jerusalem which sits upon a mountain or the Mt. of Olives is in near sight. It represents what appears to be impossible, immovable, something beyond our finite ability!! Good! This is where faith begins. Believing faith taps into God’s power to accomplish His purpose. Again hear Andrew Murray who said, “We have a God who delights in impossibilities.”
- An important point of clarification: True and believing prayer is not attempting to get God to change His will to fit our plans. It is a passionate pursuit to see God’s plans accomplished in us! Prayer is not conjuring God up like some “genie in a bottle” obligated to grant us whatever we wish. Read Matt 6:9-10; Mark 14:36; John 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:23-24; and 1 John 5:14-15 before you draw such a foolish and erroneous theological conclusion. Let Scripture interpret Scripture as you apply “the analogy of faith.”
 - Reflecting on this text I recently tweeted (9-29-11), “There are some things we should not pray for and some things our good God will not give. PTL!”
 - Praying in faith with mountain moving faith, our God will give us what we need to glorify His name. Here is a “house of prayer” you can bring your petitions to! In one of his hymns John Newton said it like this, “Thou are coming to King!

Large petitions with thee bring! For His grace and power are such—non can ever ask too much!” So when we pray we trust not only His power to give us what we ask, but also in His wisdom to give us what we need! I trust Him enough to have Him say no and turn me down if that is what He chooses. That means “we may receive answers we do not want, find things we are not looking for, and have doors opened [and closed] we do not expect.” (Garland, *NIVAC*, 449). And, since He has raised the issue of prayer, Jesus shares one additional insight and what an important one it is!

2) Be forgiving like this Savior.

11:25

- Here comes the gospel wrapping up this entire episode in a grace package! We can forgive because we have been forgiven through the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. Forgiveness so freely and graciously extended to us can now be graciously and freely extended to others. The theme of prayer that dominates vs. 22-25 finds its contextual connection in v. 17 and the fact that God’s temple which is what we now are is to be a “house of prayer” and “a house of prayer for all nations.” Jesus is such a temple for Heb 7:25 says, “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” And, we are to be such a temple extending the same forgiveness that we are confident we have received and will continue to receive from the God we now call Father (v. 25). Interestingly, this is the only time in Mark’s gospel you see the phrase “Father in heaven.” Matthew is very fond of it. Perhaps Mark includes it here because the Father who is in heaven is by default “fatherly” over all the nations. By means of the temple named Jesus and through

millions of temples called Christians who are unrestricted by geography and structural boundaries; pagans, unwashed and unclean Gentiles, can find the Savior for all nations and receive the forgiveness so freely offered from the Father who in heaven is watching over all the earth.

Conclusion:

- Are you a barren fig tree? Am I? Are Southern Baptists? Can I be specific? Can you forgive those you may hate and who have wronged you enough to get the gospel to them? Can you? Can we? Can you remove any and all barriers that would keep them from a genuine face to face encounter with the Savior for all nations? Can you? Will we? Will we pay any price necessary that all the nations might hear of King Jesus?
- The missionary C. T. Studd said, “Some wish to live within the sound of a chapel bell. I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell!” Now that is a great place to plant a temple! That is great place to plant a life with a sign that reads, “A Savior for All Nations! Come on in! All are welcomed! None will be turned away!”
- Do we really get it? I pray that we do. Time will certainly tell.