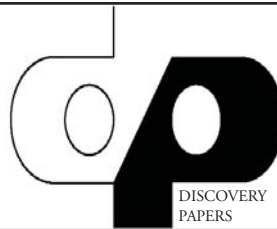


A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS

*SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK*



Catalog No. 100110
Mark 11:12-25
34th Message
Scott Grant
January 10, 2010

Have you ever wondered why God created humans to need food? What trouble he might have spared us if we didn't need to eat. Why food? The answer, I suppose, is multifaceted. In one facet, God created us to need food because he loves metaphors. In the Scriptures, physical hunger is sometimes used as an illustration for spiritual hunger. Hunger teaches us that we need more than food, for humans don't live by bread alone.

In Mark 11:12-25, Jesus hungers. It may not surprise us, given what the Scriptures teach us about hunger, that he hungers for more than food. It may surprise us, however, to find that we can satisfy his hunger. So, how might we satisfy the hunger of the Son of God?

The hunger of Jesus

Mark 11:12-14:

On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.¹

Jesus hungers, but for what? For food? Perhaps. But he has just left Bethany for the brief, two-mile trip to Jerusalem. If he was hungry, why didn't he eat in town, where food was readily available? And if he was hungry, why did he hope that an out-of-season fig tree might satisfy him? Only the spiritual nature of Jesus' hunger makes sense of the story. A day earlier, Jesus journeyed toward Jerusalem while being hailed by pilgrims as the Messiah, the ultimate Jewish king. However, when he entered Jerusalem, Jewish leaders declined to honor him or even meet him. Jesus hungers for spiritual fruit in Jerusalem.²

Even though figs are out of season, Jesus still hopes that he might find something—anything—on the tree, perhaps an early first-ripe fig or even a small bud that signals future fruit. Jesus has seen "everything" in the temple after his arrival in Jerusalem (Mark 11:12); now he just wants "something" from the out-of-season fig tree, as if by some kind of miracle. As he draws near, however, he finds nothing other than what he saw from afar: a tree with leaves. Despite what he has seen in Jerusalem, Jesus still hopes to find some spiritual fruit there, as if by some kind of miracle. Hungry people hope for miracles. His hunger for spiritual fruit, however, is not being satisfied by Jerusalem or its temple. Jesus therefore judges the fig tree, pronouncing its destruction. His pronouncement bodes ill both for Jerusalem and its temple.

Jesus hungers for spiritual fruit in us. He hungers, first of all, to be received. Jerusalem snubbed him. We must

receive him. We can welcome him so that he, through the Holy Spirit, might work in the deep places of our hearts and our church to cultivate spiritual fruitfulness. He is extraordinarily hopeful, believing that the supernatural work of the Spirit can create fruit where none would otherwise be expected.

Jesus, the Son of God, is hungry. We can serve him. We can feed him. We can satisfy him. How? By receiving him. Open the gates of your heart and let him in. If we refuse him, Jesus' words to the fig tree may haunt us: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"

Having cursed the fig tree outside Jerusalem, what will Jesus do when he visits the city?

Parable of destruction

Mark 11:15-16:

Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple.

Jesus, having seen the fig tree in leaf, came to it and pronounced judgment against it. Now, having seen everything in the temple the previous day, he comes to it and acts against it. His demonstration—driving out buyers and sellers, overturning tables and benches, stopping those who were carrying merchandise—constitutes a parable of destruction. Just as Jesus pronounced judgment against the fig tree, he dramatizes judgment against the temple in the manner of the prophets, who illustrated their messages with dramatic actions. Because Jerusalem is bustling with pilgrims who have come to celebrate the Passover, Jesus has a prime-time audience.

The prophet Malachi predicted that the Lord would "suddenly come to his temple" and warned Israel, "But who can endure the day of his coming?" (Malachi 3:1-2). The prophet Zechariah, anticipating the establishment of the kingdom of God, predicted, "And there will no longer be a Canaanite [or "merchant"] in the house of the Lord of hosts in that day" (Zechariah 14:21). Jesus, with Messianic authority, echoing the actions of former kings, acts in fulfillment of both Malachi and Zechariah to restore the kingdom of God (2 Chronicles 29-30, 2 Kings 22).

Jesus interrupts the ministry of the temple. For a moment, he puts a stop to the animal sacrifices, most of which symbolized forgiveness of sins. He thereby lays bare the sins of the people, who temporarily have no ability to carry out sacrifices. Earlier in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus upstaged the temple by offering forgiveness of sins apart from the ministry of the temple, raising the ire of some

scribes, who were experts in the Jewish law (Mark 2:1-12). With the coming of the Messiah, the temple is on its way to being redundant. God is dealing with sin—indeed, with all evil—in a deeper way. The Son of Man has come “to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Sometimes, Jesus interrupts our routines—he overturns our tables, so to speak—and lays our sins bare. At least for a moment, our normal ways of coping with moral shortcomings—denial, trying harder, self-flagellation, self-pity—fail us. Then we realize, or we have the opportunity to realize, that we need help, the kind of help only Jesus can give. At such a moment, he comes to our aid with the body and blood of his healing love.

Jesus, in Mark 11:17-18, gives a rationale for making a scene in the temple. The temple not only suffers from redundancy, it also suffers from corruption.

A house of prayer or a den of robbers?

Mark 11:17-18:

And He began to teach and say 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 ROBBERS’ DEN.” The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.

Jesus, in explaining his actions in the temple, employs the words of Isaiah, who envisioned the day when the temple would become “a house of prayer of all the nations” (Isaiah 56:7). God has always dwelt with Israel, symbolically in the temple, not simply for the sake of Israel but also for the sake of the world (1 Kings 8:41-43). Jesus is saying, in so many words, that the day envisioned by Isaiah, when the nations would come to fully share in the blessings of Israel, has come. Israel, though, fails to recognize the day.

Jesus, employing the words of Jeremiah, tells those listening to him that they have made the temple a “robbers’ den” (Jeremiah 7:11). In Jeremiah’s day, the people of Israel worshiped other gods and practiced injustice but believed that the temple protected them from the judgment of the Lord. After all, it was, said the people of Jeremiah’s day, “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” The prophet, though, said people in the temple were hiding from God’s judgment like bandits from lawmen. Jeremiah said that the temple provided no protection, and he predicted its destruction, which came to pass in 586 B.C., when Babylon sacked Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:1-15).³

Just like the people of Jeremiah’s day, the people in Jesus’ day believe they are safe from God’s judgment because of the temple. But Jesus, with his actions and teaching, is predicting God’s judgment on the temple (Mark 13:1-2). In what sense has the temple become subject to judgment?⁴ Jesus’ problem, in that he dramatizes God’s judgment against the temple, which Israel as a whole appealed to, is not so much with particular activities in the temple but with the entirety of Israel, which is shot through with corruption, just as it was in Jeremiah’s day. Part of the problem was militant nationalism, which in part explains Jesus’ use

of the word translated “robbers” (*lestēs*), which would be better translated “brigands” or “insurrectionists.”⁵ Israel, corrupt as it was, the haunt of insurrectionists who sought to take up arms against Gentiles, was by no means what it was supposed to be: a light to the nations. Nor was its temple close to being what it was predicted to be: a house of prayer for all nations.

Chief priests, who supervised the temple, and scribes determine that Jesus must be stopped, lest he undermine their agendas. The chief priests and scribes, along with the elders, constituted the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council. Many of the scribes were also Pharisees, who tended to favor revolution against Rome. The chief priests, who were drawn from the Sadducees, tended to favor the status quo. Jesus worries the Pharisees for failing to endorse the revolution, and he worries the chief priests for stirring up the crowds and disrupting the status quo.

Looking for God or running from God?

Many of us, if we’re honest, might confess that at least some part of us hopes that our involvement with church will keep God from overturning the tables of our lives. We think that if we give God a little of what he wants, he will let us pursue our agendas. In this story, Jesus is not concerned so much with our agendas as he is with giving religious shelter to them. The question, then, is whether we are using church involvement to sanction agendas that oppose God’s will. Jack Crabtree, a former pastor of our church, said, “Most people don’t come to church because they’re looking for God. Most people come to church because they’re running from God and looking for cover.” Are we coming to church but hiding from God? Perhaps we’re hiding from God and not even aware that we’re doing so. Much of what we do, for good or ill, essentially becomes second nature. We do it without thinking.

If you are beginning to see something of your propensity to use church involvement to shelter your agenda and hide from God, then it’s time to come out in the open. Jesus is not our accuser; he’s our high priest. True, in this story, he slices us open with his actions and words, but only so that we might see, that we might confess, and that we might be healed. The temple, after all, was there to deal with sins. Today, God’s new temple, the church of Jesus Christ, deals with sins. If you’re coming to church but hiding from God, you are probably also hiding from those you sit next to in church. Open up, not only to God, but also to others in the church. Come out of hiding and be healed.

Only as we come out of hiding do we become what we are supposed to be: a house of prayer for all nations. God dwells with us—he hears our confessions, he gives us each other, he heals us—not simply for our sakes but also for the sake of the world. One of the main reasons people in our world shun the church is because they believe it’s full of hypocrites. In a 2009 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 55 and 53 percent of former Catholics and Protestants, respectively, became unaffiliated because they believe that religious people are hypocritical, judgmental, or insincere. If we make it a practice to come out of hiding, to be honest with God and each other, we might change a few minds. Most people, to some extent, are hiding. Many people, however, also want to come out of hiding, if only someone would accept them. To be a

church where transparency is both valued and practiced is to go a long way toward fulfilling our vocation to be a house of prayer for all nations.

Writer Dan Wakefield took to heart this advice a college professor gave him: “Whenever you write the thing that’s the most painful to you—the thing that is most embarrassing, that you would feel terrible about if other people knew it—that is when you really reach people. Because everybody has had his own version of it.”⁶

One Sunday last fall, we canceled our sermon and opened up our two worship services for congregational sharing. People opened up about personal struggles. One of the services ran overtime before we finally ended it. We heard later about more people who were inspired to share but weren’t able to because the service ended. We also heard about the presence of visitors who were shocked—and blessed—by the transparency of those who shared. We’re planning to open up our services for congregational sharing again in the near future, so stay tuned.

When we come out of hiding, we not only open ourselves to God’s healing, we also reach people. Will we put a stop to Jesus, like the chief priests and scribes, for the threat he poses to our agendas, or will we let his piercing words do their work so that we might come out of hiding and fulfill our vocation as a house of prayer for all nations?

Jesus, after disrupting the ministry of the temple, leaves Jerusalem along with his disciples.

Have faith in God

Mark 11:19-23:

When evening came, they would go out of the city. As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.” And Jesus answered saying to them, “Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.

By bracketing the story of the temple with the story of the fig tree, Mark poetically illustrates that two stories relate to each other. The fig tree represents the temple, which itself represents Jerusalem and Israel as a whole. Mark noted in verse 14 that the disciples were listening as Jesus judged the fig tree. Now, as they are passing by on the way to Jerusalem, Peter notices that the tree has withered.

Jesus addresses all the disciples concerning the implications of his actions against the fig tree and the temple, beginning with the words, “Have faith in God.” In his first recorded words in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus commanded listeners in Galilee to “repent and believe.” He’s been looking for faith, or belief: the kind of faith that realizes that God is bringing his kingdom near (Mark 1:15). Have faith not in the temple, especially because the temple is corrupt and passing away; instead, have faith in God and believe that he is doing something new and will destroy the temple, just like Jesus destroyed the fig tree.

Jesus wants the disciples to observe, with the faith that he commends, that God will respond to whomever unwaveringly and confidently commands “this mountain” to be cast into the sea. The mountain Jesus refers to, as he and the disciples approach it, is Mount Zion, the home of Jerusalem and the temple. Isaiah reported that a voice was calling for “every mountain and hill to be made low” in preparation for the return of the Lord to Zion—a voice that John the Baptist owns in the Gospel of Mark (Isaiah 40:3-4, Mark 1:2-3) Furthermore, Jesus has cursed the fig tree and dramatized judgment against the temple, and he will explicitly tell the disciples, in reference to the temple, “Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down” (Mark 13:2). “This mountain” is Zion, and the one who speaks to it that it might be “cast” (*ballō*) into the sea is Jesus, just as he spoke to the fig tree and began to “drive out” (*ekballō*) the buyers and sellers from the temple.

Jesus did not doubt: he did not pull back from wanting the destruction of the temple. He believed both that God was doing something new and that what he said was literally already “happening.” He could read the signs; he had looked around at everything in the temple (Mark 11:11). He knew the temple was doomed. Jesus, of course, was true to his word: the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. in response to a Jewish rebellion—a rebellion that was taking shape before Jesus’ eyes.

The Lord often gets our attention through odd events like the withering of a fig tree. The life of faith involves becoming attentive to such events and bringing them to the attention of the Lord. He uses these events in our lives to foster faith, especially faith in the one whose words move the mountains of evil in our world.

Jesus now invites his disciples to follow his example.

The new temple

Mark 11:24-25:

Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.” [“But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”]⁷

What is the new thing God is doing? He’s forgiving sins based on the once-for-all sacrifice of his Son; he’s dwelling in his Son; he’ll be dwelling in his people through his Spirit. In other words, he’s building a new temple, not with stones and mortar but with flesh and blood. Not surprisingly, then, Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer, faith, and forgiveness, which were central to the ministry of the temple.

Jesus is not telling his disciples to believe that God will give them anything they want if they pray with the belief that he will grant their request. If Jesus were teaching this, then he would later violate his own instructions when he prays in Gethsemane, “All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You

will” (Mark 14:36). Indeed, all things are possible for God, and for those who believe, as Jesus says in Mark 9:23, and for those who believe that they have received what they have asked for. Nevertheless, “all things” does not mean “anything” without qualification. Jesus is not, for example, promising that God will literally cast any mountain into the sea if someone can pray while unequivocally believing that God will grant his or her request. No one who worships God can pray in such a way, with certainty that God will answer such a capricious prayer.

No, Jesus has just said that God will respond to his faith-based pronouncement of judgment on Mount Zion. “Therefore,” Jesus says, because he demonstrates this kind of faith, his disciples should have this kind of faith as well. What kind of faith is that? It’s spiritually sensitive faith that participates in the vanquishing of evil and the establishment of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is telling his disciples to have the kind of faith that hears and sees what God is doing and to pray accordingly. Jesus entered the temple, saw what was happening, and spoke accordingly. If the disciples have faith in God, if they have eyes and ears to see and hear what he is doing to advance his kingdom, then, of course, they should believe that he is doing such things and pray along those lines; and, of course, God will answer those prayers. It’s not a matter of praying for anything and believing that God will say yes to it; it’s a matter of being sensitive to what God is doing to advance his kingdom, to what is in fact already “happening” (often, such sensitivity comes through prayer), and praying according to such faith. Jesus promises that God will answer such faith-based prayers. He will cast mountains into the sea, if they oppose his purposes, and destroy obstacles to worship, as he cast Mount Zion into the sea metaphorically and destroyed the temple actually.⁸

Jesus instructs his disciples not only to pray with faith, he also instructs them to pray with forgiveness. Believing prayer results in the granting of petitions; forgiving prayer results in receiving the Father’s forgiveness. Scholar N.T. Wright comments: “The heart that will not open to forgive others will remain closed when God’s forgiveness is offered”⁹ As the disciples follow Jesus and take on mountains of evil, they cannot do so with mountains of malice in their own hearts. Jesus hung on a cross without malice for those who both put him there and mocked him for being there (Mark 15:29-32). As the disciples, soon to be apostles, confront Jewish and Roman opposition, they must do so in love.

When King Solomon dedicated the original temple, he prayed that God would answer prayers, that he would forgive sins, and that he would respond to foreigners (1 Kings 8:27-53). When Jesus enters the temple, it is not the season for ripe figs. The temple proves not to be the answer to Solomon’s prayers. It will take a new temple for that: a new temple that Jesus is building in the hearts of his disciples, a temple that will expand to include all those who pray and believe and forgive in his name.

Partnering with God

Jesus teaches us, as living stones in God’s new temple,

about faith, prayer, and forgiveness. Through biblical stories such as this one and through his active involvement in our lives, he helps us cultivate a spiritually sensitive faith that pays attention to what he is doing in our lives and in our world so that we might partner with him to vanquish evil and establish the healing, loving rule of God. We partner with him not least by praying—boldly, confidently—in response to what we see God doing in our lives and in our world. God, speaking first to David, then to Jesus, and finally through Jesus to us, says, “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, / And the very ends of the earth as Your possession” (Psalm 2:8). Really? Shall we ask? Since moving to Sunnyvale a year and a half ago, I’ve found myself praying, “Lord, just give me Sunnyvale.” We’ve planted three new community groups in Sunnyvale, and I pray for them regularly, and for other groups throughout our area. Where do you live? What’s on your heart? Who—or what—might you pray for? A group in our church meets every week simply to pray for India. Is it any wonder that we’re sending thirty people to India in a few weeks? The kingdom advances through prayer.

If we’re going to be a house of prayer for all nations, we must, of course, pray. However, we cannot presume to take on evil in the world while allowing the malice in our own hearts to fester. Therefore, we do the hard and beautiful work, with the help of the Spirit, to forgive those who have wronged us. The mountain that may need to be moved may be in our own hearts.

When the mountains in our world seem immovable, remember: those mountains can’t stop us from believing; they can’t stop us from praying; they can’t stop us from forgiving. God gives us what we need to partner with him—faith, prayer, forgiving hearts. He is casting mountains into the sea and creating a new world, and he invites us, as the believing, praying, forgiving people of Jesus, to be his partners. We are a house of prayer—and a house of faith and forgiveness—for all nations.

As a church, we fulfill our vocation as a house of prayer not least by being invitational. The Holy Spirit dwells with us, empowering us as a church, and especially as smaller communities within the church, to practice transparency as we learn about faith, prayer, and forgiveness. If we’re a house of prayer for all nations, let’s open our doors and invite others to observe and experience the powerful dynamic of the Spirit at work in our midst, especially in our smaller communities, which offer plentiful opportunities for participation and interaction are greater. If we’re practicing transparency, and if transparency is attractive, let’s invite the nations to experience our house of prayer, which is, after all, here for them.

Imposing obstacles stand between the church and the nations. If we endeavor to invite the nations to join us, we will encounter a mountain of fear, suspicion, and indifference. But, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and cast into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Pray. Invite. Pray. And watch God cast the mountain into the sea.

When I experience the richness of community in different settings in our church, I often wonder about the

people in our world. I think about what they're missing and wonder whether they'd be drawn to us if they really knew what was happening in these settings. In the community group that I'm involved with, for example, I hear from men and women who are struggling but who are also looking for God in the midst of their struggles. They struggle, but in an attractive way. Most people want a place where they can let down their guards, where they can be themselves, where they will be accepted. Let's be such a place, and let's invite people we know into our smaller communities. Let's be a house of prayer for all nations. To start, simply consider praying about one person to invite and watch what God does with those prayers.

We don't necessarily have to go anywhere to fulfill this vision, because the nations have come to us. I returned to the Silicon Valley in 1994 for what I thought was a temporary stay. I grew up here (it wasn't called the Silicon Valley when I was a boy), and I wanted to go someplace new. Then, as I was reading a book in a café in Mountain View, my hometown, and I heard four different languages being spoken. I thought to myself, "This is someplace new." So I stayed. As a boy, I played in the orchards of the Valley. Has anyone seen an orchard lately? The orchards are gone, but the nations have come. What an exciting place to live as a follower of Jesus!

We're hungry, too

So, how do we satisfy the hunger of the Son of God? We satisfy his hunger by opening the gates of our heart that he might cultivate spiritual fruitfulness in us—that is, that he might transform us into a house of prayer for all nations. As Jesus works in the deep places of our hearts and our church, sometimes making a mess of things, sometimes slicing us open with his words, he coaxes us out of hiding so that we both might live more transparently and invite others to experience the healing love of his community.

We're hungry, too, aren't we? If he's hungry to be received, maybe we're hungry to receive him. If he's hungry to transform us, maybe we're hungry to be transformed. Maybe we're hungry to be a house of prayer for all nations. Let's satisfy Jesus and, in so doing, satisfy ourselves.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

- A Next day he saw fig tree, went to it (12-13)
- B Jesus said, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" (14a)
- C Disciples were listening (14b)
- A' They came to Jerusalem (15a)
- B' Jesus demonstrated in temple, began to say to them (15b-17)
- C' Chief priests and scribes heard (18)
- A" They passed by in morning, saw fig tree (19-20)
- B" Peter said to him that fig tree had withered (21)
- C" Jesus answered and said to disciples (22-25)

² Fig trees were used in the Scriptures to represent the spiritual fruitfulness—or lack thereof—of God's people (Jeremiah 8:13, 24:1-10; Hosea 9:10, 16-17; Micah 7:1; Luke 13:6-9).

³ The temple was later rebuilt under Zerubbabel and Joshua son of Jehozadak and embellished by Herod the Great, so that it was standing in Jesus' day.

⁴ Jesus doesn't accuse anyone of economic exploitation. If that were his primary concern, why would he drive out the buyers instead of standing up for them? Nor does he say, as he did in a similar but apparently earlier incident, that he is concerned with the location of the transactions (John 2:16).

⁵ Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, applied the word to Jewish insurrectionists who took up arms against Rome. Even the Hebrew word translated "robber" in Jeremiah can mean "violent one." This is the meaning in Daniel 11:14, where it is predicted that "violent ones" from among the Jews would rise up against an Egyptian king. The Greek word *lestēs* was used of Barabbas, whom Mark identifies not as a robber but as an insurrectionist (John 18:40, Mark 15:7). Mark also identifies each of the men crucified next to Jesus as a *lestēs* (Mark 15:27). The Romans crucified not robbers but rebels.

⁶ Scott and Joy Sawyer, "A Great Circle Coming Fully Around," *Mars Hill Review* (Winter/Spring 1996), 113.

⁷ Verse 26, which doesn't appear in the earliest copies of the Gospel of Mark, almost certainly was not part of Mark's original manuscript.

⁸ Earlier, the disciples participated in the vanquishing of evil and the establishment of the kingdom by casting out demons. Then, they ran into a demon they couldn't cast out. Jesus told them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 6:13, 9:29).

⁹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone* (Louisville, Kent.: John Knox Press, 2004), 60.