

- Most of us have heard the statement, “appearances are deceptive.”
- People who are not what they appear to be.
- Friend who looked wonderful. Wanted to get to know. Found out they were self-focused, uninterested in anything but themselves.
- Many of us have actually experienced something similar to this. We know this truth yet we spend a lot of our time trying to appear to be something to someone.
- The entire social media industry is based on presenting a certain version of ourselves to others. And most are not what they appear to be. Contrary to what you see, others are not on vacation, having fun, going to parties and clubs, enjoying the grandchildren and celebrating God in amazing ways 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week (with a token prayer request thrown in to make them seem human).
- I wonder if sometimes we treat God this way? We try our best to do the right things, be good people and, go to church, drop a \$20 into the offering plate and yet God doesn't seem to respond to our prayers.
- When I pray, I wonder if God sees all those things I'm doing and is impressed enough to listen? Or for some, disappointed enough to ignore us?
- For most of history, people have struggled with trying to live by doing the right things for God in an attempt to present the right persona to God so that God will do the right things for us.
- And even if you are a follower of Jesus, it is easy to fall back into a life where your outward actions and appearances take on more importance than the inward.
- **GOD VALUES FAITH OVER FORM.**

- Mark 11 begins with the event that we celebrate on Palm Sunday, the weekend before Easter. In it, Jesus enters Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, and the crowds shout praises and put down palm branches and it is this large gathering of people lauding Jesus the week before they call for his death.
- For our purposes today, it is the connecting verse at the end of this account of Jesus' entry in Jerusalem that catches your attention.

*Mark 11:11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.*

- Jesus went to the temple. It was the beginning of the Passover week, a huge celebration for the Jews. It was a natural destination site. Jesus went there. He looked around. He got the lay of the land. He saw the activities, the setup, everything. He had been there many times before, but perhaps not for a while. Then he left the city to go stay at some friends' house with the 12 disciples. This sets up the events of the following day.

*12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.*

- Maybe he hadn't had breakfast. Maybe not enough. Or maybe the walk was making him hungry. Regardless, he wanted something to munch.

*13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs.*

- He went to see if the tree had produced figs to eat, but it had not.
- Why would he expect figs if it was not the season for figs?
- I looked up some information on fig trees (apparently I would need to spend months or years to become an expert on the number of variations of fig trees and how they grow).
- Some fig trees produce fruit twice per year. Some produce an ongoing crop for up to 10 months a year. Some fig trees produce crops of small edible buds that could be snacked on followed by full harvest later. The point was that when you saw a fig tree the way this one was, full of leaves, it was reasonable for Jesus to expect to find something edible on the fig tree even though it was not the season for figs.
- Yet even though the tree looked good, it had nothing.

14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

- Is this because he was "hangry"? Was he irritated? What we are going to see later is that it is none of these. Jesus was being very intentional.
- And then Mark adds this interesting side comment.

*And his disciples heard him say it.*

- He is setting us up and giving us back story for what is going to happen later.
- Mark liked telling this kind of sandwich story. Start, pause, go back to it. All connected.
- What Jesus did with the fig tree is connected to what happens next.

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts

• Just like the day before, he entered the temple courts, but not just to observe this time. *and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.*

- In order to understand this, let me do a little history teaching here.
- The temple was an amazing structure. Herod the Great was a huge builder, doing many projects throughout Palestine, and one of these was the complete restoration of the temple. It was huge and it was beautiful. [SEE MAP]
- This was a huge festival – the Passover – for the Jewish people. The temple would not have been empty. There would have been lots going on.
- There were different levels of access in the temple. The court of the Gentiles was the part of the temple anyone could access. You then had the court of the Israelites where only Jewish people could go. There was the court of women, court of men, and then the place where only priests were allowed to go and ultimately the most holy place, where only the high priest could go once per year.
- It was in the Court of the Gentiles that Jesus was in turning over the tables.
- The high priest Caiaphas had authorized a market for the sale of ritually pure items necessary for temple sacrifice – this was normal practice – people still needed to buy sacrifices, especially those who had traveled from a long way away.
- The money changers helped the people change their Greek and Roman money into Jewish currency – a small fee was allowed.
- Was it simply the abuses of this system that caused Jesus to get so upset?

17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

- Not only were the moneylenders probably taking advantage of the poor and those who had come to worship, it seems that people were taking merchandise through this court on their way to other parts of the city (v16), making it a thoroughfare.
- Jesus quotes an OT passage regarding the temple that it was supposed to be a house of prayer "for all nations." God desired Jews AND Gentiles to use it as a place of worship.
- This is a place where people were supposed to draw near to God and the whole place where the Gentiles were allowed was like a common marketplace. But it was more than that.
- Jesus quoted from another passage from Jeremiah to explain his actions.

*Jeremiah 7:4,9-11 Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" . . . Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods . . . and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe" – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? 18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.*

- What Jesus was objecting to mostly was the attitude that they simply had to do religious things and they would be OK. The religious leaders led the way in this and they hated Jesus for exposing their hearts.
- They could live however they wanted throughout the week and then think they were safe from God's judgment because they went to the temple each Sabbath. They were trusting in the temple, rather than trusting in the God of the temple
- Do you see the common theme in these two events?
- A beautiful tree with the promise of something satisfying that had nothing to offer.
- A beautiful temple that promised people a way to connect with God that did nothing to change the way that people lived and treated each other.
- They both looked good. They both were not backed up by anything meaningful and it rendered them useless. Both of these sections are about fruitlessness.

## I. Beware the danger of fruitless religion and ritual.

*19 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. 20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"*

- They saw the same tree and what was green and full of leaves the day before was now a dry, withered husk.
- At one level this is a condemnation of Israel. The fig tree was frequently used throughout Israel's history as a picture of God's favor or disfavor on Israel. Symbolically, the fig tree represented the spiritual barrenness of a nation that would crucify the King that it had just celebrated as he came into Jerusalem.
- When the fig tree withered, it simply exposed the deadness of the tree.
- The temple looked good. The sacrifices, the people, the worship. Do you realize that the people crucified Jesus in the midst of their most important festival? And as Jesus died, they went back to their religious exercises.
- This served a somber warning for Israel.
- Many times God told Israel that He expected fruit from them: righteousness, obedience and love for the Lord. In these two events, Jesus is making that point that he has found a lot of leaves – a lot of religious activity – but no fruit. In both cases what was impressive from a distance did not deliver what was promised or expected.
- It was only 40 years later in 70 AD that Jerusalem and the temple were completely destroyed by the Romans and has not been restored, even till today.
- There is a personal warning as well.
- God was and is unimpressed with the appearance of religion. He cares for hearts tuned to love him and one another. He is looking for a fruitful life. Your church attendance, involvement, service, even your witnessing, is not what God seeks. He desires your life to be fruitful. He wants us to live lives characterized and ruled by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

## II. Fruit comes from faith.

- Jesus answer when Peter called attention to these things, puts the focus on faith.  
*22 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. 23 "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

- These verses are the source of a lot of angst for people. They pray and when they do not receive, they are told it is because they did not believe enough. After all, if you believe it, God will give it to you.
- This becomes a matter of more faith. It seems as though this puts the onus on us and not on God. Almost as though we have to prove something.
- This takes Jesus words completely out of context. For many of the people of Jesus' day, the object of their faith was no longer the God of the temple but the temple itself. The temple was the place where your prayers were most likely to be answered. The temple was the place where you expressed your faith, the place where you received forgiveness.
- They figured if they did what God wanted, went to church, gave a sacrifice, followed the religious rules, then God would listen to them and answer their prayers.
- Jesus isn't giving us a formula for using faith to do miracles. There are many other places where Jesus talks about our prayers are as much about aligning us with him and his will as anything else (Mark 14:36, Matthew 6:9-10, John 14:13-14, John 15:7, John 16:23, 1 John 5:14-15).
- He is pointing to the absolutely central place faith has in our lives. Faith is of more value than the temple.
- The true power of religion is not found in ritual or appearance, but in a personal relationship with God which is expressed in faith. Trust God completely and mountains can be moved.

### **III. Faith filled prayer is rooted in a right relationship with God.**

- It is not our religious actions that change things. It is faith in the one who makes things happen. The key phrase in this entire section is the what Jesus starts with. "Have faith IN GOD."

#### **A. Faith is expressed in a trust in God.**

*"Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."*

- Jesus did the very thing he is teaching. When he prophesied to the fig tree, nothing happened till later, but he acted as though it had already been accomplished.
- We are more prone to pray, hope to see and answer, and when it happens, then we will believe. The problem is that we don't need faith AFTER Jesus answers a prayer. We need the faith BEFORE we have the sight. We need faith before we see the "There it is."
- When Hudson Taylor went to China, he made the voyage on a sailing vessel. As it neared the channel between the southern Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, the missionary heard an urgent knock on his stateroom door. He opened it, and there stood the captain of the ship. "Mr. Taylor," he said, "we have no wind. We are drifting toward an island where the people are heathen, and I fear they are cannibals." "What can I do?" asked Taylor. "I understand that you believe in God. I want you to pray for wind." "All right, Captain, I will, but you must set the sail." "Why that's ridiculous! There's not even the slightest breeze. Besides, the sailors will think I'm crazy." But finally, because of Taylor's insistence, he agreed. Forty- five minutes later he returned and found the missionary still on his knees. "You can stop praying now," said the captain. "We've got more wind than we know what to do with!"
- Through prayer you exercise your faith in God. Your trust in God grows as you believe Him to hear and answer.

*Psalm 9:10 Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.*

- God is inviting us to trust him. To know him. To follow him. Don't trust in ritual to earn his favor. If we are living lives without faith, trying to be "good enough" or "do the right things" in order for God to watch out for us, we are barren and in much danger.

- Rather, we are those who pray for others, trusting in the goodness of God regardless of what we see.
- The African impala can jump to a height of over 10 feet and cover a distance of greater than 30 feet. Yet it is said that these magnificent creatures can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a 3-foot wall. The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall. Faith is the ability to trust what we cannot see.
- Jesus finished this teaching by saying this.  
25 *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*"
- What's the connection? Faith is not simply a "between God and me" thing.

#### **B. Faith is expressed through my relationship with others.**

- The fruit of our lives needs to be vertical and horizontal.
- We have seen this before. There is a connection between how we relate to others and how we relate to God.
- If we are holding onto unforgiveness, it blocks our relationship with God. I wonder how many times we pray and God is asking us to deal with another person, a hurt, a need to forgive, and we ignore him and tell him we cannot, but then want him to answer our prayers.
- *"Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."* (C. S. Lewis)
- It seems that faith becomes blocked when we refuse to relate in faith to others.
- For us, **GOD VALUES FAITH OVER FORM.**
- Jesus is entering the final week of his life. 5 days after this event, he would be dead. He would have suffered at the hands of those who were the most religious, most righteous, most bible believing, bible following, praying people in that city.
- The same people who should have been most open to God and his work.
- The leaders who should have been leaning in to God to cooperate with his mission.
- The ones who should have embraced the Messiah.
- They were going to kill him.
- So Jesus gives this warning and encouragement.
- **GOD VALUES FAITH OVER FORM.**
- Your religious actions, your rituals, all those things that you might do to make God love you more, listen to you more, give you what you want, they are dead. They will wither and die and they have no value to save you or bring life.
- What he seeks is a heart that is tuned to him. That believes he is God. That believes he is good. That trusts him to do right and then asks without reservation based on that. He wants those who let that relationship with God flow into our relationship with others.
- So that we are people who live without worry. Who love other people. Whose first instinct is to be kind. Those who live honest and kind lives. Who have the kind of peace that brings deep rest. People with joy. People who serve faithfully.
- Not because there is a list of things to do, but because there is a God who loves us and is inviting us to something more.
- **GOD VALUES FAITH OVER FORM.**