

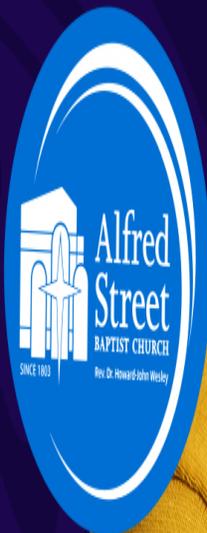
MAY 28/29, 2022

MARK 11:12-21

CAN I
GET A
WITNESS

PART 3

#CANIGETAWITNESS | #PHJW | #ASBCSERMONSERIES



A SERMON SERIES BY REV. DR. HOWARD-JOHN WESLEY | @PASTORHJW

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Date: May 28/29, 2022
Preacher: Rev. Dr. Howard John Wesley
Sermon Title: Can I Get a Witness - Part 3
Scripture: Mark 11:12-21 (NRSV)

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. 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 heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "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 when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."

SERMON SUMMARY:

In this third installment of *Can I Get a Witness*, Pastor Wesley unlocks the story of Jesus and the Withered Fig Tree. Concluding with a powerful analysis of three things that hinder our witness, he begins the sermon with an explanation of a literary device, intercalation. Intercalation is when one story begins, is interrupted by a second story, and then the reader is returned to the first story to close the cycle. In intercalation the stories, though distinct, serve to illuminate one another.

In Mark 11 we find an example of intercalation. The story of the withered fig tree begins, is interrupted by the story of the cleansing of the Temple, and then concludes with a final commentary on the fig tree. The relationship between these two texts is that both the fig tree and the Temple appear as if they have “fruit” to share with hungry souls. However, in truth, the fig tree is absent literal fruit and the Temple is devoid of the spiritual fruit that would nourish those who come into its precincts. Jesus condemns the fig tree when he says, *“May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”* He treats the Temple the same way saying, *“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.”* This moment of intercalation teaches that bearing fruit is vital to the witness of the fig tree, of the Temple, and to any witness you and I might share.

Pastor Wesley suggests that there are times when our lives mirror the fig tree. Sometimes our lives appear to have leaves and we look like we should have fruit. But, when examined, there is no fruit. Metaphorically, when our lives do not bear fruit we cannot leave a sweet taste in the mouths of those we encounter. Further, when our lives bear no fruit, we have no seeds to sow into others. This can be true in our individual lives and in the life of the church. When our churches bear no fruit and produce no seed, our witness is compromised.

Turning again to Mark 11, Pastor Wesley points to three major sins prohibiting the ancient Temple from bearing fruit and sowing seed. And, in a powerful second turn, Pastor suggests these same sins are resident in our contemporary church and her members. The three sins are predatory monetary practices, the weaponization of scripture, and a hypocritical hierarchy of sin.

When these sins are alive in our churches or, in us, we cannot bear fruit, we produce no seed, and our witness is compromised.

KEY POINTS:

1. Jesus does some strange things in scripture. However, in every instance, when Jesus does something strange *“it is a segue to Jesus teaching something critical about the Kingdom of God.”*
2. Through the literary device of intercalation the cursing of the fig tree helps us understand the cleansing of the Temple. Both the fig tree and the Temple look as if they should produce good outcomes; figs for the tree and the glorious authentic worship of God for the Temple. But neither the fig tree nor the Temple are functioning as they should because neither has borne fruit or has seed to sow into the lives of those who trust them.
3. Like the fig tree and the Temple, sometimes the lives of Christians and the life of the church do not bear fruit. When we have no fruit, we produce no seed, and we have little to share with the world.

4. This sermon asserts that we have no fruit because we
 - a. Engage in predatory monetary practices. Pastor focuses on the habits of churches that take money from members and squander the resources instead of serving the goals of the Kingdom of God.
 - b. Weaponize scripture. We are reminded in this sermon that we cannot take a single topic or a single verse and declare it to be the whole truth of God. We must align the message of each scripture and each topic with the teachings and life of Jesus. Anything short of this is a misuse of scripture and can create the conditions to weaponize scripture.
 - c. Hypocritical Hierarchy of Sin. The willingness to highlight some sin while overlooking other sin is present in the church, causing church hurt that is like no other. The church's double standard around sin damages our witness and reduces our fruit.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU QUESTIONS:

1. Who planted seeds of faith in your life, not by talking with you or directly teaching you but, by the way they lived? What impact did this person's behavior have on you in general? How has their behavior affected your witness?

ACTIVITY:

1. If the person you named above is still alive and you can reach them, write them a thank you note. Let them know how their life offered a path for you. If they are not alive, or you do not know how to reach them, write a prayer to God thanking God for this person's witness in your life.

SPIRIT WORK:

1. Galatians 5:22-23 says the following, *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. Please note, the sentence does not say the **fruits of the spirit are**, but fruit and the verb that modifies it are singular.

The fruit of the spirit is one whole piece of amazing and multifaceted fruit. You and I do not get to pick and choose which aspect of the fruit we bear. Given this, which part of this multifaceted fruit is easy for you to bear, and which part requires you to mature in your faith.

In your daily prayer time, ask God to help you increase your faith as it relates to the aspect of the fruit of the Spirit on which you now know you must work.

INTO THE BIBLE QUESTIONS:

1. In this morning's Mark text we hear, *On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.* Jesus is hungry. This text reminds us that Jesus is fully human. What does the phrase, Jesus is fully human bring to mind for you? What are the benefits of serving a fully human Jesus?

2. Pastor's botany lesson regarding the "fruit first and leaves second" nature of a fig tree was a surprise to hearers. This example reminds us that knowing the context, culture, and the particulars of the stories Jesus tells is a powerful aid to undersanding. In your mind, what difference does it make when we learn the context of the biblical stories? How does it help us understand the stories of Jesus?

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

1. In the sermon Pastor says, "In every instance, when we see Jesus doing something strange, it is a segue into Jesus, teaching something critical about the kingdom of God." Has Jesus ever done anything strange in your life? What was it? What did it lead to? What did you learn or what are you learning from this strange act of Jesus?

2. Like the fig tree, most of us have experienced times in our lives when we were unable to bear fruit. If this is true for you, what was this season like? Has it turned around? What turned it around? How are you different when you are bearing fruit?

3. In this sermon the Pastor says. “People refuse discipleship, not because they're atheists, not because they don't believe in God, not because they won't confess Jesus. But because they experienced a tree that had leaves but no fruit.” What are the ways the church should bear fruit that will attract people to Christ?

4. Pastor ends the sermon by saying, “The truth of the matter is we need more fruit in church. We need something that leaves a better taste in people's mouths so that they might receive the seed of discipleship.” When you hear this statement what does it make you think? What does it call you to do? What will you do to bear more fruit for the Kingdom?

“CAN I PUSH IT?” QUESTION:

1. Several times in this sermon Pastor uses his signature phrase, *Can I Push It*. In each instance, he critiques the practices of the church or those who claim to follow Christ. When Pastor Wesley pushes us, we are forced to consider aspects of faith that are not pretty or easy to swallow. How does his habit of using the phrase *Can I Push It* strike you? Does it help your learning? Does it cause you to think differently? Finally, does his use of this phrase in any way remind you of Jesus? If so, how.