

Our Legacy - No Matter What

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

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Mark 11:12-21 (CEB)

¹²The next day, after leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³From far away, he noticed a fig tree in leaf, so he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing except leaves, since it wasn't the season for figs. ¹⁴So he said to it, "No one will ever again eat your fruit!" His disciples heard this.

¹⁵They came into Jerusalem. After entering the temple, he threw out those who were selling and buying there. He pushed over the tables used for currency exchange and the chairs of those who sold doves. ¹⁶He didn't allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷He taught them, "Hasn't it been written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you've turned it into a hideout for crooks." ¹⁸The chief priests and legal experts heard this and tried to find a way to destroy him. They regarded him as dangerous because the whole crowd was enthralled at his teaching. ¹⁹When it was evening, Jesus and his disciples went outside the city.

²⁰Early in the morning, as Jesus and his disciples were walking along, they saw the fig tree withered from the root up. ²¹Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look how the fig tree you cursed has dried up."

Revelation 3:14-22 (CEB)

¹⁴"Write this to the angel of the church in Laodicea:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷After all, you say, 'I'm rich, and I've grown wealthy, and I don't need a thing.' You don't realize that you are miserable, pathetic, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸My advice is that you buy gold from me that has been purified by fire so that you may be rich, and white clothing to wear so that your nakedness won't be shamefully exposed, and ointment to put on your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹I correct and discipline those whom I love. So be earnest and change your hearts and lives. ²⁰Look! I'm standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them, and they will have dinner with me. ²¹As for those who emerge victorious, I will allow them to sit with me on my throne, just as I emerged victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²If you can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

John 15:1-8 (CEB)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. ²He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. ³You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. ⁶If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

We are to leave a legacy of faith built on the fruit of our discipleship.

Throughout this series, we've considered the legacy that we are leaving now and in the future. Are we building for the kingdom of God or for the kingdom of sin and death? Will our lives produce the fruit that God hope from us or will we have left behind little that really matters? We have three Scripture passages this week – each of them focused on producing God's fruit.

Jesus curses a fig tree

Virtually everyone, Christian or not, has a pretty good idea of what it was like on the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem as its arriving Messiah. The crowds shouted "Hosanna!" (meaning "save us") and waved palm branches as Jesus rode in on a small colt. But most

don't know that the next day, Jesus cursed a fig tree for not bearing fruit and then reentered Jerusalem. He made his way to the temple and invoked the words and actions of Jeremiah in disrupting the temple activities and pronouncing judgment on the whole system. Then,

A Royal Reception

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Matthew's account of Palm Sunday is laden with these symbols.

Four hundred years before Jesus, the prophet of Zechariah told about God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt (Zech 9:9). Jesus used this imagery and entered Jerusalem on a colt.

We may have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but his followers certainly didn't. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They hailed him as the "Son of David." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They even waved palm branches, which were symbols of abundance and thanks. All this was a welcome fit for a king.

the next day, Tuesday, as Jesus and the disciples made their way back to the city they again passed the fig tree Jesus had cursed the day before. Now it was withered from its roots upward.

That's the sequence of events. But what is going on? A fig tree?

The key to understanding is to know that the fig tree symbolized Israel (the people of God), the religious center of which was the temple in Jerusalem. Those in charge of the temple system, the priests, had allowed God's temple to be fall into corruption, to become a "den of thieves." The temple was the center of the Jewish religion and should have been a place of rest and sustenance and justice of all. Instead, the priests had gotten rich. The temple no longer bore any fruit. And so Jesus had pronounced God's judgment on it. And the unlucky fig tree was an enacted prophecy of that judgment.

The temple priests and all the other leaders of the Jews at the time had served God poorly, seeing their roles as a means to gain wealth and prestige rather than as the opportunity to do great good, i.e., to produce fruit.

Their legacy would be the destruction of the very temple that they had corrupted. In the late 60's AD, Rome swept into Judea and

Galilee to put down a massive Jewish revolt and destroyed the grand temple, scrubbing the Temple Mount clean. Jesus had pronounced judgment on those who had led Israel astray and, with the temple's destruction, had been vindicated.

Hot fruit or cold fruit – but never lukewarm

After the dramatic vision of Jesus that opens the book of Revelation, John tells us of seven letters that Jesus sends to Christian communities in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Jesus commends some of the communities, such as Philadelphia. But other letters express Jesus' anger with the directions the Christian communities have taken.

I've come to a somewhat different understanding of the letter to the Laodiceans than I once had. I, like many others, tended to see the contrast between hot and cold as speaking to whether we were on fire for God and cold to him. But this is probably not what was meant. There were two other cities within several miles of Laodicea. One was Hierapolis which was famous for its hot mineral springs. The other was Colossae which was notable for its cold freshwater spring. Both cities supplied water to Laodicea. The problem was that by the time the Hierapolis water reached Laodicea it was no longer hot and the Colossae water was no longer cold. Both had lost their distinctiveness. Both were simply lukewarm.

Jesus is warning the Laodiceans that they had lost their distinctiveness and were no longer remarkable. They had settled into a gray discipleship that bore no fruit. They might say all the right words and even feel really good about themselves, but it all amounted to nothing.

Of all the letters, the one to the Christians in Laodicea hits my heart hard every time I read it. You see, I know that I spent much of my adult life as a Laodicean Christian. I went to church much of the time, sang in choir a lot, even taught Sunday School now and then, but I was lukewarm. I would have told someone that I believed in Jesus and even been able to spout some smart-sounding theology, but I was really indifferent to the whole thing. I could take care of my own needs quite well . . . or so I thought. Sadly, I didn't realize all this at the time. It is only by looking back from my new life in Christ that I can see my tepid faith for what it was. Did my discipleship bear fruit? Not that I remember. Did I leave any sort of worthwhile legacy? Not that I recall. I know for a fact that I kept a tight hand on my wallet!

So . . . when I read that Jesus wants to spit these wealthy lukewarm Laodiceans out of his mouth, I take a big gulp and thank God that he grabbed me rather than tossed me.

I know that many who come to church are like I once was – present but apathetic, a tightly gripped wallet, not allowing God into any part of their life beside Sunday morning. A little worship now and then suits them just fine. But Jesus stands at the door, knocking, waiting for us to open it, not just peek through the crack. Only by opening the door and embracing our life in Christ can we hope to leave an enduring legacy that pleases the one who gave himself for us.

The vineyard

Israel is a land of vineyards, thus we shouldn't be surprised that it is a common biblical metaphor (see Isaiah 5:1-4, Psalm 80:8-9; Genesis 49:11-12,22 for example). The metaphor usually works like this. God plucked the people out of Egypt and planted them in Canaan, There, they, the vineyard, were to be fruitful and grow, but the vineyard had turned bad (as in today's passage from Isaiah) and God will come to judge and destroy the vineyard. But, as always, there are images of restoration and blessing alongside the images of judgment and destruction. In these images, the fertile vineyard is the blessed and restored Israel (Jeremiah 31:5; Amos 9:14).

In his talk with his disciples, Jesus takes the vineyard imagery upon himself. He is the true vine. He is the true Israel, the fruitful vine that Israel had failed to be. He is the Israel that is able to keep its covenant with God to simply love God and love neighbor. He is the Israel through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, thereby fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham long before (Genesis 12:3).

The "I am" statements in John's gospel can be seen as not-so-subtle hints to Jesus' divinity or, at least, his identity with the Father. Based on that, we'd expect to find Jesus as the vinegrower in this passage – for it is God who is the vinegrower in the OT passages. However, Jesus makes himself the vine in the metaphor; the grower is the Father. This "I am" statement identifies Jesus with Israel, the people of God. He is a Jew. He is human. He is one of us. Moreover, Jesus, as the true vine, the true Israel, exists in enduring relationship with both the Father, who is the vinegrower, and with his disciples, who are the vine's branches.

It's helpful to step back from Jesus' words for a moment and picture a grapevine, all twisted and turning upon itself. It is hard to tell vine from branch or branch from branch. It is a whole, a unity, a community of sorts. It takes all three – the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches – to produce abundant fruit. The vinegrower continually prunes and shapes the vine, getting rid of dead branches and shaping the branches so they can bear more fruit. Because grapevines will tend to grow lots of leaves and shoots that dissipate the vine's energy and suppress the production of fruit, the vinegrower is always busy making sure that the vine is producing fruit and not just a pretty show of green leaves.¹

¹John uses a wordplay here that the English translations can't really capture. In the Greek, prune (v. 2) and cleanse (v. 3) are the same Greek root. The point is not vine growth, but fruit production. A big showy vine that produces no fruit is not God's intention. Metaphors can be very thought-provoking!

Jesus' meaning seems clear. When the branches remain part of the vine, the branches can grow and thrive. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches wither and die. Likewise, we are to abide in Christ, just as he abides in us. It is only in Christ that we can find the life that we seek. As the vine gives life to the branches, Jesus is the giver of life to us. After all, he is the Bread of Life! So the question is always, will we remain in the vine or will we go our own way? Will we seek the independence and self-sufficiency that the world values and offers? Or will we remain connected to the vine; remain in Christ, entangled with and dependent upon not only Jesus, but the rest of the branches, the entire community of believers?

It is important for us to realize that abiding in Jesus means much more than just believing or even trusting Christ. It is about remaining in union with Christ, in a deep and enduring relationship. This is how we are to *be*. Our very *being* is to be grounded in this oneness with Jesus. In Peterson's paraphrase of John, Jesus says, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." First *being*, then *doing*.

Producing fruit

Finally, we the branches are to bear fruit. That is what we are here for. There can be no excuses. We are to allow God to prune us and shape us so that we have the strength and vitality to love and to love well.

Yes, we can all bear fruit, but only by remaining in Christ. It is this deep union with our Lord that enables us to do what God would have us do. Without this deep and enduring relationship, we can do none of what God desires from us.

But we shouldn't think that Jesus' way is some sort of gray, joyless obedience. Instead, Jesus assures us that he has said all this so that our "joy may be complete" (15:10). Joy, according to Merriam-Webster, is "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: DELIGHT." As Don Carson writes, the love of God is the love for which we were created. When we live within that love, rather than try to run from it, we discover a joy deeper and more lasting than any of the temporary joys that the world offers. So the questions are simple: Will we remain in the vine? Will we strive to bear fruit? Will our discipleship be such that we leave a lasting legacy – today, right now? St. Andrew is a wonderful place to live out our life in Christ. Here, our fruit will be multiplied like those loaves of bread on a Galilean hillside. Will we do our part?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus knew that the Temple, as the center of Israel's religion, was a place that must bear fruit. But it did not. If Jesus looked at your life, would he commend you for the fruit of your faith? To what in your life would you point him?
2. Hot? Cold? Lukewarm? . . . If the letter to the Laodiceans doesn't get you thinking, then not much will. In which of these three categories would you place yourself? In which category would your friends place you? Your family? Co-workers? If your faith were hot, how would anyone know?
3. In her commentary on John, Gail O'Day made an observation about today's passage that really made me think. She notes that Jesus never urges the branches to grow, not even as the metaphor unfolds later in the chapter. It isn't growth that Jesus seeks from his disciples here, but fruit. They are to bear fruit, these acts of love that characterize his disciples. There are many ways for a vine to grow. Some are very showy, producing a beautiful canopy of branches and leaves, but little fruit. Jesus wants the fruit, not the canopy.

In what ways do we tend to emphasize the canopy, the show, rather than the fruit? I'm sure most of us do from time to time. I know I do. What are some examples of showy shallowness that you've seen from yourself or others? In what ways do churches emphasize the canopy, the show, rather than the fruit? How about St. Andrew?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Jeremiah 7:1-29 Jeremiah pronounces God's judgment on the Temple in Jerusalem. More than 600 years later Jesus would do the same.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Jeremiah 24 Good and bad figs</p>
<p>Wednesday, Isaiah 5:1-7 The vineyard of the Lord. What has God not done for his vineyard? Israel is the vineyard.</p>	<p>Thursday, Psalm 80 God has brought a vine out of Egypt</p>
<p>Friday, Matthew 25:31-46 A contrast of two legacies – one built on heaven, the other built on hell.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

