

Series - On Your Mark

Date/s - 16 September 2018

Topic - Appearances Can Be Deceptive

Speaker/s - Pastor Lionel Goh

**Welcome** [15 min]

You may want to look up the following websites for *icebreakers* suitable for your cell.

[www.thesource4ym.com/games/](http://www.thesource4ym.com/games/)

[www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/articles/icebreakersbeyond.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/articles/icebreakersbeyond.html) < go to LEAD, click on ICEBREAKERS >

**Worship** [15 min]

You may select songs like “Living Hope”, “No Other Name”, “Hosanna (Be Lifted Higher)” or “When Jesus Comes Again”.

**Spiritual Objectives**

At the end of the cell discussion, cell members will know God’s heart for us to be true worshippers and followers of Christ. God is not looking for fake religiosity and shallow appearances.

**Word** [45 min]

Continuing on the sermon series on the gospel of Mark, we now arrive at chapter 11. This week’s sermon is taken from Mark 11:1-21. Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. The people were jubilant, welcoming Jesus with shouts of “Hosanna!”. However, as we see from this passage, things were not as rosy as they looked.

Mark 11:1-21 tells of four main events:

1. Jesus’ jubilant entrance.
2. Jesus cursed the fig tree.
3. Jesus cleansed the temple.
4. The fig tree withered.

**Jesus’ triumphant entrance****The jubilation of the crowd**

Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey and the crowd welcomed Him with joy and celebration. Significantly, this was the first time that Jesus accepted the recognition and adulation shown to Him. Why would Jesus do this? This was to be His final entrance into Jerusalem before His death, and He most probably wanted to signify that He was indeed the King who was prophesied in Zechariah 9:9. The Jews indeed saw Jesus as their King and wanted Him to redeem Israel from Roman rule and usher in a new and prosperous age for the nation.

But just one week after that, the Jews were demanding that Jesus be crucified. Why this sudden about-turn?

The following sequence of events sheds some light on the Jews’ attitude towards Jesus. Beneath the warm and beautiful façade, there was spiritual bareness.

**Jesus cursed the fig tree****The lush façade of the fig tree**

In verses 12 – 14, Jesus was hungry and wanted to eat of the fig tree. But He saw that it had no fruit, and cursed it. Why was Jesus so *harsh*?

To appreciate the deeper implication of this story, we need to understand the symbolism of the fig tree. Throughout Scripture, the fig tree is used to symbolise Israel. When Jesus cursed the fig tree, He was symbolically pronouncing judgement on Israel. Israel was meant to flourish and produce good fruit like a fig tree. But just as this fig tree had beautiful leaves but bore no fruit, Israel had a rich tradition of temple worship but bore no spiritual fruit.

**Jesus cleansed the temple**

The glamour of Temple worship

Verses 15-21 are set in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was the heart of Jewish worship and it was a magnificent structure, grand in architecture and impressive in size. However, some of the activities carried out in the Temple were much less noble. Three main reasons stand out:

1. The court of the gentiles was turned into a market place.  
Gentile (non-Jewish) worshippers could enter the Temple to worship, but had to keep within an area reserved for them, known as the Court of the Gentiles. This area was however turned into a market place, thereby taking away from the only space that the gentiles had to worship.
2. Animals were sold as exorbitant prices.  
The market place that occupied the Court of the Gentiles had merchants selling animals used for sacrifice. As prescribed in the Torah (the Law), worshippers were to bring blemish-free animals for sacrifice. Corrupt priests, in cahoots with these merchants, sold “Temple-approved” animals at exorbitant prices. Worshippers were not allowed to bring their own animals.
3. Money changers charged high exchange rates.  
The Torah also prescribed a Temple tax for the upkeep of the Temple. As the Temple accepted only Jewish currency, worshippers had to convert Roman coins at money changers situated in the market place. These money changers charged high exchange rates.

The three examples above illustrate how, under the glamorous façade of Temple worship, there was actually a culture of corruption. Jesus saw the injustice being done to the worshippers and drove out the merchants (vv. 15 – 17).

**The fig tree withered**

The next day, Jesus and His disciples passed by the fig tree that Jesus had cursed and saw that it had withered.

We can see that Mark recorded these events in a particular order:

Fig tree was cursed (vv. 12 – 14)
Temple was cleansed (vv. 15 – 17)
Fig tree was withered (vv. 20 – 21)

The above sequence is called the *Markan sandwich*, where a key event is sandwiched between 2 halves of a different event. This is to highlight the key message of this passage (the event in the middle): just as the fig tree had nice leaves but bore no fruit, the worship of the Jews was grand but spiritually barren.

So, what are the implications for us?

### **What was Jesus looking for in His people?**

Jesus wanted to teach His followers *true worship, not fake religiosity*. In John 4:23, Jesus says that the Father is looking for true worshippers who will worship the Father in spirit and truth. We worship God in spirit and truth when we love our neighbour, stand up for injustice, and give sacrificially.

Jesus also wanted from His followers *true commitment, not easy believism*. Jesus wants our genuine commitment to a life of true discipleship, and not to follow Jesus simply to fulfil our wants and desires.

Let us put aside the appearance of a nice façade, and focus on bringing true worship and bear spiritual fruit.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. **The fig tree in Mark 11:12-14 bore many leaves but no fruit. What is the symbolic difference between leaves and fruit that Ps Lionel shared?** [15 min]

**Leader's Notes:** *This is a recap question. Allow members to discuss and share their thoughts about this. The leader may summarise by saying that leaves give the fig tree its impressive look. But the real value of the fig tree is in its fruit which can feed people and animals, and to reproduce more fig trees with its seed. Leaves represent the external image, but fruit represents what really matters. Leaders can also ask members to reflect on the trap of fake religiosity and losing sight of true worship. As an illustration, leaders can go through Mark 11:15-21 and reflect on the reasons why Jesus was angry with the hypocrisy behind the glamorous façade of the worship at the Temple.*

2. **The Jews welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem only to want Him killed a few days later, because they had wrong expectations of who Jesus was. Are there any wrong expectations we have of God? What are they?** [15 min]

**Leader's Notes:** *To explain the question in more detail: the Jews expected Jesus to be a political saviour, to save the nation of Israel from Roman occupation. Jesus showed the Jews that that was not His mission at all and instead even uprooted long-standing Jewish traditions which were contrary to God's ways. Their expectation of who Jesus was turned out to be wrong, and that was why the Jews wanted Him killed.*

*This is a relate question. Encourage members to share in a safe environment. These need not be personal stories; they can be general view points to help other members identify and probably realise wrong expectations that Christians, in general, have of God. One of the more common expectations is that once we become Christians, life will be smooth-sailing. God never promised that.*

*Our belief in God must not be anchored in what God can do for us but in true worship. While God answers (like "magic") prayers cried out in great anxieties caused by internal or external storms, He loves us too much to let us stay with an infantile understanding of Him. God wants us to grow from faith to faith, and to develop a mature relationship despite of the trials that may come our way! See Hebrews 5:13-14.*

3. **God wants us to be true worshippers, not Christians who put on a nice front. Share one thing that you will do this week to help you become a true worshipper and follower of Christ.** [15 min]

***Leader's Notes:*** This question is meant to get the commitment of the members to practical actions that they can take, to becoming true worshippers and disciples of Christ. Any form of action, no matter how small, is welcome. The main point is to commit to doing it and be accountable to one another. After members have shared and prayed over, encourage them to commit to doing it this week.

### **Works** [10 min]

Let's pray:

1. That every RiverLifer will focus on what really matters: to be a true worshipper and follower of Jesus Christ.

### **Announcements**

1. **Water Baptism Class**  
**Sat, 6 Oct | 9am - 3pm | Faith Chapel**

Our next baptism service will be held on Sun, 11 Nov. Register for this class at the Information Counter by Sun, 30 Sep. For enquires, please contact Clara Tan at 65114160 or email her at [claratan@riverlife.org.sg](mailto:claratan@riverlife.org.sg).

**Church Vision Statement:**

"A vibrant family where sons and daughters mature and reveal the Father's glory from generation to generation."