

"STEEPLES ARE DANGEROUS"

April 23, 1989

TEXT: Mark 11:13 "And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs."

What an amazing story! As we listen to Mark's words, we can hardly believe our ears. How could Jesus possibly have done what Mark says he did? And, if he did, why? He was always so kind, so understanding. How could he now be so unreasonable? Why would he do three things that make no sense at all?

Listen again to what happened. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. It was early in the morning, and he was hungry. Then he saw a fig tree off in the distance. So he went to it, seeking something to eat. All of this even though it was not the season for figs! That is senseless thing number one.

But, of course, he found no figs. That does not surprise us, does it? It was not the season for figs. It should not have him either. That it did is senseless thing number two. Then came senseless thing number three. Instead of reacting with grace and understanding, he cursed the tree. He said, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

On the surface, of course, that seems to have been pretty childish. He almost seems to have thrown a temper tantrum when he did not get his own way. And that is what is so hard to believe. It was so unlike him. Why even look for figs out of season? Why the surprise when he did not find them? And why take it out on the tree? On the surface, it seems totally unreasonable. But the surface is often misleading.

Actually, what Jesus did was completely reasonable. Not only that, but it teaches an important lesson. But, to understand, we must know two things about fig trees. The first is this. In Palestine, at least, they produce two crops a year. One in late fall, which usually drops to the ground before it ripens. And the other the commercial crop which comes in late spring. That was the crop Mark had in mind when he said "it was not the season for figs." Secondly, the figs, or at least their buds, come out before the leaves. Now, put these facts together, and what Jesus did makes perfect sense.

Why did he look for figs out of season? Not because he wanted spring figs. He knew better than that. But there might be some of the fall crop left, enough to satisfy his hunger. What he did was not only reasonable, it was highly practical and often done by hungry travelers. And why was he surprised? Not by the lack of spring figs. Nor even by the lack of no fall figs. He was surprised because, in Mark's words, "he found nothing but leaves." He had no right to expect figs. But there should at least have been buds. And there were not. There was no fruit. And there was no potential for any. That is what surprised him.

He cursed that tree because it was not what it claimed to be. By its shape and by its leaves, it said it was a fig tree. But fig trees produce figs, and this one could not. For a hungry traveler, it was bad enough that it had no figs. But, even worse, it never would. It had no buds.

Yet it is not just trees that can find themselves in that predicament. It can happen to anything. It can even happen to churches. I have called my sermon, "Steeple's Are Dangerous." I do not know what you thought when you saw that. Perhaps you thought about falling off of one. I remember watching with awe when our steeple was last painted. You could not get me up there in one of those little boatswain's chairs for all the tea in China. But that is not what I had in mind. And perhaps some of you thought about the danger of attracting lightning. But I did not mean that either.

Steeple's can be dangerous because they say to all the world that this is a church. Like the leaves on that fig tree, our steeple offers a promise. A promise of potential, if not always ripened fruit. A steeple says to the world, "the people who worship here are a church. They are trying to follow Jesus, not only here, but everywhere. They have made a commitment, a promise "to unite together the followers of Jesus Christ for the worship of God and for making His will dominant in the lives of men." They may not always succeed, but you can count on them to try.

So Jesus, or one of his children, might see such a steeple "from afar off" and come to see if he could find anything to feed his hunger. It would be bad enough if he found no fruit. That sometimes happens, even in the best of churches. The sermon does not quite come off. The music needs a little more rehearsing. The people are in a hurry to get home and are not quite as friendly as they could have been. Or they are so happy to see their friends that they stand around in little clusters, forgetting about newcomers. It should not happen, of course, but it does --even in the best of churches.

But what if there is not even potential? What if people come only for what that church can do for them, or for their children? What if they are not really interested in what they can do for Christ? What if they give to God's use only what

they can easily spare in time and money? What if their Church is a source of pride instead of humility? If the people there are really worshipping themselves and not God? Would not God be justified in saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again"? Could we blame him for saying, "Get rid of this. Make room for something with potential? If this were not a church, perhaps such judgement would not be appropriate. But we have a steeple. And our steeple says to the world, "This is a Church. It must be judged as a Church." That is why "Steeple's Are Dangerous."

But the same sort of thing can happen to people. There are also "people steeples." The most obvious, of course, is a uniform. If a man wears a policeman's uniform, we have a right to think he is a policeman. If he is inexperienced and can not help us yet that is bad enough. But, if he is not a policeman, that is even worse. Then he can not ever help us. He can even be arrested for impersonating an officer.

And a license is another kind of "people steeple." If a person has a license that says he is a doctor, or a lawyer, or a minister, we have a right to expect him to be what he claims. He may need more experience or training, but he ought to be able to help a little. If the license is a fake, however, then he probably can not help us at all. And he can be arrested for practicing fraud.

And, Christians have "steeples", too. When we join a Church, we say to the world, "I am a Christian. I may be inexperienced, but I am working at it. At least I have potential." The buds are there. But what if we have nothing but leaves? What if we join a Church without really meaning to be a Christian? Or if we let our Christianity lapse from lack of use. Might we not be convicted for imitating a Christian? Might we not be accused of practicing fraud?

Would Jesus have cursed that tree for lacking fig buds if it had been an elm or a maple? Of course not. He would not have expected figs, or even buds, from those. It was its unfulfilled promise that brought his curse upon it. And is it not possible that, whatever God expects from others, He may also expect a little more from Christians? Not necessarily the full-grown fruit. But at least the buds. At least some hope that fruit is possible.

This morning thirty-five of you joined the membership of this Church. And the rest of us re-affirmed our commitment. For us all, it is a beautiful and joyous occasion. But let us be what we claim to be. Let us unite in the worship of God, as often as we possibly can. Let us make time each day to read our Bibles, to pray our prayers. And let us find places, at Church and at homes, at work and at play, to bear our fruit. Instead of "Let no one ever eat fruit from you again", let us hope to hear our Master say, "Well done, you good and faithful servant."