

A TERRIBLE TEMPER

Mark 11:15-17

I have never lost my temper. That's right. You heard me. As God is my witness, I have never lost my temper.

I haven't lost it, because I still have it. I know exactly where my temper is. I know exactly where to find it when I need it.

The problem is, sometimes I use my temper (I never lose it) when I don't need to, or I use it in an unhealthy, unproductive way. Sometimes I fly off the handle for no reason at all. At other times I let my temper simmer, just below the surface. You may never know it is there. You may never know I am angry. But if you wrong me, I will think of a way to get even. I might even stay up at night scheming and planning. More than likely, I will never follow through, but revenge—even the thought of revenge—feels good.

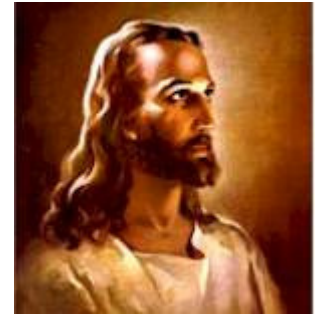
Do you think God ever loses His cool? Does He ever get mad? Does He have a temper?

It's hard to picture Jesus angry. After all, Jesus is loving, kind, and compassionate. It's hard to imagine Him losing His temper.

I grew up knowing exactly what Jesus looked like. I had a picture that I carried in my wallet. My Sunday School teacher gave it to me, and Mrs. Oliver would never lie. You have probably seen this picture. It was painted by Warner Sallman in 1940 and has

been reproduced over 500 million times. The painting is called “The Head of Christ” and is the single, most popular picture of Jesus ever created.¹

In the picture, Jesus looks like a nice guy. He almost looks effeminate. He doesn't look threatening at all. He has shoulder length curly hair and a neatly trimmed beard. There is no way that the Jesus in this picture would ever lose, use, or abuse His temper.



I lost my wallet size picture of Jesus years ago. Now I have another picture hanging in my office, above my desk. I am looking at it right now. I bought it at a bookstore several years ago, and I paid \$300 for it. I have never paid that much for a picture!

In the picture Jesus is sitting in a chair beside a middle-aged man who is sitting at his desk in his office. I have always assumed the man was a pastor, that's why I bought it. The picture looks like it was taken in the 1950s. On the man's desk is an old rotary style phone. The man is wearing a dark gray, double-breasted suit, with a light gray tie. He is also holding his glasses in his right hand. Jesus is dressed in His customary robe.

Jesus and the man are obviously talking, and it seems that Jesus is giving the pastor some advice. You can tell the man is listening intently because his chin is resting on his fingers, with his index finger up near his ear. The Jesus in this picture looks a lot like the Jesus in the famous painting. He is a nice guy, probably soft-spoken. I can't imagine Him losing His cool. That would be so un-Christ-like.

¹ Warner Sallman was American, and one of the mistakes he made in his portrait of Jesus was making Him look European, when Jesus was a Jew, who lived in what we now call the Middle East.

Well, there is a story found in all four Gospels that tells of a time when Jesus completely lost His cool.² It's a story that shows a side of Jesus most pictures don't show. It's a story that illustrates for us that in certain situations, it is perfectly acceptable to get in people's faces and speak your mind. Following Jesus doesn't mean you have to be timid and meek and mild. Just make sure when you do get angry, it's for the right reasons. We usually get angry at the wrong things and at the wrong time. That makes me mad.

Cursing the Fig Tree and Clearing the Temple.

Mondays can be difficult days, can't they? Mondays are a terrible way to spend one-seventh of your life. A lot of people hate Mondays, and there's biblical evidence to do so.

Jesus lost His temper on a Monday.

In chapter eleven of Mark's Gospel, Mark describes events that took place during the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. During this week, Jesus and His disciples spend the evenings in the town of Bethany,³ and their days in the city of Jerusalem. Jesus knows how this week is going to end, and so I imagine He is under a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety, which explains why He was particularly on edge on this particular Monday.

² The story of Jesus losing His temper can be found in Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; and John 2:12-16. I will look mainly at Mark's account because he places it in the context of Jesus cursing a fig tree as well.

³ Bethany was a small village on the southeastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, approximately 2 miles east of Jerusalem. Bethany was the hometown of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus and His disciples probably stayed in their home during the week. It is quite possible that the reason Jesus stayed out of Jerusalem at night was because of threats to His life by the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

Mark records, “The next day as they (Jesus and His disciples) were leaving Bethany...”⁴ The “next day” was the day after Jesus’ parade into Jerusalem, the day we now call “Palm Sunday”⁵, the beginning of Holy Week (or Passion Week); and so, the “next day” was Monday.

On Monday morning, as Jesus and His disciples walk the two miles from Bethany to Jerusalem, something very human happens to Jesus; He gets hungry, and so Mark continues, “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. Then He said to the tree, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And His disciples heard Him say it.”⁶

What just happened, and what does it mean? Why does Jesus get angry at a fruitless tree that wasn’t in season to have fruit?

Jesus’ cursing the fig tree, causing it to wither, is the last miracle (except for the resurrection) in Mark’s Gospel, and it is the only miracle Jesus performed that destroyed life instead of giving life. What was Jesus trying to communicate in His seemingly harsh words?

Mark returns to the fig tree in 11:20, but sandwiched in between the two events with the fig tree is another account of Jesus getting angry. It’s still Monday, but this time He clears out the temple area.⁷ The cleansing of the Temple within the story of the cursing of the fig tree means the two stories help interpret each other, giving insight into the intended message.

⁴ Mark 11:12a, parenthesis added for explanation.

⁵ Mark 11:1-11.

⁶ Mark 11:13-14.

⁷ Mark 11:15-19

The best explanation of cursing the fig tree and cleansing the temple is that Jesus was illustrating a parable about the coming judgment of Jerusalem. Old Testament prophets frequently spoke of the fig tree in referring to Israel's status before God. When Jesus saw the fig tree from a distance, it had foliage on it. Thus, even though it wasn't the usual time of year for there to be fruit, this tree had the appearance of fruit, but upon closer examination, it was barren.⁸ Jesus curses the tree for its hypocrisy—appearing to be one thing while in reality being another thing.

While Jesus is kind and compassionate, there is another side to Him. There are some things that make Him righteously angry, and hypocrisy is one of those things; which leads us to today's first lesson: ***What is it that makes Jesus angry?***

1. Not being and doing what you were created to be and do.

The fig tree was created to be fruitful, providing nourishment for others. Outwardly the tree looked like it was being and doing what it was created to be and do, but inwardly it was empty. Likewise, Jesus created you for a purpose. He created you to have a relationship with Him. He made you unique, giving you specific talents and gifts. There is a reason you were put on this planet, and it is only through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that you will ever fulfill your destiny and reach your dreams. Without Him, life is meaningless and empty. There is a *loss of purpose* when you are not doing and being what you were created to do and be.

⁸ Fig trees in Jerusalem usually leaf out in March or April, but do not produce figs until June. This places this event in the spring, during the time of Passover. Early green figs, which actually appear before the leaves, could be expected at this time, and though they are disagreeable in taste, they can be eaten.

Mark continues, “On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area 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, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 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.’”⁹

Maybe Jesus got up on the wrong side of the bed, after all, it was Monday; or maybe there is something deeper going on. The previous evening Jesus went to the temple and looked around, but apparently the “market area” had closed for the day.¹⁰ Now He returns, and He is on a mission because He knows He is running out of time. Like the fig tree, the present condition of Judaism was hypocrisy, and that hypocrisy was mostly seen in the activities surrounding the Temple. The “temple area,” where Jesus goes into a righteous rage, was in the “Court of the Gentiles.”

Literally millions of people were in the temple area, celebrating the Passover, purchasing animals and incense and jewelry, and other items to be used in the religious ceremonies of the week—such as wine, oil, and salt—all required by the Old Testament Law. The result was that the Court of the Gentiles had turned into a flea market and cattle mart. Religion had become big business, and it was all taking place in the only area a non-Jew could worship God! This commercialization was totally unnecessary. Outside the temple area, on the Mount of Olives, were approved markets for the same purpose. The problem was that the priests didn’t get a cut of everything sold outside the

⁹ Mark 11:15-17. The quotes in v. 17 are from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11.

¹⁰ Mark 11:11

temple area. But inside, they made a lot of money. The priests opened up the temple area to line their own pockets.

More deplorable than the merchants were the “money changers.” Once a year all Jews were required to pay a temple tax. The common coin was the Roman coin, but the Roman coin was unacceptable for the temple tax. Thus, the Roman coin had to be exchanged for a Hebrew coin, and the exchange rate being charged was astronomical. This brings up another thing that makes Jesus angry.

2. Not taking worship seriously.

Somehow we have convinced ourselves that purchasing praise and worship CDs and leather bound study Bibles big enough to choke a mule and breath mints with scripture written on it and t-shirts with cute Christian sayings and bumper stickers that proclaim “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven”, and putting a fish emblem on our cars, makes us right with God. When all it really does is make religious professionals rich.

We have deceived ourselves. We look like a tree full of fruit, but we are empty on the inside, and we are more concerned with our billfolds than we are worshiping God. I wonder if what we do each Sunday is pleasing to God, or are we just ticking Him off. The result of not taking worship seriously is a *loss of power*.

Mark now returns to the fig tree, “In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.”¹¹ It is now Tuesday, and as Jesus walks back to Jerusalem, His disciples notice that the tree Jesus cursed has withered. (More about this later.)

¹¹ Mark 11:20-21

Mark continues, “They arrived in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ they asked. ‘And who gave you authority to do this?’”¹²

There is no doubt the religious leaders were still upset about Jesus’ emotional outburst the previous day. “Who did He think He was!” they wanted to know. Jesus asked them a question they could not answer, and so He said with an attitude, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”¹³ Thus, there is a third thing that makes Jesus angry.

3. Not honestly seeking Him.

Jesus doesn’t mind questions. But the religious leaders were not interested in answers. They simply wanted Jesus done away with. Instead of seeking Him, they were questioning His authority. Likewise, God doesn’t mind your questions, your doubts, and your concerns. All He asks is that you honestly seek Him, and open yourself up to Him. He will prove Himself real in your life. But if all you are doing is looking for reasons not to believe, looking for something else to criticize, looking for another way to undermine His authority, well, He is under no obligation to help you out. The result of not honestly seeking Him is a *loss of potential*.

Lifting the Curse, Making things Right

¹² Mark 11:27-28

¹³ Mark 11:29-33

On Tuesday morning, as Jesus and His disciples were going back to Jerusalem, they pass the fig tree Jesus cursed. Peter makes reference to it, and Jesus says, “Have faith in God...I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”¹⁴

Nowhere does Jesus explain why He did what He did. However, if the whole cursing the fig tree and cleansing the Temple had to do with the coming judgment on Israel because of her hypocrisy, then His response to Peter must be how to avoid the coming judgment. In other words, Jesus was telling His disciples, and us, how not to wind up like the fig tree and temple merchants. Three things stick out that correspond to the three things that made Jesus angry in the first place. Three things a person must do to lift the curse off their life.

1. Have faith.

Don’t just believe, believe in Jesus. Don’t have faith in your ability, but in the ability of Jesus. Don’t place your faith in faith; rather, “have faith in God.” Have unwavering faith in Him. Commit your entire life to Him, and He will restore your *purpose*.

¹⁴ Mark 11:22-26

2. Pray.

And have faith when you pray. Anything that runs on electricity must be plugged into the electricity to receive any power. Likewise, the Christian life runs on the power of prayer. However, you must stay plugged into the power to receive any power. Prayer will restore your *power*.

3. Forgive.

Jesus made it clear that if you don't forgive others, He will not forgive you. There is no room in a believer's life for bitterness and resentment. I am convinced one of the main reasons Christians don't experience power in their lives, and one of the main reasons believers forget their purpose, is because they have not forgiven those who have wronged them. It is only through forgiveness that you will regain your *potential*.

CONCLUSION

What makes Jesus angry? Not being and doing what you were created to be and do—a loss of purpose. Not taking worship seriously—a loss of power. Not honestly seeking Him—a loss of potential. How do you make things right? Faith—rediscover your purpose. Prayer—restore your power. Forgiveness—release your potential.

When you were a child, did your parents ever discipline you while saying, “This hurts me more than it hurts you”? Did you believe them? Now, as a parent, have you ever disciplined your child and it broke your heart? Do you now understand what your parents were saying?

Why does it break a parent’s heart when a child does something wrong? Because as parents we want more for our children than we want for ourselves. A parent understands their child’s purpose, power, and potential. A parent gets upset, not because the child’s wrong affects the parent, but because the parent knows the affect the wrong will have on the child. Likewise, Jesus doesn’t get angry because of how what we have done—or not done—affects Him, but because He loves us, and wants more for us than we want for ourselves; and He knows how our wrongs affect us.

Today, right now, you can rediscover your purpose through faith; restore your power through prayer; and release your potential through forgiveness. Let Jesus cleanse the temple of your heart, lift the curse from your fruitless life, and restore you to Himself.