

**Bible Study Notes for 8-14-24**

**THE GOSPEL OF MARK**

**Mark 11:1—12:44**

**By**

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In the opening words of our Scripture lesson, we read how methodically Jesus planned this event. First, He instructed two of His disciples to go to a certain place in the village where they would find a colt that had never been ridden before. Second, He told them exactly what to say to the colt's owner in order to secure permission to use the animal, ***"The Lord hath need of him."***

Next, Mark tells us that the two disciples followed Jesus' instructions, and everything turned out exactly as He said it would (11:1-6). Jesus then mounted the colt, and His procession moved down the road the short distance to Jerusalem. While the crowd along the way responded enthusiastically to Jesus, it is not certain at all that they understood the full meaning of what was happening. The quotation in Mark 11:9, ***"Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord,"*** comes from Psalm 118:26.

In those days that phrase was used as a greeting for all pilgrims on their way to a religious festival. It is true that the words in verse 10 refer to the Kingdom of David. They make a statement of hope for the Messiah, which points to the idea that this One would be a political and military leader. It is possible that Jesus chose this way of entering Jerusalem because He knew that those who understood Him and His mission would recognize the meaning of the symbolism. Those who did not would simply shout "Hosanna" as a spontaneous response to a parade.

For Mark's readers, looking back from their side of the cross, the scene was loaded with meaning. They would have remembered that the crisis that led to Jesus' crucifixion began with His triumphal entry, and they would have recalled how the disciples followed along in their own confused way. They would also remember that lurking behind the crisis of excitement were the religious authorities who were waiting to strike at just the right moment. And in the midst of all it was Jesus, a secluded and sorrowful figure, determined to press on to the concluding events of His ministry.

Before going on, let us go back for a moment and look again at some of the rather interesting details associated with the early stages of this event. Note that the colt

was tied up at a prearranged location. There also appears to be a predetermined “password” between the colt’s owner, *“Why do ye this?”* and Jesus, *“The Lord has need of him.”* The event suggests that Jesus already had active followers in Jerusalem. Repeatedly in Mark’s Gospel, as we have seen, the ministry and message of Jesus have been partially secret and usually unadvertised. But now Jesus emerges from the shadows into the public eye. Jesus and His followers could have entered Jerusalem easy and quietly, but now He chose to arrive in a dramatic fashion.

But even though His movements were public and ceremonious, Jesus’ actions delivered a different message than was popularly expected. He entered as a “lowly hero,” a phase that seems to contradict itself. His followers were a mixed crew but He was more of a king than the crowds realized.

During this scene Jesus does not say anything. But we listen to the cry of the crowd, “Hosanna!” which means “Save, now” or “Save, I pray.” Jesus’ silence as He rides along straddling a donkey suggests an unspoken reply, “I am the Messiah, and I will save, but not in the way you expect.” The importance of this scene for us runs parallels its meaning for early Christians. Jesus calls His followers to be “Lowly heroes and heroines.”

Mark’s Gospel has slowly revealed who Jesus is. The recording of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem fits an established pattern. Jesus’ act was an announcement, but it was not exact. The people shouted the proper words, but it seems clear that they did not understand the full implications of what they were saying. While Jesus intentionally “went public” at this time, it was not clear even to His disciples who He really was, until after the cross and the resurrection.

What happened next in Mark’s account is hard to understand without background information. Jesus is returning from Bethany where He and His disciples had spent the night. He is hungry. He sees a fig tree, but it has no figs on it *“for the time of the figs was not yet” (11:13)*. Jesus then behaves in what appears to be a most uncharacteristic manner: He condemns the tree. *“No man shall eat fruit of thee hereafter forever. And His disciples heard it” (11:14)*. The story is completed later in **11:20, 21**, when they find *“the fig tree dried up from the roots.”*

Because this action is so unexpected of Jesus, most commentators believe this was an enacted parable. It was, in other words, an act that made a statement. The earliest commentator on Mark’s Gospel, Victor Antioch in the fifth century, said that Jesus “used the fig tree to set forth the judgment that was about to fall on Jerusalem.” (He was referring to the terrible devastation of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.) Israel, particularly

its leaders, had produced leaves that could be observed but there was no fruit. Jesus was denouncing sterile/barren religion and leaders who fail to provide spiritual direction and power.

Another reason for concluding that the fig tree story was an enacted parable is its location in Mark. Like bread in a sandwich, the verses that tell the story surrounded another event that illustrates the point of the parable. The story in the middle describes the overthrow of the money changers in the temple (11:15-19). Self-centered religious leaders are like fruitless fig trees.

In this middle story we see Jesus entering the temple, the courtyard, the place where non-Jews were allowed to pray. The courtyard, known as the Court of the Gentiles, was a place where people of other races could meet God. Sadly, it had become a place where all kinds of sideline activities were happening, chief of which was the selling of sacrificial animals. Religious peddlers peddled “purified” doves for sacrifices. The doves used in the temple sacrifice had to be without blemish, and temple inspectors found birds purchased outside to be “impure.”

The unblemished doves available in the courtyard were sold at an inflated price, and religious pilgrims who came to worship were often exploited. In addition to the dove peddlers there were money changers who exchanged Roman money for Jewish coins. Only Jewish money could be used to pay temple dues, so the money changers provided a service, which had come to be a rip-off because of the high rate of exchange which resulted in a huge profit for the priests.

Jesus’s response was full-force anger. When He first arrived in Jerusalem, He had visited the temple and **“looked round about upon all things” (11:11)**. It may be that He had sized up the situation at that time and took action immediately upon His return later.

In these verses Jesus sounds and behaves like an Old Testament prophet, quoting Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. He reminds the temple scribes and priests that the courtyard was to be **“of all nations the house of prayer,”** but **“ye have made it a den of thieves” (11:17)**.

The anger of Jesus’ words was matched by His actions, as He threw out the money changers and the peddlers and wrecked the place. He also put a stop to the common practice of using the courtyard (outer court) as a shortcut for traffic: **“And (He) would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple” (11:16)**. Jesus demonstrated extreme impatience with all prostitutions of faith, and

this encounter is the most dramatic example. The scribes and chief priests certainly got the message, and they increased their efforts to destroy Jesus (11:18).

The comparison between this story and our churches today is noticeable. Side activities, money-raising events, gambling, when done in the name of Christ, can undermine the spiritual intentions of Christianity. Jesus attacked the money changers and the peddlers because they had confused the world and the temple. They had become lump instead of leaven. And that is our danger as well.

Next, we see that Jesus changed the subject when the disciples focused on the incident of the fig tree. This is another reason to believe that the fig tree episode was an enacted parable. In Mark 11:22-26 Jesus teaches the disciples a lesson about faith and prayer by using a surprising figure of speech.

“Removing a mountain” was a common expression for describing a situation that was basically impossible. In those times, teachers were sometimes called “mountain-removers” because of their efforts to remove mountains of ignorance and confusion. Jesus is telling them here that prayer without faith does not stand a chance. And Mark seems to place Jesus’ teaching here on faith and prayer immediately after two dramatic condemnations of spiritual sterility, so that the disciples will see and understand the only antidote for religious impotence.

Three conditions are necessary if prayer is to “move mountains.” “***Faith***,” stated here both negatively (“***and shall not doubt in his heart***”) and positively (“***but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass***”) is a requirement (11:23). “***Expectation***” is also important: “***What things soever you desire, when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you shall have them***” (11:24). And “***forgiveness***” (11:26) is necessary because lingering bitterness or leftover feelings of resentment nullify our prayers.

We need only to evaluate our prayers by these standards to see the source of our own spiritual weakness. The early church remembered these sayings of Jesus because they were basic to life in the Christian community. The church is a community of faith and prayer, or it is an empty shell. Christians are persons who pray with ***faith*** and ***expectation***, with a ***forgiving*** spirit, or they are ineffective.

The day after the events we have just studied happened, Jesus returned to Jerusalem and was walking in the temple. There He was confronted by the chief priests, scribes, and elders. It is quite likely He was walking in what was called the Royal Cloister of the temple’s outer court where rabbis taught and debated ideas. We can assume

that their question, ***“By what authority do You these things?” (11:28)*** referred to what had happened the day before when Jesus had cleared the temple. At one level they were asking, “Who do you think you are to come storming in here upsetting our operation? Who name you chief reformer”?

Their question was frightening. They were not really seeking information. They were just trying to put Him in a corner. But Jesus stayed within the rules of good debate technique, and instead of answering them directly, He posted a counterquestion, ***“The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or men? Answer Me” (11:30).***

Jesus’ reply was sharp. He was a lot sharper than His opponents. They thought they had trapped Him by their question about His authority. If He had said His authority came from God, they could have accused Him of blasphemy. On the other hand if He had said it came from secular authorities, His cleansing of the temple would have been an act of rebellion. But His counterquestion put them on the defense.

If they replied that John’s baptism was not approved by God, the people who loved and admired John would be offended and outraged. If they said it was from God, then Jesus, who was identified with John, could say that His authority also had divine blessing. Jesus’ question forced His enemies to remember John’s call to repentance, his message of forgiveness, and, most important, his announcement, ***“There comes one mightier than I after me...” (1:7).***

Their only possible response was, ***“We cannot tell” (11:33).*** They could not have answered because they would have incriminated themselves. For this reason, Jesus was not obligated to answer their question. We learn from this that Jesus does not commit Himself to any who do not commit themselves to truth. And Jesus’ message to us is equally sobering. If we ask, “Who are you, Jesus?” He is most likely to turn our question around and ask, “Who do you believe I am?”

In taking us behind the scenes of this confrontation of Jesus with the Jewish authorities, Mark shines light on the intense controversy that raged over Jesus’ authority. The outrage was increasing, and led to His arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Jesus’ dialogue with the scribes, chief priests, and elders continued (12:1-12). He told them a parable that also had to do with authority—theirs and how they had abused it! Jesus’ parables are not usually symbols. They are stories that stand on their own and do not have symbolic meanings. But the parable of the vineyard is an exception; it is a cross between a symbol and a parable. The vineyard stands for Israel, and its owner represents God. The tenants in the story are the Jewish religious

leaders; the servants include the Old Testament prophets and possibly John the Baptist. The owner's son represents Jesus.

The story moves through four stages. First (12:1-5), the tenants (Jewish religious leaders) rebel against the owner (God) by rejecting, beating, and killing a string of servants (prophets). Second (12:6), the owner goes far beyond normal expectations and sends his son (Jesus) in one final effort to receive the fruit of the vineyard that is owed to him. Third, (12:7-8), the servants kill the son, demonstrating the self-serving abuse of the authority entrusted to them. And the fourth (12:9), the owner rejects the faithless stewardship of the tenants and decides to entrust the vineyard to others.

Next, Jesus changes His comparison (12:10-11) to emphasize a final point: the church with Christ as the cornerstone is God's new hope. Israel had violated a sacred trust, and the parable predicts the end of one chapter in history and the beginning of another. To illustrate His point, Jesus quotes a selection from their own Scriptures, Psalm 118:22-23), to describe their condemnation.

Jesus' enemies understood what He was saying. They were condemned by their arrogance. Jesus had challenged them: except my words or kill me. And they would have killed Him on the spot, but they were afraid such action at that time would incite a riot.

The first wave of attack by the religious leaders had been resisted, ***"They left Him and went their way" (12:12)***. Fresh troops were sent to challenge Jesus. This time, we read certain Pharisees and Herodians came ***"to catch Him in His words" (12:13)***. Their question was wrapped in flattery as insincere as their souls, ***"Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men but teaches the way of God in truth" (12:14)***.

Mark introduces us here to the eleventh controversy in his Gospel: civil obedience, God versus country. This was an issue in Jesus' day, even as it is ours. Politics and religion are always touchy subjects.

Jesus' interrogators were clever, and they stated the question in classic form, ***"Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" (12:24)***. They had chosen a burning situation for this entrapment, one that had divided the Jews since a head tax or "census" was imposed by the Romans in A.D. 6. The Zealots had refused to pay it and instigated a brief and unsuccessful revolt against Rome. The tax continued to be unpopular with the government.

The issue called for a decision as to whether one ought to obey a law imposed by a government of employment. If Jesus said “yes,” He would have offended the people who shared the sentiments of the Zealots. If He had said “no,” He could be denounced to the Roman authorities as a rebel.

Jesus did not accept the “either/or ness” of their hypocritical question. There is no question but that we owe some things to the state, but we owe something totally different to God. The fact that the Pharisees and the Herodians had a coin when Jesus asked them for one, convicted them. They admitted to having Caesar’s currency, so they were committed to paying taxes in that coin. He seems to be saying, “Caesar’s image is on the coin. It is his money. You have already involved yourselves in his value system. But do not forget: God has a different kind of claim on our lives (12:17).

Jesus turned a trick question into an occasion for teaching a basic principle for moral decisions. He does not tell us what to do, but He offers guidelines about how to make a decision. His point seems to be that since we receive certain benefits from the state, we ought to pay for them with the money that has “Caesar’s imprint” on it. But we also have the imprint of God on us; we are created in His image. Our primary obligation in life is to Him.

The next group to challenge Jesus was the Sadducees (12:18-27). They refused to accept any Scriptures as valid other than the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy and they rejected any theological advances including the resurrection of the body. The haughty and arrogant Sadducees were unpopular with the people because they openly collaborated with the Romans. This is the only time in the Gospel of Mark that the Sadducees appear on the scene. But to them goes the suspicious honor instigating another bitter controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities—this time about the resurrection.

They present Jesus with a hypothetical situation, which, in their minds, will demonstrate the ridiculousness of believing in an afterlife (12:19-23). The situation they pose is based on instructions given in **Deuteronomy 25:5**, *“If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her.”*

This provision of the Mosaic Law, known as Levirate marriage, was instituted so that family names and property could be carried on. The Sadducees twist this concept

now to fit a ridiculous situation in which seven brothers die without children, each having in turn taken the childless wife of the older brother. Then, an attempt to stump Jesus and bluff the idea of resurrection, they ask whose wife she would be in the afterlife.

Jesus responds to their outrageous question with a double accusation. First, He accuses them of not knowing their own Scriptures. Second, He indicts them for failing to trust the power of the living God (12:24). In making this second point Jesus refers to Exodus 3:6, which makes it clear that the God of the Patriarchs is the God of the living, not the dead. In speaking to Moses from the burning bush God said, ***“I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”***

The present tense form used here indicates that the patriarchs are alive with God. Then Jesus goes on to challenge the Sadducees. They viewed resurrection in terms of the temporal forms of this life, where afterlife happens in eternal circumstances. The resurrected are ***“as the angels which are in heaven”*** (12:25).

The Sadducees knew the Scripture a little bit, but they did not know the Spirit that interpreted it. They were trapped by their own imagination. Those who misuse and twist Scripture to support their own ideas, instead of listening to the Bible to hear what God is saying, are today’s Sadducees. Jesus basically confronted them with a blunt statement, ***“You are wrong in the question you ask.”*** They were guilty of the ancient yet very modern game of trivial pursuit—how many angels can sit on the head of a pin.

The lesson for us in our day is to avoid playing dangerous games with our Scriptures. Instead, we are to listen prayerfully and openly to what the God of the living has to say to us in His Word.

Unlike the Sadducees, the scribes who next appears before Jesus gives every indication of being sincere and honest in his search for answers (12:28-34). When we know that the rabbis identified 613 different commandments in the law, the question, “which is first?” seems reasonable.

Jesus responds by citing two Old Testament passages, Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18. But He puts them together in a way that had not been done before. Verses 29-30 are from the *Shema*, a prayer which devout Jews repeated daily. Reciting basic beliefs about God (***“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord”***) was a way of reminding devout Jews of God’s total claim on their lives. The Shema



was probably the answer the scribe expected, but Jesus changed its meaning by adding the Leviticus passage, “...*thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*” The point Jesus was making is that while the love of God is of supernatural importance, if it is not associated with obligations to one’s neighbor, it is without doubt self-centered. In the original context, loving thy “neighbor” had to do with a Jew’s treatment of other Jews. But Jesus here speaks of it without boundaries. The old law was invested with new meaning.

The scribe understood the point Jesus was making and responded positively (12:32). He seemed to understand that loving God and loving others exposed the sacrificial system of Judaism as a spiritually barren ritual. And Jesus’ response to the scribe is encouraging, “*Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God*” (12:34).

While the scribe was “*not far from the Kingdom,*” Jesus’ sworn enemies in the surrounding crowd were not happy. For them, this represented a major controversy over the interpretation of the Law. And while they were forced to be silent for the moment, their evil intentions would soon erupt into violence.

In **Mark 12:35** we get an answer from Jesus without knowing the question, “*How say the scribes that Christ is the Son of David?*” Whatever He was asked, His reply addresses His own relationship to a long-standing belief that the Messiah would be a Son of David. The popular image of a “Son of David” for the “Messiah” was misleading and therefore a trivial matter. Jesus was a descendant of David, but that was not the most important point. He was trying to deny the idea that the Messiah was to be a nationalistic warrior who was coming to establish an earthly empire. Jesus was saying, “*The true messiah is David’s Lord, not simply his descendant.*” In saying that, He created another controversy over the true meaning of the Messiah’s descent from King David.

In response to all this discussion Mark tells us that the “*common people heard Him gladly.*” We can be sure the scribes did not hear gladly what Jesus said next in verses 38-40. Here we read that Jesus in rapid succession accuses the scribes of being status-seeking, privilege-demanding stuffed shirts who take advantage of widows! They were full of pride, dressing to attract attention and occupying the front rows in the synagogue.

We are well advised to pay close attention to Jesus’ strong words. The specific reference in Mark 12:40 was probably to the scribal practice of accepting fees for performing religious services to widows. But now as then, people who experience grief are vulnerable to those who will exploit them in the name of religion.

Jesus' warning to the scribes has a practical application for us today. We are not to use our Christian position for personal gain as the scribes did. This condemnation of their pretentious showmanship and greed was indeed a bitter pill for them to swallow. It kindled a controversy that could not be ignored because it went against the grain of all they held dear.

Immediately the scene shifts, and Jesus gives us a vivid contrast between people in "high places" behaving in low ways and the widow who dropped her two mites into the treasury (12:41-44). The farthing that the woman gave was the smallest unit of money in the currency at that time, but it was all she had. It is certain that as Jesus stood by watching that day that He saw many people give larger amounts of money, but when this widow dropped in her two little coins, He commended her for giving more. Hers was a sacrificial gift; it was all she had!

In this moving story that closes our lesson, a vivid example of commitment and sacrifice stands in contrast to the previous one of self-interest, exploitation, and greed. This was an important word for Mark's earliest readers. They were in a minority facing death and despair. They were hounded by both civil and religious authorities to give all they had. But unlike the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus approved of them. And they came to understand that it is by giving that we receive.

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