

Mark 11

Introductory Comments

1. Mark 11 begins Jesus' final week before his death as he arrives in Jerusalem for Passover. It contains the stories of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his cursing of the fig tree, his conflict with the Temple money changers, and his argument with the chief priests and elders about his authority.
2. Chapter 11 represents a significant shift in the narrative. There are no more healing miracles, no more stories of widespread success, no more exorcisms or secrecy commands, no more calling of disciples. From here on out, Jesus will be facing significant rejection and opposition, epitomizing the preponderance of "bad soil" surrounding him.
3. Outline of Mark 11:1-12:12
 - A. Introduction – 11:1-11 – Triumphal entry
 - B. 11:12-13:37
 1. 11:12-25 – unfruitfulness and fig tree
 - a. 11:12-14 – failure of fig tree
 - b. 11:15-19 – cleansing of temple
 - c. 11:20-25 – fig tree and faith
 2. 11:27-12:12 – Jesus' and John's authority
 - a. 11:27-33 – controversy over authority
 - b. 12:1-12 – parable of the Vineyard and the Tenants

Questions and read Mark 11 aloud

Discussion Questions

1. Mark 11:1-11 introduces the second major section of Mark's gospel, the Passion. Do you notice any shifts in how Jesus is acting here versus how he acted in the first section? *It's an intentional, public act meant to draw attention to himself and step into his identity, as opposed to low-key profile and secrecy elements of first section. From his earliest healing miracles (e.g., 1:43-45) through his most recent teaching sessions with the disciples on the road to Jerusalem (e.g., 7:24; 9:30-31), Jesus has consistently attempted to hide his actions, silence those who realize who he is, and in general cut a very low profile. While his efforts have usually been foiled, his intention has remained constant. Now, he initiates public celebration and recognition. Hiddenness and lonely places are a thing of the past.*

2. What is the symbolism of riding in on a colt? *Embodies messianic prophecies suggested by Zechariah 9:9, which refers to the humble but powerful arrival of Israel's king; cf. Borg and Crossan re: this being a counter-parade to Caesar's lavish military parades; laying cloaks and branches recalls Israel's royal festal processions (2 Kings 9:13); further connects Jesus with the line of David.*

3. What does the story of the fig tree (11:12-25) mean? *The fig tree miracle illustrates the unfruitfulness, hard-heartedness, and opposition now poised to engulf Jesus. And the fact that the narrator points out that “it wasn’t the season for figs” (11:13) encourages the audience to perceive the symbolic rather than the mundane character of Jesus’ action. It is Jesus’ last miracle, different than all his other miracles. How and why? It is not a healing miracle, but a symbolic cursing of unfruitfulness. It illustrates that there is no good soil in Jerusalem, the religious center of Israel. How is the fig tree like the disciples? It offers no fruit. The withering away at its roots is the exact characteristic of the rocky soil, which abides for a time, but then withers away because it has no root (4:6). Jesus’ harsh words in 11:14 suggest that time can indeed run out on fruitless trees, prayer-less temples, and even faithless disciples.*

4. The story of the fig tree (11:12-25) is actually an inclusio around the story of the temple cleansing (11:15-19). You may remember that Mark does this often, to connect the two stories (the bookend story and the inserted story). What do you think he’s trying to say with this inclusio? *Associates the barrenness of the fig tree with the corruption of the Temple. To Jesus’ hunger the tree offers nothing but leaves, just as to the spiritual hunger of the nations the Temple offers nothing but a “den of robbers” (11:17). In Jesus’ renewed profile, God’s house is not for the Jews alone but for all people, and it is not a commercial venture but a “house of prayer.”*

5. Who is Jesus talking to in 11:22-25, and what does he mean? *He’s speaking to the disciples, but even more importantly to the audience. Audience has heard repeatedly and consistently the idea that faith precedes miracles. Now Jesus is delineating the issue openly. Miracles are NEVER the cause of faith, they are only the result. Jesus further extends this understanding of faith to prayer and forgiveness. Prayer from the faith-filled heart receives its request, and prayer that forgives all others assures God’s divine forgiveness. For Mark, the key to miracles, effective prayer, and divine forgiveness lies within the human heart. God does not manipulate the will by miraculous signs or entice the mind by unexpected gifts or induce a forgiving spirit through guilt. Instead, it is the human initiative of the faithful ground that produces the abundant fruits of the kingdom of God.*

6. What things are the chief priests and scribes referring to in 11:28? *Specifically, Jesus’ visit to the Temple the day before, his disparaging comments about it being a “den of robbers” and his casting out of the money changers. But more than that, their question of Jesus’ authority echoes both the very first healing miracle of the Gospel (1:21-28), in which the authority of his performative word was contrasted to the teaching of the scribes (1:22, 27), and also the very first controversy of the Gospel (2:1-12), in which Jesus demonstrated to hostile scribes his “authority on earth to forgive sins” (2:10).*

7. What does Jesus reveal about the chief priests and scribes in the exchange of 11:27-33? *Nothing altogether new. But he does show that self-interest and popular opinion underlie their positions and teachings. They don’t search Scripture, they don’t employ logic or voice deeply held convictions to determine their response.*

Instead, they fear looking foolish or provoking the crowd. Demonstrates their LACK of authority, these same people who question Jesus' authority and always have. And Jesus actually does answer their question in the Parable of the Talents, but that's for next week...

**** For next session, read Mark 12*