

Discipleship According to Mark

A Barren Temple (Mark 11:1-25)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at Houston Chinese Church on July 19, 2026

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're jumping back into our series in the Gospel According to Mark. We covered chapters 1 to 10 back earlier this year and took a short summer break in the Psalms. But if we want to finish the book in a year, Lord-willing, then we need to quickly get back into it. So this morning we're starting in Mark chapter 11.
 - Now what's interesting is how chapter 11 to the end of the Gospel, in chapter 16, cover events that occur within a span of just one week. **If you add it up, that means one-third of Mark's Gospel is dedicated to telling us about the last week of Jesus's life.** Which, if you think about it, is *not* how any normal biography is written. You'll never read a biography on some notable historical figure that dedicates a third of the book to merely the last week of the person's life.
- ❖ But Jesus is no mere historical figure. And Mark's Gospel is not a biography in the normal sense. **What takes place in the last week of his life is the most important aspect of Jesus's life story.** And all of human history and all who have ever lived in the past, present, and future have felt the impact of what went down in that one week.
 - And that's why we're going to spend the rest of this year, slowly working through the final third of Mark's Gospel, carefully considering the pivotal events that took place in the final week of Jesus's life.
- ❖ **Now in this morning's passage, we find Jesus on a search. He's clearly looking for something.** After entering Jerusalem, he went straight to the temple. Which was the most sacred, holiest space in all of Judaism. Where they believed God's glory dwelt on earth. Where they could offer their sacrifices and find atonement for their sins. Jesus went to the temple looking for something in particular. Look at v11, *"And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And ... he ... looked around at everything."*
 - **He was looking for fruit—for the fruit of true faith in God.** But apparently Jesus didn't find any in the Jerusalem temple. Which is why he returned the next day to cleanse it of merchants and money-changers. And it's why that particular incident is sandwiched between this curious moment where Jesus curses a barren fig tree. And the next morning, it's completely withered away to its roots.
 - **All of that is meant to convey that whatever Jesus was searching for was no longer present in the temple of God.** So consequently, he cursed the temple, prophetically foretelling its demise.
- ❖ As we go deeper in this passage, the obvious question that we're confronted with is what will Jesus find if he visits our church today? **Whatever he was searching for in the temple back then, will he find it in among us?** Will he discover the fruit of true faith? Will he commend the church today or curse it?
 - Those are the big questions we're confronted with in this morning's text. As we walk through it, we'll see three things: **(1)** The fervent yet fickle crowd, **(2)** The busy yet barren temple, and **(3)** The clear and conspicuous signs of faith.

The Fervent Yet Fickle Crowd

- ❖ As we begin our own search in this text, we'll see, in vv1-11, **the fervent yet fickle crowd**. In all four Gospel accounts, there's a similar account of Jesus's triumphal entry into the royal city of Jerusalem. It's the Palm Sunday moment, which has carried over into Christian tradition as we celebrate Holy Week each year.
 - **But what I think is notable about Mark's account is how Jesus's triumphal entry ends in v11 in an anticlimactic fashion.** He looks around. It's already getting late. So he leaves the city altogether to go back to Bethany to spend the night. I think when we consider the context that anticlimactic ending starts to make more sense.
- ❖ Now starting in v1, we're given more details about how Jesus prepared for his entry into Jerusalem. He was intentional with every step. **Because he was intentionally sending a signal.** Remember that all of this took place days before the Passover, which means pilgrims from all over were flocking into the holy city, to worship at the holy temple, offering their requisite sacrifices. So Jesus and his disciples were part of a larger crowd of pilgrims making their way into Jerusalem by way of the Eastern Gate. Which was the closest to the temple.
 - **But, by design, Jesus made sure that he stood out.** Regardless of how they traveled to Jerusalem—whether on the back of a beast of burden or not—most pilgrims would usually walk the last stretch of the pilgrimage towards the city gate. So for Jesus to arrange to ride on a colt would have meant he stood out. He was probably the only one that day riding into Jerusalem.
- ❖ And it's not just that he was on a colt while everyone else was on foot. **The very act of riding a colt, the foal of a donkey (Mt 21:2, 5), entering the city by way of the Mount of Olives is chock-full of OT imagery.** 2 Samuel 15 recounts the story of when King David had fled Jerusalem, by way of the Mount of Olives, weeping as his son Absalom attempted to overthrow him (2 Sam 15:30). David was even given a donkey to ride as he fled the city (2 Sam 16:2). Devout Jews that day were well-acquainted with that ancient story.
 - And now you have Jesus *entering* Jerusalem, by way of the Mount of Olives. And he too is riding on a donkey and weeping over the city as mentioned in Luke's account (Lk 19:41). **The crowd picks up on this imagery.** And coupled with all the messianic fervor already surrounding Jesus, they begin to throw down their cloaks in front of him and spread out palm branches (cf. 2 Kgs 9:13). And recite verses out of Psalm 118, "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" (11:9)
- ❖ **Every one of those actions was full of messianic symbolism.** Not long before this, during the intertestamental period, there was a Jewish military leader named **Simon Maccabaeus**, who was closely associated with Hanukkah (the holiday that celebrates a Jewish victory over their Greek oppressors). After he helped recapture Jerusalem, Simon and his soldiers are described—in one of the books of the Apocrypha—as being welcomed into the city "*with praise and palm branches.*" (1 Macc 13:51)

- ❖ So by NT times, the singing of Psalm 118 and the waving of palm branches carried strong messianic overtones. **Just hearing that tune being sung would've sent a clear signal across the crowd that day.**
 - It's like how you can be in a large noisy crowd and suddenly you hear the Star-Spangled Banner being played. And that noisy crowd immediately gets quiet, everyone stands to attention, looks the same direction with a hand over their hearts. And you know what's about to happen. We're about to play ball!
- ❖ In the same way, when the crowd that day at the gates of Jerusalem, heard Psalm 118 being sung, and saw the cloaks on the road and the palm branches swaying, and a man riding on a donkey, by way of the Mount of Olives. They immediately recognized that this was no ordinary pilgrim entering Jerusalem on an ordinary day.
 - **This man—whether you believed him or not—was signaling by his actions and by the crowd's response that he is the messianic fulfillment of OT prophecy.** Of **Zechariah 9:9** that says, *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* So Jesus was signaling that he's a king!
- ❖ The crowd recognized that and shouted out, in v10, *“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”* That's a call for political action. **They're seeking a political salvation.** Hosanna is a transliteration from the Hebrew into Greek and then carried over into English. When we sing Hosanna, we're saying, “Save us, we pray!”
 - **So when the crowd was chanting, “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!,” they're praying for salvation from their foreign oppressors.** They're shouting out for political salvation. And they're hopeful that Jesus will lead them, like Simon Maccabaeus, to overthrow Roman rule and restore the throne of David.
- ❖ The fervent crowd that day wanted Jesus to come and save them and to judge the nations (the Gentiles). **What they certainly didn't expect was for him to come and judge *them* and to *save the nations*.** The crowds thought the real problem is those darn Romans. Ruling our city. Occupying our land. We need to get rid of them. **What they didn't know is that the real problem is found inside them. The real problem is their sin.** That's what they need saving from. And we do too. Sin is what we should have in mind whenever we sing Hosanna.
 - **But the salvation from sin that the Messiah is destined to bring is a salvation by *faith*.** But sadly, faith was nowhere to be found that day when Jesus entered Jerusalem and visited the temple. Look at v11, *“And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”*

- ❖ **Like I said earlier, Mark's account of the triumphal entry is noteworthy for how it ends in anticlimactic fashion.** Unlike in Matthew 21, the city is not stirred up asking in wonder, "Who is this?" (Mt 21:10) Unlike in Luke 19, the crowd's reaction is *not* so great and tumultuous that even the stones are ready to cry out (Lk 19:40). No, in vv11 it's as if the crowd suddenly disappears and Jesus just goes home. He leaves and returns to Bethany.
 - That's the first clue that there's a lack of true faith. **Apparently the temple in Jerusalem is not home for the Son of God.** He doesn't reside there. He leaves the temple. He leaves Jerusalem. Neither place, neither space is the home of God.
- ❖ **I'm sure if you were standing there in the crowd that day, you would've assumed these were true worshippers with true faith in God.** Because look at their enthusiasm. Look at their pious actions. Listen to their fervent shouting and singing. They're singing for salvation! They're singing Hosanna!
 - But that's the lesson for us: **Don't mistake enthusiasm for faith.** Because, as the chapters unfold, in a few days, the same crowd fervently singing, "*Hosanna*," will be shouting, "*Crucify him!*" (15:13) This is a fervent yet fickle crowd.
- ❖ **And that's because their faith is *not* directed in God but in a political figure.** In a person of power and influence. Who can stand up to our foes and eliminate our enemies. But when that person or that party shows any sign of weakness, they're quick to abandon and flock to another. To whoever makes the newest and loudest claims of power.
 - This is where I believe the church today is most at risk. **Churchgoers can be full of enthusiasm and fervent in worship. But who are we worshipping?** What are we putting our faith in? Is the church at risk of conflating our faith with our politics? That's a mistake we have to avoid. **Like the crowd that day, you can be excited and enthusiastic about Jesus. But is he merely a surrogate for your political hopes and aspirations?** Is Jesus just a stand in for what you really believe in?
 - A progressive vision for reforming our society? Or a conservative vision for recovering a culture? **Either way, the problem is that what you think needs saving is out there. When the real problem is in our own hearts.** The Hosanna has to start with us.

The Busy Yet Barren Temple

- ❖ So don't mistake religious fervency for true faith in God. In the same way, don't mistake a busy temple for a true meeting place with God. This leads to the second thing we see in our text—**the busy yet barren temple.**
 - But as Jesus returns to the temple the next day, we're told, in vv12-14, that he was hungry. *"¹³And 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. ¹⁴And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it."*

- ❖ A lot has been written on this. On why Jesus would curse the fig tree for having no figs when we're told it wasn't even the season for figs. Apparently summer was the season when figs were fully ripened and ready for harvest. **But when figs trees begin bearing leaves—which would've been around the time of Passover (April)—those leaves are indication that tiny figs should be growing on the branches.** At that early stage, the figs are small and green and definitely not ripe. But at least they're edible. And back then, they were picked and eaten unripe, especially if you were really hungry.
 - **So when Jesus saw a fig tree full of green leaves, it gave the impression that at least those green, unripened figs would be present.** But sadly, nothing was there. So Jesus cursed the tree saying, *"May no one ever eat fruit from you again."*
- ❖ That's not Jesus being impulsive or rash in anger. That's Jesus making a point. Consider how Mark arranges this material. Sandwiching this incident at the temple with this object lesson of a fruitless fig tree. **In other words, the fig tree represents the temple of God, which should be fruitful all year long.** Which should always be bearing the fruit of true worship.
 - But that's not what Jesus finds when he arrives in the temple courts that morning. Look at v15, *"¹⁵And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹⁶And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple."*
- ❖ Jesus arrived in the outer court surrounding the temple, which is often called the Court of Gentiles. Because it was the closest Gentiles could get in proximity to the temple proper. **And in that large court, there would've been tons of people, busy with activity.** There were money-changers present with their tables set up for pilgrims to exchange their foreign currency into a half-shekel. Which could then be used to pay the annual temple tax as required by Mosaic Law (Ex 30:13-16). You were prohibited from offering to the Lord any coins of mixed alloy or with images of pagan rulers on it. That's why the temple coin was made with pure metal and void of any images. So there was a whole industry in place for temple currency exchange where, of course, you'd charge a fee for every transaction.
 - **And in that court, you would've heard the incessant bleating of sheep and been overwhelmed by the constant odor of livestock.** Depending if you were rich or poor, you could buy goats, lambs, or pigeons to be used for the various sin offerings or sacrifices of thanksgiving. **Suffice it to say, the Court of Gentiles was always busy with lots of commercial activity.**
- ❖ Now imagine you were a Gentile God-fearer who came to the temple to worship and offer your prayers to Yahweh God. This court is as close as you can get. And it was filled with so much noise, so many smells, so many people talking and bartering and arguing with each other. You can see why Jesus was so upset. **Instead of drawing all nations to God, they turned the temple court into an obstacle for all nations.**

- ❖ Listen to what Jesus says in v17, “*Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.*” **The temple was meant to be a house of prayer not a place of business.** They were coming to the temple not to worship but to make a profit. And if it’s not bad enough that they weren’t coming to worship, they were hindering Gentile God-fearers from actually worshipping. So Jesus overturned their tables and seats. Causing quite a scene and confusing many in the crowd.
 - They expected the Messiah to enter Jerusalem and purge the city of the Romans. **But instead of clearing the temple of Gentiles, Jesus clears it for them.** He says the temple is to be a house of prayer for *all* nations.

- ❖ Now it’s often assumed that Jesus was cleansing the temple of unjust business practices and driving out those who were exploiting innocent pilgrims trying to worship God. **But when read in context of Jesus’s encounter with the fig tree, I don’t think he was cleansing the temple to restore it back to proper function.** No, Jesus was doing something far more radical. **He was cursing the temple and replacing it with himself.**
 - Look at v15 and notice he didn’t just drive out those who *sold* in the temple courts. He also drove out those who bought. Even those pilgrims who had just arrived in the city. Who were trying to exchange their coins to pay the temple tax. Who were purchasing pigeons to offer as sacrifices to the Lord. He stopped them as well.
 - He wasn’t targeting the swindlers and cheats. He didn’t allow “*anyone to carry anything through the temple.*” **So I don’t think Jesus was reforming an unjust temple system. He was rejecting the temple system altogether.**

- ❖ By calling the temple a “*den of robbers,*” he is not saying that the temple itself is where all the stealing and cheating takes place. Their den is not where robbers *go* to steal and cheat. Their den is where they *return* to *rest* after all their stealing and cheating.
 - **So by calling the temple a “den of robbers,” Jesus is saying the temple has become a safe haven for religious hypocrites.** For those who think they’ll find forgiveness and fellowship with God in the place. Even as they go about their lives stealing and cheating and all sorts of sins. The temple is no longer a house of prayer for the nations. It’s a den, a refuge, a safe haven for unrepentant sinners.
 - And in due time, the temple will be no more. That’s what the object lesson of the fig tree was teaching. In v20, we read that within twenty-four hours, the fig tree had withered away. **The imminent destruction of the fig tree signaled the imminent destruction of the temple.** Which, according to history, was burned down and destroyed by the Romans in AD70.

- ❖ **But, in fact, the temple’s demise had already taken place years prior, during the last week of Jesus’s life.** Through his death and resurrection, he fulfilled the temple and its purposes so as to replace it with himself. The temple is withered and gone. **From now on, Jesus serves as the meeting place with God.** From now on, his blood—not the blood of bulls and goats—atones for our sins. From now on, the temple is no longer the center of faithful worship. Jesus is. **From now on, Jesus is the center of our faith and religion.**

- ❖ When Jesus came to the temple that day, he was searching for the fruit of truth faith. But sadly there was none to be found. The place was active and filled with people. It was busy yet sadly it was barren.
 - Let that not be said of the church today. **Just as we shouldn't mistake enthusiasm for faith, don't mistake a church building—packed full of people and busy with activities—as necessarily the house of God.** It could be if the gospel and faith are there. But the reality is that a church building—as busy as the temple was—could be equally barren if Jesus is not at the center.

The Clear and Conspicuous Signs of Faith

- ❖ So if fervency and busyness are not evident signs of spiritual fruitfulness, then what are? **How do you know if a church possesses true faith?** What was Jesus searching for that day? What would convince him that the fruit of true faith is in this place? He tells us starting in v22. **Let's consider his words and identify the clear and conspicuous signs of true faith.**
 - It can be summed up in two words: **prayer** and **forgiveness**. When you encounter a prayerful people and a forgiving people, you can be sure that faith in the Son of God is the driving life force of that church. It's the source of all their spiritual fruitfulness.
- ❖ Listen to what Jesus says after Peter points out how the tree he cursed yesterday has now withered. *“²²And Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God.’”* That's the whole point. Of the fig tree object lesson. Of his actions in the temple. That's what Jesus has been searching for. For signs of true faith in God.
 - **And one clear and conspicuous sign is faith-filled prayer.** *“²³Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”*
- ❖ Most Jews in Jesus's day thought the temple was that place where your prayers would be most effective. That by entering the temple courts, standing as close to the temple as possible, you could be more certain your prayers will come to pass.
 - **But Jesus's point in this passage is that the strength of your prayer life should rest—not on where you're standing at—but on who you're trusting in.** It's all about faith in God. One clear and conspicuous sign of a faith-filled people is a prayerful people.
- ❖ **When Jesus visits our church let's be sure that he finds a prayerful people.** Not just a people who pray for good health and safe travels. Which I'm not saying are bad things to pray for. **But let's be a people that prays for big, God-sized things like moving mountains.** That was a Jewish metaphor back then for doing the impossible. Do our prayers sound like that? Are we ever asking in faith for what seems like the impossible?

- ❖ Now we need to be careful with vv23-24 because they can be (and have been) misapplied to offer people a blank check. Suggesting that if you can get rid of all your doubt and pray with all your faith, then you'll get whatever you ask for. That's not how prayer works. **Prayer is not transactional. It's relational.** Those who have a deep faith in God desire the will of God, which is why they can pray in faith and with deep confidence that it will come to pass.
- ❖ **Now in addition to prayerfulness, another clear and conspicuous sign of true faith among a people is forgiveness.** They are a forgiving people. Listen to v25, *"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."*
- ❖ It seems like the topic of forgiveness is coming out of nowhere, but it makes sense in light of Jesus's prophecy of the temple's imminent demise. **Forgiveness was the central function of the Jerusalem temple.** It's where atonement for sin was made under the old covenant.
 - But now that Jesus is here. Now that he embodies the presence of God. Now that he has made atonement for our sins through his shed blood. **He's the new temple where forgiveness is received through faith in him.**
- ❖ **And as his church—as a body of forgiven sinners—we've become a living temple.** Where forgiveness is our central function. That means if Jesus were to visit here—looking for signs of true faith among us—he'll be looking to see if we are a forgiving people.
 - To hold grudges against each other. To remain resentful at those who have slighted you. To be bitter at those who have disrespected you. **That kind of attitude is incompatible with any claim to be a living temple of the Lord.** Jesus is saying, in v25, that there's a direct contradiction at hand if you stand in church singing and praying to your Crucified Christ while simultaneously refusing to forgive that person who wronged you.
- ❖ **Unforgiveness is only possible when that person's sin has become bigger in your eyes than the cross of Christ.** But if you have true faith—if you're trusting in the cross for your own sins—then you can't remain in a posture of unforgiveness. You can't hold onto that grudge. **If you're a Christian, I guess you could say forgiveness is in your blood. It's just what you do when you're covered by *his* blood.**
 - So the question is: **What is Jesus going to find when he visits our church?** May he find the fruit of true faith. May he encounter a praying people and a forgiving people. May Jesus find that he's the true center of our faith and worship!