



Sermon Transcript March 11, 2018

Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus Temple Talk Mark 11:12 - 12:12

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 11, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Mark 11:12 - 12:12

¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 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. ¹⁴ And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

¹⁵ And 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. ¹⁶ And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ And he was teaching them and saying to them, "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." ¹⁸ And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came they went out of the city.

²⁰ As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

²¹ And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." ²² And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. ²³ Truly, 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. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ 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."

²⁷ And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, ²⁸ and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?"

²⁹ Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ³⁰ Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me."

³¹ And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ³² But shall we say, 'From man'?"— they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.

³³ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

^{12:1} And he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. ² When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. ⁶ He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ⁷ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ ⁸ And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹ What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this Scripture: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹ this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’” ¹² And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

Introduction

This morning we find Jesus arriving in the city of Jerusalem. We knew he was going there. We even know why he was going to Jerusalem. We just spent three weeks looking at three conversations Jesus had with his disciples about his pending death on the cross. He was going to Jerusalem to die on the cross. In fact, we noted last week that his third conversation about the cross began by setting the scene. Mark describes the scene for us in Mark 10:32, “*And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem.*” And now we find in Mark 11 that he has arrived. The rest of the Gospel of Mark takes place in the city of Jerusalem.

When we open the pages to Mark 11, we discover that his arrival into the city of Jerusalem was anything but quiet. I can’t think of any other scene in the four Gospels where Jesus experienced more fanfare than he did on what is often referred to as his “Triumphal Entry” into the city of Jerusalem. He rode into the city on a colt and people spread their cloaks on the road in front of him and they waved palm branches as they sang, “*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!*”

The word “*Hosanna*” means “save us.” It comes out of Psalm 118, one of the psalms they would regularly sing as they went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. But on this

occasion, this Passover season, there was something a little extra special in the air. The crowd was acknowledging Jesus to be the Messiah, the one God sent to save his people. In fact, the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah, wrote in Zechariah 9:6, “*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.*” And of course, they are right to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, just like Peter was right when he confessed that Jesus was the Messiah in Mark 8. But also like the disciples, they didn’t understand the kind of deliverance Jesus came to bring. Like the disciples, the crowd was not expecting the cross.

I want to pick up this morning with what happens once Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem. Where does he go and what does he do? Mark 11-13 tells us that over the next several days, much of his time is spent in the Temple. We know from the Old Testament that the Temple was an important building in the life of Israel. In fact, there was no more important building in the life of Israel than the Temple. It was the building that housed the presence of God. It was a building that mirrored the heavenly throne room of God. It was the place where sacrifice for sin was made so that the people of Israel could approach God. So it was a building that represented both the holiness of God and the presence of God as he came and lived among his people.

We know that Solomon, the Son of King David, built the Temple. We also know that it was later destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. When the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem from exile, one of the first things they did was rebuild the Temple. But in the day of Jesus, the Temple had undergone a massive renovation by King Herod. In John 2:20 we discover that this rebuilding project took forty-six years. The stones were massive and it looked like a mountain of marble decorated with gold. Of course, you could say that the rabbis were biased when they said of the Temple, “He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life.” But even the Roman historian, Tacitus, was impressed by the glory of the Temple and he called it “a temple of immense wealth.” It sat on the top of the mountain. It was massive. It dominated the city skyline. In Mark 13:1 the disciples were coming out of the Temple and they too were marveling at the grandeur of it. They said to Jesus, “*Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings.*”

And yet, at the same time, the Temple became a symbol of everything that was wrong with the religious system of the day. At the center of this corruption, we find the religious leaders of Israel. Consequently, much of the activity that Jesus engages while in the Temple is with the religious leaders of Israel. They come to him in mass in Mark

11:27, “As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him.” Then like “tag-team wrestlers” each of them took their turn trying to trap Jesus with their questions. In Mark 12:13 it was the Pharisees who tried to entrap him with a question about taxes. In Mark 12:18 the Sadducees tried to entrap him with a debate regarding the resurrection. And then a scribe came to him in Mark 12:28 to discuss matters of the Law. They were all scheming and plotting against Jesus because of what Jesus had done earlier in the Temple. The intent of the religious leaders was noted earlier in Mark 11:18 when it says that the “*chief priests and the scribes . . . were seeking a way to destroy him.*”

Why? What did Jesus do and what did Jesus say that caused the religious leaders to feel so threatened? We will look at it in detail in a moment, but let me just make a general statement here. Basically, Jesus came into this magnificent Temple and he said that the whole system, building and all is coming down. If you don’t pick up the hints of this in Mark 11-12, you can’t escape what we will hear Jesus say plainly next week in Mark 13. After the disciples marvel at the grandeur of the Temple, Jesus says, “*Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.*” But Jesus doesn’t just come against the Temple here. He also comes against the religious leaders and they get what he is saying. In fact, after he pronounces judgment against them, we learn in Mark 12:12 that “*they were seeking to arrest him.*”

So when Jesus comes into Jerusalem, he doesn’t come in like “mild-mannered Clark Kent.” Instead he is a force to be reckoned with as he goes “toe-to-toe” with the religious leaders. In Mark 11-13, Jesus is pronouncing judgment upon the religious leaders and those who reject him. I know that is not a popular notion of Jesus in our day. But it is the tone and the witness of this passage. In fact, when Luke tells us about the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem, he says that when Jesus saw the city come into view that he wept over the city. Why? He cried, “*Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace.*” He was weeping over their failure to repent and the consequent judgment that followed. He went on to describe the same fate that awaits the city as he describes in Mark 13 to his disciples when they marveled at the grandeur of the Temple. Not one stone will remain on another.

So this morning I want to consider the “Temple Talk” that took place in Mark 11 and 12. We are going to listen in on two of the conversations Jesus had. One conversation takes place around a fig tree and the other conversation around a vineyard. Both of these “Temple Talks” bring a warning of judgment, and at the same time, an offer of hope. It all depends on what you do with Jesus. In other words, our hope is Jesus.

Temple Talk #1: The Fig Tree and Prayer

After the Triumphal Entry, the first thing we see Jesus do takes place on the next day. He is coming from Bethany into the city of Jerusalem. On his way to the city, he sees a fig tree. We know from the passage that the fig tree is in leaf. So from a distance, the tree looks good. And yet, it is very clear from the text that the season for figs had not yet come. Most likely, when he got close to the tree, he saw green figs on the tree but not ripe figs. We know that he was hungry. But when he arrived at the tree he didn't see any ripe figs to eat. So he cursed the tree; saying, "*May no one ever eat fruit from you again.*"

Now to many this seems very unreasonable and they consider the actions of Jesus to be inappropriate. It is like going to the orchard to pick apples before they are ready to be picked and leaving disappointed and telling everyone how bad the orchard is. And yet, here we see Jesus cursing a tree for not bearing fruit when it is not in season. But Jesus is not throwing some kind of tantrum because he couldn't satisfy his hunger from this tree. Rather, he is taking the posture of a prophet who comes to pronounce judgment. Often, in the Old Testament, prophets would use symbols to illustrate their point.

And more directly, the fig tree was often used by the Old Testament prophets to describe Israel's spiritual condition. For example, in Micah 7:1, the prophet says of Judah, "*Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit is gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first ripe fig that my soul desires.*" In other words, the prophet is saying that the absence of fruit was a symbol of the absence of righteousness in the land. "I desire the first ripe fig" but it is not there. Or consider Jeremiah 8:13, where God describes judgment that comes upon Judah because of the false religious leaders. He says, "*When I would gather them, declares the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, even the leaves are withered and what I gave them has passed away from them.*" Again, the lack of figs on the fig tree is a symbol of the lack of righteousness among the spiritual leaders. And so, this action of Jesus was not about the fig tree. Rather, it was about Israel. The oldest existing commentary on the Gospel of Mark is from 400 AD and it was written by Victor of Antioch. He says of this cursing of the fig tree, that "Jesus had used the fig tree to set forth the judgment that was about to fall on Jerusalem."¹ As goes this tree, so goes the city of Jerusalem.

When Jesus comes up over the hill and the city comes in view, the prominence of the Temple stood out. This marble building that was lined with gold, glistened in the sun. It was like that tree full of leaves. It looked good from a distance. But when you got inside and saw what went on inside, there was no fruit of righteousness to be found.

Mark takes us with Jesus inside the Temple. He writes in verse 15, *“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. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.”* As we stand with Jesus here, we are in an area known as “the Court of the Gentiles.” It is a huge area. It is the length of three football fields and it is 250 yards wide.² This outer court was as close as a Gentile could get to the Temple. And yet it was there as a provision for a Gentile to draw near to the one true God. But, instead, it became a convenient place for commerce. Commerce was necessary, so that is not the issue here. Sacrifices had to be bought by the worshiper. Foreign currency had to be exchanged for Jewish currency. Admittedly, often this led to taking advantage of the poor. In addition to that, this outer court became a convenient shortcut from one part of the city to the other. All of these things contributed to the Gentile being pushed further and further to the periphery of the Temple and away from God. But in Isaiah 56:7, God said of the Temple, *“my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”* The context of Isaiah 56 speaks to the heart of God for the outcast, the foreigner. And now with this grand Temple, more walls have gone up and more barriers have been created that keep people from God. I wonder . . . what walls do we erect that keep people from God?

But with the action of Jesus in the Temple, there is something else going on here. Throughout his ministry, he was constantly upstaging the Temple. For example, he said in John 2, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will rise it up.”* Now when people heard this they thought it was crazy that Jesus could restore in three days what it took Herod to build in forty-six years. In fact that statement by Jesus was used against him in his trial in Mark 14:58. One witness came forward and said, *“We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days, I will build another, not made with hands.”* And when he was on the cross in Mark 15, he was mocked for this statement. As he hung on the cross they jeered at him, suggesting that if he could rebuild the Temple in three days, surely he can save himself from the cross. But we know what he meant by that statement. Jesus is the one the Temple pointed to. In other words, with the coming of Jesus, there is no need for the Temple. Jesus is the presence of God. Jesus is the place for atonement for sin. By turning over the tables and halting the purchase of sacrifices, he was declaring that something better had come in himself.

So the next day, they pass by that fig tree and they see it already withered away and they point it out to Jesus. And Jesus says this in verse 22, *“Have faith in God, truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt it in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for*

him.” Now some people take this verse to mean, “with faith you can move mountains!” Have you ever heard that? But that is not what he is saying. He is talking about “*this mountain*.” What mountain? The mountain that houses the Temple. It will “*be taken up and thrown into the sea*.” What else did we see thrown into the sea in the Gospel of Mark? We saw a herd of pigs possessed by a legion of demons hurled into the sea. It was a picture of judgment. But if the Temple is gone, where will we pray? If the Temple is gone, how will we draw near to God? Did Jesus not just say, “*My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations*.”

It is interesting that the Jews thought prayer was most effective at the Temple. One rabbi wrote, “When a man prays in Jerusalem, it is as though he prays before the throne of glory, for the gate of heaven is in Jerusalem.”³ But Jesus is reconditioning his disciples by telling them that the effectiveness of prayer has nothing to do with the Temple. Rather, “when he dies on the cross, access to God is not closed off but opened up for all. His death creates a new house of prayer, a temple not made with hands, which will be without barriers or limitations.”⁴ And so he exhorts them to continue praying. He says in verses 24-25, “*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 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*.” Through Jesus we can all approach God with boldness.

Temple Talk #2: The Vineyard and Faith

Surely, you can understand how this action of Jesus in the Temple got the attention of the religious leaders. In fact, Jesus shows up the next day and they all want to have a word with Jesus. Every major group of religious leaders is represented as they confront Jesus. In Mark 11:27 it says, “*the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?’*” Well, “what things?” Obviously, they are referring to what he had done the day before when he overturned the tables. In fact, you often hear this action of Jesus in the Temple referred to as “the cleansing of the Temple” as though Jesus is trying to initiate reform. But we just saw that he is not issuing reform at all. He was pronouncing judgment. And if the religious leaders didn’t pick up on that yet, they are about to pick up on it loud and clear. In fact, by the time Jesus gets done with this second “Temple Talk” they are looking for ways to arrest him.

The second “Temple Talk” begins in Mark 12:1. Here Jesus tells them a parable. He begins by saying, “*A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for*

the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country.” Like the fig tree, as soon as Jesus started telling this parable, the mind of the religious leaders would immediately go to the Old Testament. In Isaiah 5, Israel is described as a vineyard, and like in this parable, Isaiah says of this vineyard that the owner, *“dug it and cleared it of stones . . . he built a watchtower in the midst of it, he hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes.”*

Furthermore, the vineyard was the national symbol for Israel. Many of their coins bore the symbol of a cluster of grapes or a grape leaf. Kent Hughes said that “the very Temple in which Jesus was standing sported a richly carved grapevine, seventy cubits high (that is thirty-five yards high), sculpted around the door which led from the porch to the Holy Place.”⁵ Consequently, I don’t think Jesus is very long into this parable when the religious leaders pick up on the fact that he is talking about them, like Isaiah was talking about Israel through the image of a vineyard. At some point they got it. In verse 12 it says, *“they perceived that he had told the parable against them.”*

The parable begins by telling us that the man who planted the vineyard leased it out to some tenants while he himself went off into a distant land. Apparently, this was a practice not too uncommon in the land of Israel at the time. And so, in the parable, it came time for the landowner to collect his rent, some of the fruit of the vineyard, from his tenants. So he sent his servant to collect what he was owed but the tenants beat him up and sent him on his way. A second servant was sent to collect, and they struck this one on the head. Finally, a third servant was sent, and perhaps emboldened from their previous actions, they killed this one. And actually, in verse 5 it says, *“And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.”* It poses a real dilemma for the landowner. And so he decides to send his *“beloved son.”* We know where this is going. In the back of our minds, we can hear the voice of God the Father at the baptism of Jesus and the Mount of Transfiguration, where he says of Jesus, *“You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”* It carries with it the idea of the “one and only Son.” And so the landowner decides to send his beloved Son, thinking, *“They will respect my son.”* But we read in verse 7, *“But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.”* And so, Jesus asks in verse 9, *“What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.”*

First of all, this parable reflects back on how Israel’s religious leaders often treated the prophets sent by God to the people of Israel. Hebrews 11:36-38 summarizes their treatment when he says of the prophets of old, *“Others suffered mocking and flogging,*

and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned [Jeremiah], they were sawn in two [Isaiah], they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy.” In the parable, Jesus speaks of a servant who was “struck on the head.” Some think that is an allusion to John the Baptist who was beheaded. But either case, Jesus is lumping these religious leaders in the category of those who rejected the prophets sent by God. But in this instance they are the ones who are rejecting the very Son of God. In fact, in three days they will be inciting the crowd to call for Jesus to be crucified on the cross.

But notice what Jesus says in verse 10, *“Have you not read this Scripture: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”* This too, is taken out of Psalm 118, the same Psalm that was sung when the crowds were singing, *“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord . . . Hosanna in the highest!”* The cornerstone was that principle stone that was laid at the corner of a foundation and the rest of the foundation was built off of it. Interestingly, when Solomon’s temple was built, one of the stones that was rejected as the cornerstone became the “keystone” to the entry way. The “keystone” is the central stone of an arch that locks the whole thing together. Kent Hughes says, *“The picture it gives is so beautiful, for it depicts one of the building stones gathered for Solomon’s Temple which was rejected in the construction of the Sanctuary, but then became the keystone of the entrance.”*⁶ In other words, through his death, Jesus will become the entrance to God. This was powerfully demonstrated when the veil in Temple was torn at the moment Jesus died.

Conclusion

So what do we do with all this “Temple Talk”? I can think of two things.

First of all, we must see what Jesus is claiming about himself in all this “Temple Talk”. In fact, in Mark 12:11, after claiming to be the “capstone” - the very entrance to God, Jesus says, *“this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”* Jesus is replacing the Temple. It is not to say that the Temple was bad. But the Temple and its sacrifices could not do what Jesus did. The Temple points us to Jesus. He is the sacrifice for sin. He is the place where we meet God.

Consequently, weighing what you will do with Jesus is a weighty matter. To reject him brings judgment. To repent of your sine and turn in faith to him brings life. In John 3:34 we read, *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not believe that Son shall not see life, for the wrath of God remains on him.”*

This “Temple Talk” also has something to say to the church. Did you notice how in Mark 12:9 that Jesus said in the parable of the vineyard that he would “*give the vineyard to others.*” That is us. It is the church. In the church, with Jesus as the cornerstone, we are “living stones” joined together and we are the dwelling place for God. And so the expectation God had for his people in the Old Testament is an expectation he has of us. In this vineyard, God expects to see fruit. What is that fruit? It is “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*” It is the Fruit of the Spirit. When this fruit is present, we become the presence of God. But when this fruit is not present, like in the “Court of the Gentiles” we keep people from God. And we saw how Jesus feels about that.

When Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem, he wept for it because of the judgment that was to come. May we be so moved to weep for this world. When he came into the “Court of the Gentiles” he sought to remove the barriers that kept people from God. May we remove such barriers that keep people from seeing the love of God in us. When Jesus went to the cross, the way was opened to God through Jesus. May we be faithful to proclaim Jesus with truth and grace. “*The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*”

¹William Lane *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 400

²J. D. Douglas, ed., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Volume 3 (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1980)1530

³David Garland *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996)442

⁴Ibid

⁵R. Kent Hughes *Mark Vol Two: Jesus Servant and Savior* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989) 94

⁶Ibid., 98

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. How do you build time into your life for rest? What does the rhythm of physical and spiritual rest look like for you?
2. Describe one way you received encouragement this week and why it encouraged you.
3. Share one thing you learned about Jesus from the sermon this week?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Mark 11:12-14 and 20-21. What does the cursing of the fig tree tell us about the judgment of God? Why is the judgment of God such a difficult topic for people?
5. Read Mark 11:15-18. What provoked Jesus to do what he did in the Temple? How does Isaiah 56:1-8 and Jeremiah 7:8-11 help you understand what Jesus is doing here? How did their actions keep people from God?
6. Read Mark 11:22-25 and John 2:19. How does the Temple point us to Jesus and what do we learn about prayer from this passage?
7. Read Mark 12:1-12. What is Jesus saying about himself in this passage? Who are the “others” that God gives the vineyard to? What expectations does Jesus have for his vineyard?

Taking It Home

8. “When a seeking heart enters our churches, our homes, our lives, our ‘Court of the Gentiles’, may what we do say that God is alive—that God is holy—that God is loving.” How do you want God to be reflected through you this week?
9. When Jesus saw the city of Jerusalem, he wept for the city. Who do you “weep” for? Who do you have a burden for? What is one step you can take towards this person?