

# Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

## Session Nineteen – Mark 11:12~33

*Mark 11:12-14 - The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 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. 14 Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.*

### A Real Puzzler

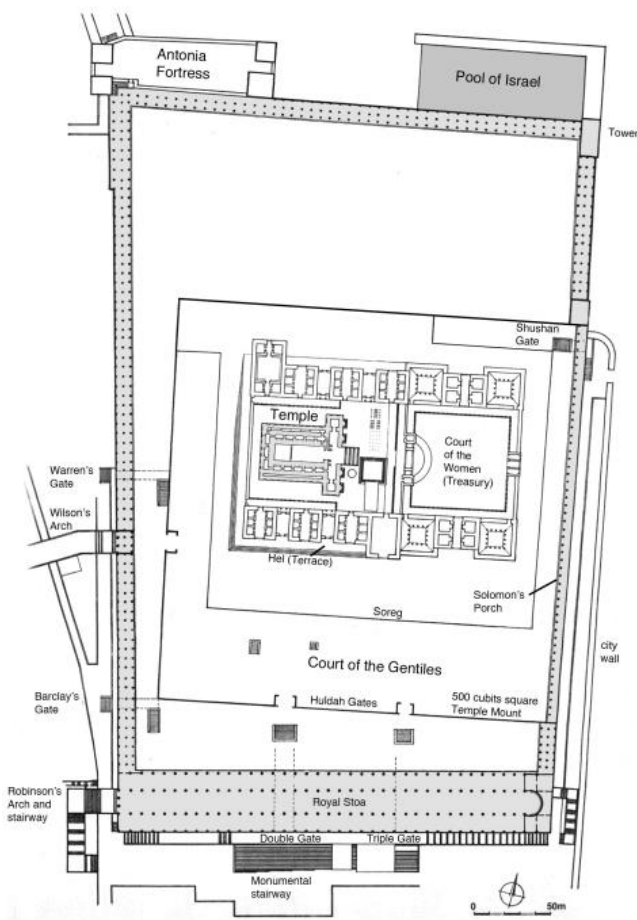
On its surface, this passage seems to show Jesus at his worst – he’s “hangry,” that is, hungry and unreasonably upset. The poor fig tree bears the brunt of his anger. But is this what is going on? Notice Mark points out that it is not “fig season.” Surely Jesus knew this. That’s your clue: the fig tree is an illustration, setting us up for what is to come.

### The Temple (from eyewitness Josephus)

*“All who ever saw our Temple are aware of the general design of the building, and the inviolable barriers which preserved its sanctity. It had four surrounding courts, each with its special statutory restrictions. The outer court was open to all, foreigners included; women during their time of impurity were alone refused admission. To the second court all Jews were admitted, and, when uncontaminated by any defilement, their wives; to the third male Jews, if clean and purified; to the fourth the priests robed in their priestly vestments.*

*The sanctuary was entered only by the high priests, clad in the raiment peculiar to themselves. So careful is the provision for all the details of the service that the priests’ entry is timed to certain hours. Their duty was to enter in the morning, when the Temple was opened, and to offer the sacrifices, and again at mid-day, until the Temple was closed. One further point: no*

*vessel whatever might be carried into the Temple, the only objects in which were an altar, a table, a censer, and a lampstand, all mentioned in the Law. There was nothing more; no unmentionable mysteries took place, no repast was served within the building.”*



***Mark 11:15-16 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts 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, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.***

**Jesus is really upset now!**

There is SO much going on here, and so many possible ways of looking at it. Surprisingly, the story of the fig tree is the major clue as to what is really happening. It is much more, and much deeper, than Jesus reacting to the “buying and selling” that was going on.

**Is Jesus instigating a revolt?** Is this the moment the disciples were waiting for – Jesus to proclaim himself Messiah, the crowds to unite behind him, the revolution to begin? If so, it is a failed attempt. The crowds are simply described as “amazed” or “stunned,” a reaction common in Mark. Nobody joins in; neither are the temple police (or Romans) mobilised to squash a riot.

**Is the Temple now just a marketplace?** Is the area which was intended for Gentiles to worship now overrun as a bazaar, effectively barring non-Jews from worshipping? This seems unlikely, as archaeological evidences place the area of the moneychangers and sellers in the Royal Stoa, not the Gentile court. Other barriers were in place to prevent Gentiles from approaching the Temple closely.

**Is his reaction against commerce happening in a sacred space?** The layout of the Temple speaks against this. The area in which commerce was happening was not in the Temple proper, but only the outermost forecourt, which wasn’t regarded as “sacred space.”

**Is Jesus angry at the monetary abuses?** The phrase “den of robbers” which Jesus uses seems to back this up. But the transactions taking place were actually necessary for the proper donations and sacrifices. Even more puzzling, Jesus throws out both the sellers, who may well have been cheating, but the innocent buyers as well!

**Is Jesus angry at the Temple offerings?** Should money be no part of worship? Unlikely, since elsewhere Jesus, watching this very process, commends a poor widow for making her offering. In fact, the offerings which the moneychangers were facilitating made the whole daily sacrificial system possible. Money was changed into shekels which did not have pagan images upon them.

**So what’s going on?** Remember what had happened the day before, with the Triumphal Entry, which we described as “Street Theatre.” Jesus’ actions are prophetic – they demonstrate physically what is taking place spiritually. Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple is

symbolic – it is not indicating a need to reform Temple worship, but to overturn the whole Temple system as the primary way to approach God.

**It is all coming to an end.** Jesus does three things: Turns over the money tables – the basis of support for the priesthood and all the Temple functions is ending. Turns over the dovesellers benches – the sacrificial system is coming to an end. Prevents the carrying of merchandise – all Temple activity is coming to a close. The whole system, Jesus demonstrates, is being replaced. But why? And with what?

*Mark 11:17 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.’”*

The two quotations are from Isaiah (56:3-8) and Jeremiah. Looking at them in their wider context will help us finally figure out what Jesus is doing.

**Isaiah (56:3-8) -** *Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.” And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.” 4 For this is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant— 5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.*

*6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”*

*8 The Sovereign Lord declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.”*

**Looking at the map of the Temple,** you will see that the nations – the Gentiles - are excluded from full worship, and from the inner areas of worship – as are women. Eunuchs, and those otherwise physically incomplete, were also prevented from close approach. The Temple had become a national shrine, not an international beacon of welcome and hope.

**The ministry of Jesus is in complete contrast to this.** Jesus famously welcomes the blind, the lame, the foreigner, the impure, the woman, the Gentile. Jesus is incredibly inclusive in his ministry, repeatedly saying that he has come for all the world, not just the Jewish people. The Temple, by contrast, served only to divide Israel from the nations which they were commissioned, in the call of God to Abraham, to bless.

**Quote:** *In Jesus' day the temple had become a nationalistic symbol that served only to divide Israel from the nations. If it were to become what God intended, "a house of prayer for all nations," walls would have to crumble. Indeed, walls will soon collapse and barriers will be breached. When Jesus dies, the temple veil is split from top to bottom, and a Gentile confesses that he is the Son of God. (David Garland)*

**The Jeremiah passage (Jeremiah 7:1-15)**

*This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 "Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and there proclaim this message: "Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. 3 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says:*

*Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. 4 Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!"*

*5 If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. 8 But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.*

*9 "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? 11 Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.*

*12 "Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. 13 While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. 14 Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. 15 I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.'*

**Quote:** *The "den" is the place where robbers retreat after having committed their crimes. It is their hideout, a place of security and refuge. Calling the temple a robbers' den is therefore not a cry of outrage against any dishonest business practices in the temple.*

*Jesus indirectly attacks them for allowing the temple to degenerate into a safe hiding place where people think that they find forgiveness and fellowship with God no matter how they act on the outside. Jesus' prophetic action and words attack a false trust in the efficacy of the temple sacrificial system. The sanctuary, supposedly sanctified by God, has become a sanctuary for bandits who think that they are protected from God's judgment.*

*The phrase "I have been watching" (Jer. 7:11) matches the description of Jesus' visit to the temple on the previous day, when he "looked around at everything" (Mark 11:11), turning that visit into an inspection. Jesus shares the purview of God. He has seen what the people are doing and pronounces God's judgment. (David Garland)*

***Mark 11:18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.***

**No wonder!** The reaction of the Temple officials is severe, and their fear is well founded. They understood perfectly well that Jesus' actions and words undermined not just the Temple's monetary practices, but the entire Temple system. The fact that this idea was "amazing" the crowd was even more unsettling. It was Jesus or the Temple. And so Jesus had to go.

***Mark 11:19-21 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. 20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"***

**Back to the Fig Tree!** We can see now that the story of the fig tree which brackets Jesus' Temple activity, is an object lesson, helping us to properly understand his words and actions in the Temple. Jesus isn't saying the Temple needs to be reformed; like the fig tree, the Temple is failing to "bear the fruit of repentance and righteousness." It looks good – the tree was in leaf, the Temple beautiful - but is barren, and so, must be destroyed.

**Withered from the roots** – A withering of a big tree in a single day is the sign that divine judgement has taken place. So it will be with the Temple – not a gradual decline, but a complete end. Salvation now shifts from the temple to Jesus and his death and resurrection. Faith in him will become the way to God, not the sacrifice of animals in the temple.

***Mark 11:22-25 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. 23 "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.***

**25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”**

**“This mountain.”** Jesus and the disciples are approaching Jerusalem from Bethany again. The Temple Mount is before them. Jesus reiterates that the seemingly impossible – his prediction of the destruction of the Temple and its system – will in fact take place. It will do so upon the death of Jesus, when the Temple curtain is torn in two, and then less than 40 years later, when the Temple is destroyed by the Romans.

**To be replaced by:** The Temple and the sacrificial system existed as the place where prayers would be heard by God, and where forgiveness could be both given and received. Jesus teaches here, quite radically, that this will be done through faith, prayer and mutual forgiveness, rather than through the sacrificial system. God will hear the prayers of all people, not just the priests!

**Mark 11:33** *They arrived again 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. 28 “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”*

*29 Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 30 John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!”*

*31 They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ 32 But if we say, ‘Of human origin’ ...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) 33 So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”*

*Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”*

**By What Authority** – Jesus is functioning as a prophet, with astonishing words and actions demonstrating God’s judgement upon the Temple. So the natural question – what gives you the right? Jesus, as he so often does, “turns the tables” and asks them to pronounce judgement upon John the Baptist, which they are unwilling to do.

**Just Like John** - John was immensely popular, and like Jesus, pronounced forgiveness through repentance and baptism, not through the Temple system. If John’s authority came from heaven, as was popularly believed by the crowds, and if Jesus is proclaiming effectively the same message, then what can the priests say? The danger is that Jesus’ threat to the Temple is far more direct than John’s, who remained at a distance.