

**Mark 11:15-33**  
**February 4, 2024**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

Tony Evans, a pastor in Dallas, posed a question numerous years ago, but it has stuck with me: “If the Holy Spirit decided to remove himself from your church, would you know it?” This kind of question forces us to wrestle with what the indicators are that the Holy Spirit is still with us!

Q: So let’s process, “How do you know if the Holy Spirit is actively working in our church?”  
[Let people engage]

**Transition:** Before we quickly condemn the Jewish religious leaders for their sins, we should examine our own ministries to see if perhaps we are making merchandise of the Gospel. Do the outsiders in our community think of our church buildings as houses of prayer? If the Lord Jesus were to show up in our house of worship, what changes would He make?

We are going to read a familiar account where Jesus discovers that the temple has become a place to buy/sell merchandise! His reaction is ANGER, and he began driving out the money changers! He then begins to teach them what the temple was supposed to represent. Our churches should be called or known as “houses of prayer.” As you will see, the chief priests and the teachers of the law did not take kindly to Jesus’ confrontation. Let’s see how the storyline unfolds. Let’s begin.

**BOOK:**

**11** <sup>15</sup> On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area 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, <sup>16</sup> and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. <sup>17</sup> And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written:

“ ‘My house will be called  
a house of prayer for all nations’ (Isaiah 56:7)?

But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’ (Jer. 7:11)”

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> When evening came, they (some manuscripts say “he”) went out of the city.

*The Withered Fig Tree*

<sup>20</sup> In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. <sup>21</sup> Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

<sup>22</sup> “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. <sup>23</sup> “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. <sup>24</sup> Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (cf. 14:36; Matt. 6:9–10; John

14:13–14; 15:7; 16:23–24; 1 John 5:14–15) <sup>25</sup> And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

### *The Authority of Jesus Questioned*

<sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

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

<sup>31</sup> They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ <sup>32</sup> But if we say, ‘From men’ . . .” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

<sup>33</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

### **Process Observations/Questions:**

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

### **LOOK:**

Before we quickly condemn the Jewish religious leaders for their sins, we should examine our own ministries to see if perhaps we are making merchandise of the Gospel. Do the outsiders in our community think of our church buildings as houses of prayer? Are all nations welcomed there? Do we as church members flee to church on Sundays in an attempt to cover up our sins? Do we “go to church” in order to maintain our reputation or to worship and glorify God? If the Lord Jesus were to show up in our house of worship, what changes would He make?

### **Close in Prayer**

### **Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 150-152)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

***Cleansing the temple (vv. 15–19)***. Jesus had cleansed the temple during His first Passover visit (John 2:13–22), but the results had been temporary. It was not long before the religious leaders permitted the money changers and the merchants to return. The priests received their share of the profits, and, after all, these services were a convenience to the Jews who traveled to Jerusalem to worship. Suppose a foreign Jew carried his own sacrifice with him and then discovered that it was rejected because of some blemish? The money rates were always changing, so the men who exchanged foreign currency were doing the visitors a favor, even though the merchants were making a generous profit. It was easy for them to rationalize the whole enterprise.

This “religious market” was set up in the court of the Gentiles, the one place where the Jews should have been busy doing serious missionary work. If a Gentile visited the temple and saw what the Jews were doing *in the name of the true God*, he would never want to believe what they taught. The Jews might not have permitted idols of wood and stone in their temple, but there were idols there just the same. The court of the Gentiles should have been a place for praying, but it was instead a place for preying and paying.

Mark especially mentioned the people who sold doves. The dove was one of the few sacrifices that the poor people could afford (Lev. 14:22). It was the sacrifice Joseph and Mary brought when they dedicated Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:24). Even the poor people were victimized by the merchants in the temple, and this in itself must have grieved the Lord Jesus, for He was always sensitive to the poor (see Mark 12:41–44).

Jesus quoted two Scriptures to defend what He did—Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. At the same time, He exposed the sins of the religious leaders. The Jews looked on the temple primarily as a place of sacrifice, but Jesus saw it as a place of prayer. True prayer is in itself a sacrifice to God (Ps. 141:1–2). Jesus had a spiritual view of the Jewish religion, while the leaders promoted a traditional view that was cluttered with rules and regulations.

Campbell Morgan points out that “a den of thieves” is the place to which thieves run *when they want to hide*. The chief priests and scribes were using the temple and its religious services to “cover up” their sin and hypocrisy. Both Isaiah (Isa. 1:10–17) and Jeremiah (Jer. 7:1–16) had warned the people of their day that the presence of the physical temple was no guarantee of blessing from God. It was what the people did in the temple *from their hearts* that was really important. The nation had not heeded the warning of the prophets, nor would they heed our Lord’s warning.

When the scribes and chief priests heard the report of our Lord’s activities, they kept seeking some way to arrest Him (see Mark 14:1–2). Judas would solve the problem for them. Before we quickly condemn the Jewish religious leaders for their sins, we should examine our own ministries to see if perhaps we are making merchandise of the Gospel. Do the outsiders in our community think of our church buildings as houses of prayer? Are all nations welcomed there? Do we as church members flee to church on Sundays in an attempt to cover up our sins? Do we “go to church” in order to maintain our reputation or to worship and glorify God? If the Lord Jesus were to show up in our house of worship, what changes would He make?

### **The Servant-Prophet (Mark 11:27–11:33)**

In the days that followed, the representatives of the religious and political establishment descended on Jesus as He ministered in the temple, trying their best to trip Him up with their questions. He answered four questions, and then He asked them a question that silenced them for good.

**A question of authority (11:27–12:12).** As the official guardians of the Law, the members of the Sanhedrin had both the right and the responsibility to investigate anyone who claimed to be sent by God; and that included Jesus (see Deut. 18:15–22). However, these men did not have open minds or sincere motives. They were not seeking truth; they were looking for evidence to use to destroy Him (Mark 11:18). Jesus knew what they were doing, so He countered their question with another question and exposed their hypocrisy.

Why take them all the way back to John the Baptist? For a very good reason: God does not teach us new truth if we have rejected the truth He has already revealed. This basic principle is expressed in John 7:17: “If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself” (NASB). “Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge,” said the British preacher F.W. Robertson. The Jewish religious leaders had not accepted what John had taught, so why should God say anything more to them? Had they obeyed John’s message, they would have gladly submitted to Christ’s authority, for John came to present the Messiah to the nation.

The Jewish leaders were caught in a dilemma of their own making. They were not asking “What is true?” or “What is right?” but “What is safe?” This is always the approach of the hypocrite and the crowd-pleaser. It certainly was not the approach of either Jesus (Mark 12:14) or John the Baptist (Matt. 11:7–10). Jesus did not refuse to answer their question; He only refused to accept and endorse their hypocrisy. He was not being evasive; He was being honest.

Before they had opportunity to escape, He told them a parable that revealed *where their sins were leading them*. They had already permitted John the Baptist to be killed, but soon they would ask for the crucifixion of God’s Son!

**Grassmick, J. D. (1985). *Mark*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 157-160) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books**

## 2. JESUS’ JUDGMENT ON THE MISUSE OF THE TEMPLE (11:15–19) (Matt. 21:12–17; Luke 19:45–46).

This event is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. John recorded an earlier cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (cf. comments on John 2:13–22).

11:15–16. When **Jesus** arrived in **Jerusalem**, He went into **the temple area** (*hieron*; cf. v. 11), the large outer court of the Gentiles surrounding the inner sacred courts of the temple itself. (See the sketch of the temple.) No Gentile was allowed beyond this outer court. In it the high priest Caiaphas had authorized a market (probably a recent economic innovation) for the sale of ritually pure items necessary for temple sacrifice: wine, oil, salt, approved sacrificial animals and birds.

Money from three sources circulated in Palestine in New Testament times: imperial money (Roman), provincial money (Greek), and local money (Jewish). Money changers provided the required Tyrian (Jewish) coinage for the annual half-shekel temple tax (Ex. 30:12–16) required of all male Jews 20 years of age and up. This was in exchange for their Greek and Roman currency, which featured human portraits considered idolatrous. Though a small surcharge was

permitted in these transactions, dealings were not free from extortion and fraud. In addition (according to Mark 11:16) people loaded with **merchandise** were taking shortcuts **through** this area, making it a thoroughfare from one part of the city to another.

Jesus was outraged by this blatant disregard for the temple area specifically set apart for Gentile use. So He **overturned the** money changers' **tables** and **the** dove-sellers' **benches**, and **would not allow** people to use the area as a thoroughfare. Other certified markets were available elsewhere in the city.

11:17. Jesus' daring action captured peoples' attention and **He taught** (lit., "began teaching") **them** about God's purpose for the temple. Using a question expecting a positive answer, He appealed to Old Testament authority for His action (quoting Isa. 56:7b).

Only Mark extended the quotation from Isaiah to include the words **for all nations**. God desired that both Gentiles and Jews use the temple as a place of worship (cf. John 12:20). This was especially relevant to Mark's readers in Rome.

By contrast **you** (emphatic), the insensitive Jews, **have made it**, the court of the Gentiles, **a den of robbers**. It was a refuge for fraudulent traders (cf. Jer. 7:11) instead of **a house of prayer** (cf. 1 Kings 8:28–30; Isa. 60:7) for both Jews and Gentiles.

By this action Jesus as the Messiah claimed greater authority over the temple than that of the high priest (cf. Hosea 9:15; Mal. 3:1–5).

11:18–19. When the religious leaders (cf. comments on 8:31; 11:27; 14:1, 43, 53) **heard** about **this**, they **began** seeking (cf. 12:12; 14:1, 11) the best **way to kill Him** without creating a major uprising. Mark alone explained (*gar, for*) that **they** were afraid of **Him because** of His authoritative appeal to the crowds. **The whole crowd** of Passover pilgrims from all parts of the ancient world **was amazed** (*exēplēsseto*, "astounded, struck out of their senses, overwhelmed"; cf. 1:22; 6:2; 7:37; 10:26) **at** the content of **His teaching** (cf. 1:27). His popularity with the people kept the Jewish authorities from arresting Him immediately. That **evening** (Monday) **they**, Jesus and the Twelve, left Jerusalem and presumably went to Bethany (cf. 11:11).

### 3. THE WITHERED FIG TREE AND A LESSON ON FAITH AND PRAYER (11:20–26) (Matt. 21:20–22).

11:20–21. These verses form the sequel to verses 12–14. Next **morning**, Tuesday, **as** Jesus and His disciples were returning to Jerusalem, **they saw the** same **fig tree** (v. 13) but it was **withered from the roots**, completely dried up, fulfilling Jesus' words (v. 14).

Addressing **Jesus** as **Rabbi** (cf. 9:5), **Peter** spoke of the tree's condition with great surprise probably because the tree's total destruction was much more severe than Jesus' words the previous day (11:14) indicated. Though Jesus did not explain the meaning of the event, many believe that it was a vivid picture of God's impending judgment on Israel (cf. comments on vv. 12–14).

11:22–24. **Jesus** exhorted the disciples, **Have faith in God**. Faith that rests in God is unwavering trust in His omnipotent power and unfailing goodness (cf. 5:34).

Following a solemn introduction (**I tell you the truth**; cf. 3:28), Jesus said in a hyperbole that whoever **says to this mountain**, the Mount of Olives representing an immovable obstacle, **Go, throw yourself** (lit., "be uprooted" and "be thrown") **into the sea** (the Dead Sea, visible from the Mount of Olives), **it will be done for him** by God. The one condition is, negatively, absence of **doubt** and positively, belief, unwavering trust in God, that the petition will be granted. Such faith contrasted with Israel's lack of faith.

**Therefore**, because believing **prayer** taps God's power to accomplish the humanly impossible (cf. 10:27), Jesus exhorted His disciples to **believe that they have** already **received**

whatever they request **in** prayer. Faith accepts it as good as done even though the actual answer is still future.

Jesus made this promise on the recognized premise that petitions must be in harmony with God's will (cf. 14:36; Matt. 6:9–10; John 14:13–14; 15:7; 16:23–24; 1 John 5:14–15). This enables faith to receive the answers God gives. God is always ready to respond to obedient believers' prayers, and they can petition Him knowing that no situation or difficulty is impossible for Him.

11:25–26. A forgiving attitude toward others as well as faith in God is also essential for effective prayer. When a believer stands to pray, a common prayer posture among Jews (cf. 1 Sam. 1:26; Luke 18:11, 13), and **if** he has **anything against anyone**, a grudge against an offending believer or nonbeliever, he is to **forgive** that one of the offense.

This is to be done in order that his **Father in heaven** (the only Marcan occurrence of this phrase, but frequent in Matt.) **may** "also" (*kai* in Gr.) **forgive** him his **sins** (lit., *paraptōmata*, "trespasses," only occurrence in Mark), acts that sidestep or deviate from God's truth.

Divine forgiveness toward a believer and a believer's forgiveness toward others are inseparably linked because a bond has been established between the divine Forgiver and the forgiven believer (cf. Matt. 18:21–35). One who has accepted God's forgiveness is expected to forgive others just as God has forgiven him (Eph. 4:32). If he does not, he forfeits God's forgiveness in his daily life.

### *C. Jesus' controversy with the Jewish religious leaders in the temple courts (11:27–12:44)*

Mark likely packaged the five episodes in 11:27–12:37 around the theme of conflict between Jesus and various influential religious groups (similarly, cf. 2:1–3:5). A contrast between self-righteous religion and wholehearted devotion to God concludes the section (12:38–44). The temple area was the focal point of Jesus' ministry during His final week (cf. 11:11, 15–17, 27; 12:35, 41; 13:1–3; 14:49). The controversies serve as a summary of Jesus' teaching during Tuesday and Wednesday of that week. They depict the religious leaders' growing hostility toward Him.

#### 1. THE QUESTION CONCERNING JESUS' AUTHORITY (11:27–12:12)

Jesus' credentials were questioned by representatives of the Sanhedrin. His response placed them in an embarrassing dilemma (11:27–33) and His Vineyard Parable exposed their rejection of God's messengers (12:1–12).

##### *a. Jesus' counterquestion about John's baptism (11:27–33).*

11:27–28. On Tuesday morning (cf. v. 20) Jesus and His disciples entered **Jerusalem** again (cf. vv. 11–12, 15). **In the temple courts** (*heirō*; cf. vv. 11, 15) **Jesus** was confronted by representatives of the Sanhedrin (cf. comments on 8:31; 14:43, 53; 15:1). As guardians of Israel's religious life they asked two questions: (1) **What** was the nature of His **authority** (cf. 1:22, 27); what were His credentials? (2) **Who** was the source of His **authority**? Who authorized Him **to do this**? "This" (lit., **these things**) refers to His purging the temple the previous day (cf. 11:15–17) and probably more generally to all His authoritative words and deeds which drew much popular acclaim (cf. v. 18; 12:12, 37). Their questions indicate that Jesus had not openly stated that He is the Messiah, a significant point in view of Mark's "secrecy motif" (cf. comments on 1:43–45; 12:1, 12).

11:29–30. Jesus’ counterquestions, a common Rabbinic debating technique (cf. 10:2–3), made His answer to them depend on their answer to Him. It focused the issue: Was **John’s baptism** and his whole ministry (cf. 1:4–8; 6:14–16, 20) **from heaven** (of divine origin; cf. 8:11), **or from men?** (of human origin) Jesus implied that His own authority came from the same source as John’s which indicates there was no rivalry between them. The leaders’ conclusion about John would reveal their conclusion about Him.

11:31–32. Jesus’ question placed these religious leaders in a dilemma. **If** they answered, **From heaven**, they would incriminate themselves for not believing John and supporting his ministry (cf. John 1:19–27). They would stand self-condemned for rejecting God’s messenger. They would also be forced to acknowledge that Jesus’ authority came from God (cf. Mark 9:37b). This answer, though true, was unacceptable because of their unbelief.

**But if** they answered, **From men** (lit., “But shall we say, ‘From men?’”), the implications were obvious: they would deny that John was commissioned by God and discredit themselves before the people. Mark explained, **They feared the people** (cf. 12:12) because **everyone** regarded **John** as a genuine **prophet**, God’s spokesman (cf. Josephus *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18. 5. 2). The people viewed Jesus this way too (cf. Matt. 21:46). This latter answer, though false, was the one they preferred but found unacceptable because of the people.

11:33. Since neither option was acceptable, they pleaded ignorance in an attempt to save face. So **Jesus** was not obligated to answer their question. His question (cf. v. 30) implied that His **authority**, like John’s, was from God.

By suspending judgment, these religious leaders showed that they really rejected John and Jesus as God’s messengers. Throughout their history most leaders of Israel repeatedly rejected God’s messengers, a point Jesus made in the following parable (12:1–12).

**Church, C.L. (1998). *Mark In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 439). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.***

### **THE SERVANT MESSIAH (11:1–33)**

Jesus entered Jerusalem as one coming in the name, that is, the authority, of the Lord with a God-given mission of salvation (“Hosanna” means *save now*). By riding a colt, Jesus laid claim to His own brand of messiahship—not conquering hero but humble servant (see Zech. 9:9).

The cursing of the fig tree was a prophetic act meant to illustrate God’s judgment upon the temple, which had proved unfruitful by not realizing its mission as a place of prayer for all people. What is necessary for experiencing God is not the temple (see 13:1–2) but “faith in God.” Indeed, faith makes the temple obsolete. The one who believes can cast the temple mount into the sea (contrast 1 Kgs. 8:29–30). Forgiveness of sins is not experienced in temple sacrifice but in sharing God’s willingness to forgive. The “forgiveness requirement” warns believers not to turn their prayer time into a robbers’ retreat.

Understandably, the religious leaders questioned Jesus’ authority because cleansing the temple was the responsibility of the Messiah or the end-time prophet (Mal. 3:1–5; Zech. 14:20–21). Leaders had earlier questioned Jesus’ authority to announce God’s forgiveness (2:1–12), celebrate God’s new work (2:18–22), and do good on the Sabbath (3:1–6). Jesus’ question suggests that His authority was God given.

**Leavell, L.P. (1972). *Mark*. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The Teacher's Bible Commentary* (p. 627). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.**

The cleansing of the Temple (11:15–19) was a challenge both to the greed and irreverence of those people. The Temple was designed to be a place of worship and reverence. With the turmoil, noise, and confusion created by the presence of the money changers, the purpose of the Temple was prostituted. This act was an indictment against the religious leaders who allowed these practices. It was a direct confrontation with their authority and spirituality.

Returning to the city the next day, the disciples observed the withered fig tree (11:20–26). Jesus answered Peter's question with a call to definite spiritual exercise. His followers were to be men of unswerving faith and prayer.

### **Opposed by Leaders (Mark 11:27–11:33)**

*The passage*—In 11:27–33 Jesus both confounded the religious leaders and clarified his authority. As he frequently did, Jesus asked a question in response to a question. He wanted them to state their attitude toward the ministry of John the Baptist. This put them in an indefensible position. If they had stated John's ministry was of God, they would have stood condemned for not listening to and obeying John. Had they denied the divine authority of John, they would have incurred the wrath of the people who universally believed John to be a prophet sent from God. Jesus made no attempt to further identify his authority. Since they would not be honest in regard to John, he felt no need to pursue the matter with them.

**The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). Mark 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.**