

# Discussion Guide

WEEK OF 7.28.24

Series: Gospel of Mark

Text: Mark 11:11-26

**How to use this guide:** This discussion guide is designed to help you facilitate a conversation around the Bible text. Begin your discussion with prayer. Then, read this week's passage. Next, work through some of the questions together. The goal is not to ask every question, but to have a good, free-flowing discussion. Do your best to ask at least one question from each section (introduction, understanding, and application), but beyond that, let the Holy Spirit guide your conversation. Also, if you heard some point from the sermon that you'd like to discuss, feel free to add that to your group's discussion.

## QUESTIONS FOR INTRODUCTION

1. If you could change one thing about modern Christianity, what would it be? List the different answers. Now, as a group, determine the top items that you think need our greatest attention.

Read Mark 11:11-26

2. List the events that occurred in this passage in chronological order. Notice the placement of these events.
3. From Mark's agricultural description and knowledge of the growing season and signs, what was Jesus expecting to see when He approached this fig tree? Metaphorically, what does Jesus' action teach us about our spiritual journey?

Reread Mark 11:15-19

4. What was the purpose of the temple as described by Jesus? How had the temple been corrupted? Read Isaiah 56:6-8 and Jeremiah 7:11-15. How did Isaiah and Jeremiah describe the temple's purpose and its potential problems? Additional reading: read Solomon's Prayer to God when He dedicated the temple in 1 Kings 8:22-53. Did Solomon state anything different as to the purpose of the temple?
5. Why did Jesus act the way He did in the temple and how does this relate to the previous question about the purpose of the temple?
6. What does this teach you about worship? How does it connect with how you worship?

Reread Mark 11:20-26

7. What was Jesus' lesson to the disciples about the fig tree? What is He teaching you?
8. What are the lessons that Jesus teaches us about the nature of faith, the power of prayer and the role of forgiveness? List these lessons. What do you, individually, and we, as a church, need to change to meet Jesus' expectations?
9. Jesus has demonstrated His authority given to Him by His Father over the natural world and all that is in it. Does this affect your understanding of who He is? How you relate to Him?
10. What have you studied today that you may find awkward or difficult to do to prepare yourself for worship?
11. Which obstacles in your life would you miss if God removed them so that you could bear more fruit and genuinely worship Him?
12. How you plan on "tweaking" your spiritual life today as a result of what Jesus is teaching you?
13. If you were to analyze the content and frequency of your prayers, what would they communicate about your understanding of God and your faith in Him? What steps can you take to ensure that your prayers more accurately reflect Jesus' teaching in this passage?

## QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

## QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

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## COMMENTARY

### MARK 11:12-26

We have begun our study of Mark's account of "Passion Week." Last week we ended our study about Palm Sunday and ended with verse eleven which described the actions of Jesus at the end of a very long day. But we are left wondering why this verse was there? Why are we shown this pensive side of Jesus? What does it tell us and why is it important for us to know? When we look at today's verses and start this section of Scripture with this verse, the meaning might become clearer.

**11:11.** This verse shows Jesus as thoughtful and deliberate. This thoughtful pause and the actions that follow remind us of a prophecy of judgment in Daniel: "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting" (5:27). The guilty verdict was in; the sentence would be carried out the next day. The temple mount consumed more than a quarter of Jerusalem and constituted the focal point of activity for the festal pilgrims, from early morning until late afternoon. (The temple's "evening offering" was about 3:00 p.m.) Jesus "looked around at everything" in the temple area, not as a pilgrim but as the sovereign Lord who "will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3:1). *He looks around the center of Jewish religious life to see if it is fulfilling its purpose of leading people to true worship of God.*

**11:12-12:44.** This section focuses on *Jesus' Judgement on Religious Leaders*. Jesus' first actions, after being hailed by the people as King, are to pass judgement on Jerusalem figuratively through the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple, which highlight Jesus' zeal for true worship of God. Jesus' teaching is bold and authoritative in confronting the religious rulers, and is both introduced (11:20-25) and concluded (12:38-44) by instruction of his disciples. The way in which Mark organizes his material in these verses (Jesus' brief viewing of the temple/fig tree/cleansing of temple/fig tree) suggests a connection between the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree.

Trees in Jerusalem get leafy in March (and remain so for approximately nine months), but they do not produce fruit until June. Since the fruit of the fig tree begins to appear about the same time as the leaves (or a little after), appearance of leaves in full bloom should have indicated that fruit (in the form of green figs) was already growing.

**11:12-13.** If such was the case, how could Jesus expect fruit from the tree? Some have suggested that He acted in anger, but the account contains no words of anger. Others suggest that this was a miracle inserted at a later time and thus is not truly a part of Mark. This solution, however, causes more problems than it solves. Why would the later church put in a miracle that would cast Jesus in a dubious light? Another interpretation is that Jesus in His omniscience saw that the tree would never produce fruit, so He used the occasion to teach the disciples. The tree, which looked so promising because it was full of leaves, was fruitless. Notice that Mark called attention to the fact that it was not the season for figs. This signals that this was a symbolic action.

Jesus' actions have symbolic importance signifying the hypocrisy of *all who have the appearance that they are bearing fruit but in fact are not*. The specific reference, though, is to Israel, since in the OT the fig tree often serves as a metaphor for Israel and its standing before God (e.g., Jer. 8:13; Hos. 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7). People came to the temple hungry for God but found no help to connect with Him. Here, the cursing of the fig tree signifies the judgement of God on the "fruitless" Jewish people (Mark 7:6), who had turned away from God into empty ritual and legalism (Hos. 9:10-17). It is a visual parable to signify Jesus' unrequited search for the true fruit of worship, prayer, and righteousness in the Jewish nation and its religious practices.

**11:14.** Mark made sure that the reader knew that all the disciples heard Jesus pronounce judgment upon the fig tree. They understood the symbolism. The fig tree had long been a symbol of Israel's peace and security (see Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10). Jesus' curse upon it meant that Israel would not again be the God's main instrument for accomplishing His purpose.

**11:15.** Jesus had seen the buying and selling going on in the temple the night before, so His actions here are deliberate and well thought out—not a random act of violence, as some have suggested. Matthew and Luke also record the clearing of the temple at this time. John places this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is possible that there were two separate cleansings of the temple by Jesus.

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Jesus comes as Lord of the temple, and he comes to purify it (Mal. 3:1-4; Matt. 21:12). On the Mount of Olives, as well as in the temple precincts, tables were set up to enable pilgrims to change their respective currencies into coins for the annual temple tax (half a shekel; Ex. 30:13-16), as well as to purchase pigeons, lambs, oil, salt, etc., for various sin and thanksgiving sacrifices (Lev. 1:14; 5:7, 11; 12:8; 14:22, 30). The business activity turns the house of prayer into a “den of robbers” (Jer. 7:11). Gentiles in particular were hindered the temple commerce in the outer court. The goal of Jesus’ action is to restore the temple (temporarily) to its function, namely, to serve as “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa. 56:7).

**11:17.** Notice the phrase, as He taught them. After throwing out the merchants and overturning their tables, Jesus the rabbi would have explained His actions to His disciples. Jesus quoted from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. The rest of the passage in Jeremiah predicts God’s destruction of Solomon’s temple. The hearers most certainly noted this and the veiled threat it implied. It is no wonder that the rulers feared him.

Jesus’ mention of “a house of prayer for all nations” signifies that He had in mind the Gentiles. They had been pushed out of the outer court of the temple area by the proliferation of merchandise. Gentiles were allowed to worship in the temple, although only in its outer circle. “Den of robbers” does not mean a place of dishonest dealings, although it may have been that. This phrase probably referred to a refuge for unjust persons. The Jews of the day felt secure in God’s acceptance because of their rituals and laws. They were like a tree in full foliage that bore no fruit.

**11:18.** The chief priests knew, as did the rulers, that Jesus was claiming an authority higher than theirs. Paradoxically, the chief priests and scribes (who are in favor of commerce in the temple) seek to destroy the Purifier (3:6; 15:31-32) rather than to be purified themselves. Their actions are motivated by fear of Jesus’ popularity (the crowd loved Him and believed Him to be the Messiah), fear of losing power (social, economic, and political), and fear of the public uprising.

**11:19.** It would not have been safe for Jesus to remain in the city with all the plots against His life. They probably returned each night to Bethany, where Jesus could spend time with friends.

**11:20-21.** Peter’s astonishment at the withered fig tree was not because Jesus had worked the miracle. After all, he had seen dead people revived by Jesus. His astonishment arose from the fact that the miracle took place so quickly. The fig tree had withered within 24 hours, perhaps sooner (Matt. 21:19). It represents the judgement of God on Israel (Isa. 34:4; Joel 1:7-12; Amos 4:9). Jesus’ parable is clear. The religious system of the day had plenty of leaves but no fruit. Its surface piety was seen in tithes and prayers and fasts (Matt. 5–7) and in the ritual purity that kept out women, lepers, blind beggars, and those possessed by demons. The foliage of the religious leaders offered much promise but no fulfillment. As the fig-less tree could not satisfy Jesus’ appetite, so the religious system could not satisfy the spiritual hunger of the people.

There may also have been a note of horror that Jerusalem’s judgment would come soon—as indeed it did in AD 70. Mark’s mention of the tree being withered from the roots up points to its total destruction.

**11:22.** The Bible translations have this verse as the beginning of a new paragraph and a new section on the teaching of prayer. But this verse is actually a response to Peter and should finish the scene of the withered fig tree. The disciples understood Jesus’ metaphor and knew that the temple would be destroyed some day. Peter’s fear would have been a natural reaction to the loss of a way of life, no matter how burdensome. This is reminiscent of Habakkuk 2:4. Habakkuk learned that God would punish Israel by using the invasion of the Babylonians. He was horrified but testifies, “The righteous will live by his faith.”

“Have faith in God.” Jesus’ response must have surprised the disciples. (What does faith have to do with the cursing of the fig tree?) His point is that they should trust God to remove whatever hinders them from bearing fruit for God.

**11:23.** “Moving a mountain” was a metaphor in Jewish literature for doing what was seemingly impossible (Isa. 40:4; 49:11; 54:10; Matt. 21:21-22). Those who believe in God can have confidence that he will accomplish even the impossible, according to his sovereign will.

Jesus was using hyperbole as He did in 10:25. He did not intend for Christians to try to literally move mountains. But He did expect us to believe that our prayers can overcome great difficulties. We must have faith when we pray. But our faith is not in the strength of our prayers, nor in the size of our faith.

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**11:24.** “whatever you ask.” God delights to “give good things to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:11) and is capable of granting any prayer, though we must ask with godly motives (James 4:3) and according to God’s will (1 John 5:14). “believe you have received it, and it will be yours.” Those who trust God for the right things in the right way can have confidence that God will “supply every need...according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19), knowing that he will work “all things together for good” and will “graciously give us all things” (Romans 8:28, 32). Some have misused this verse by telling people that if they pray for physical healing (or will do) whatever they ask. But we must always have the same perspective that Jesus had—that is, confidence in God’s power but also submission to his will: “Father, all things are possible for you. . . .Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

**11:25-26.** This is not Jesus’ only teaching on prayer. We know that Christians are to pray within God’s will, as taught in the Lord’s prayer (Matt. 6:10). John states this clearly. “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him” (1 John 5:14-15). God’s will is a prerequisite of the prayer of faith. We know that God’s will is for us to forgive as we have been forgiven. If we cannot forgive, then we are not praying in God’s will.

(Jesus taught the disciples about the nature of faith and the power of prayer and the role that forgiveness has in true worship. Forgiveness is a requirement for both faith and prayer (Matt. 6:14).

For further study: postures of prayer—standing, kneeling, bowing of head, and prostration  
Attitudes of prayer—praise, humility, thankfulness, repentant +