

“Image vs. Reality” – Mark 11

Introduction: Last week in Mark chapter 10, Pastor Andrew covered a wide range of topics from marriage, how to enter the kingdom of God, to the story of James and John asking for seats of power alongside Jesus...not one of their finer moments. We also looked at the healing of Bartimaeus as well as a third time that Jesus foretold His death to His disciples while on their way to Jerusalem. Today in Mark 11, we will examine several stories from the early part of Holy Week through a very specific lens – the conflict of image vs. reality. Often in life, a preconceived notion and true reality collide, creating tension in most situations – Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem for Passover was no exception to this idea. As we navigate chapter 11 together, we will encounter three separate times where image and reality clash – setting the stage for the dramatic and world-changing events of the Passion.

First, we will see it in Palm Sunday’s triumphal entry (we will discuss it today, but celebrate it on April 13th), followed by the stories of the fig tree, the cleansing of the temple, and the challenge of Jesus’s authority by the religious leaders at the temple. Through each of these encounters, we will see how Jesus calls His followers—then and now—to live with integrity, where our faith is not just an outward show but an inward transformation that aligns with God’s will. Let’s dive into Mark 11 and consider how this tension between image and reality speaks to our own lives today.

The Triumphal Entry: In Mark 11: 1-11, we reach the last stage of Jesus’s journey – the end game has begun. We find Jesus and His disciples outside of the city of Jerusalem with our Lord giving careful and specific instructions to His followers. As we heard in our Scripture reading today in these Palm Sunday verses, two of the disciples are told to head into the nearby village and procure a very specific colt, and to return with it for Jesus to make His entry into Jerusalem upon. Jesus enters the city as a King as shouts of Scriptural

praise resound around Him: “Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosannah in the highest!” The people of Jerusalem are waving branches and laying their cloaks down on the road in front of their Messiah who has finally come to liberate them from their oppression. And just as quickly as it began, Mark notes that Jesus looked around at everything and then simply left the city with His disciples to stay in Bethany. A bit of a screeching halt to what must have been considered the high point of Jesus’s earthly ministry to this point - at least from a very human perspective. Everything went perfectly, the people were thrilled to see Jesus but there is more than meets the eye in the opening of this chapter.

At first blush, these verses seem straight forward enough, however, we have reached our first “image vs. reality” conflict: The Messiah as expected vs. the Messiah in reality. We’ll begin with the colt that Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Jesus deliberately chose a young donkey – one unproven and unbroken, set aside for a sacred purpose – as His mount for the single greatest moment in His ministry to date. His choice to ride a donkey instead of a war horse was purposeful – He was coming in peace rather than in military victory. Jewish leaders in Jesus’s day had differing theories on how the Messiah would arrive in Jerusalem. In Daniel 7:13-14, one can certainly see where the more militaristic arrival would have been expected when Daniel recorded that, “before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Power, authority, conquering – in short, victory over their enemies! Another approach to the Messiah’s entrance comes from Zechariah 9:9 where it says “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Not as a military general, but as a humble King.

How do we reconcile these two schools of thought? Do we even need to? The most important take away here is that we have the image of who the people of Israel *thought* they would be receiving as their Messiah (the conquering military hero) vs. who had *actually arrived* on the scene – the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53 who comes in peace. Some rabbis in that time merged the different theories by saying the interpretation should say that the Messiah would come humbly to an *unworthy* Israel but mightily to a *worthy* Israel. As we know by now reading through Mark, Israel considered itself as worthy and therefore only looked for the Messiah as described in Daniel 7 – thereby causing so many to miss the fulfillment of Scripture riding past them that first Palm Sunday. Image vs. reality.

What are your expectations of Jesus? Have you felt let down that He didn’t live up to what you thought He’d do? Here is the thing, He lives up to His Word, not our expectations. Undoubtedly, Israel was disappointed that a military general didn’t show up that day ready to toss the Romans out on their ear but they would have expected it with a greater understanding and knowledge of God’s word. Without our eyes on and in God’s Word, we won’t have an understanding of who He is and what He will do. We must know what Scripture says about Jesus – the more we read, the better we will know our Lord. For this to happen, we must ask Jesus to open our understanding of Him and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us through His Word. When we fail to do this, our expectations will not be accurate. Like the Jewish people on the first Palm Sunday, what is our image of Jesus vs. His reality?

Not to be missed in this Palm Sunday narrative is the courage that Jesus displays. Sure, the crowds are praising Him but don’t think for one second that the shouts of “Hosanna,” which literally means “Save us!,” aren’t reminding Him of the very reason He

is there with every step they take in the procession. We know from the other Gospels that Jesus is a wanted man at this point and the ultimate Jewish authority resides in Jerusalem – not exactly what you'd call “friendly territory” despite the shouts of praise reverberating up and down the streets. Despite the threat He lived under from the Jewish leadership, Jesus made a very public entrance and, to top it all off, He stops at the temple – the very seat of power for the Pharisees. Before He leaves for Bethany, Jesus does one final thing – He inspects the temple. What? Malachi 3:1-3 speaks of the Messiah arriving at his temple with the intent of purifying it with a refiner's fire. What does this mean and what does it have to do with Jesus's triumphant entry on Palm Sunday? Not only is Jesus fulfilling more prophecy regarding the temple itself, which we'll see later in the chapter, but it also speaks to the notion that things may look nice on the surface but deep down a cleansing needs to happen. Rather than setting His sights on the Roman occupiers, as Israel expected, Jesus sets His sights on His own people and their hearts. It is here that we find our second “image vs. reality” conflict: the appearance of God's people vs. their true standing with God. Mark moves ahead without explanation regarding the inspection but I believe the results of which are found immediately in the next part of Mark 11.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree: You would be hard pressed to find a more confusing story than that of Jesus cursing the fig tree. This is probably one of the pieces of Scripture we hope no one asks us about but, here we are, about to dive in! This portion of the narrative takes place in two separate pieces, with the cleansing of the temple in between, but we are going to take it all together today and come back to the temple afterward.

In Mark 11, verse 12, we read that Jesus and the disciples were returning to Jerusalem from Bethany – this is Monday of Passion week, day 2 – and in the distance Jesus could see a fig tree with leaves. When He approaches, He finds no fruit to eat and subsequently curses it. When they returned the following day in verse 20, the tree was withered. What is happening here? To the human eye, Jesus appears to be suffering from

what is known as “being hangry.” His seemingly unrealistic response to a tree that shouldn’t have any fruit during the time of Passover comes off as almost...petulant. At first read, He looks like He may be pitching a fit! Furthermore, in all of the miracles He has performed, He has never done anything to satisfy Himself, especially when it came to hunger, yet He sets the fig tree on full blast, cursing it for not providing fruit when He wanted it. The entire story doesn’t seem to fit Jesus in the least...or so it would seem.

A few moments ago, we began to consider the second “image vs. reality” conflict, the appearance of God’s people vs. where their hearts truly stood. The incident with the fig tree gives us the answer to Jesus’s inspection. Many interpretations and commentaries on this portion of Mark consider the fig tree event to be what we can call an enacted parable. Considering the fact that regular, spoke parables were difficult enough to comprehend, this could explain the confusion around the fig tree! This parable in action, while outwardly jarring, provides important commentary in the form of condemnation from Jesus on where He sees the hearts of His people. Spoiler alert – it isn’t good.

The condemnation that Jesus aims at His own people is *promise without fulfillment or reality*. The Passover season is not the season for figs – this did not happen until late May or June – but it really isn’t about the fruit, but about the *leaves*. Jesus cursed the tree for the pretense of leaves – the false promise of fruit when there was no fruit to be found. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a direct commentary of the heart of Israel in Jesus’s time. Outwardly, things looked great but no fruit was to be found. Israel’s history up to that point had been one of waiting and preparation for their coming Messiah. They were eager, or should have been, for His arrival yet when He did show up, they completely missed it. The Jewish leaders, those with the greatest knowledge of prophecy and Scripture, the ones who should have identified Jesus first, were instead afraid that they would lose their power grip on their people. Jesus was preaching a new way of faith and that new way threatened the very foundation of the control and power the Pharisees had.

On the outside, they looked righteous and holy, but their hearts were a completely different story. It was the promise of fruit but nothing to show for it.

What this enacted parable is shouting at the top of its lungs is that Jesus finds His people to be talking the talk but not walking the walk. They are all leaves and no fruit. No one can claim to follow Jesus and remain unchanged. Matthew 7:16 reminds us that we will be known by our fruit and the fig tree stood as testament that Israel was, at that time, barren. And so, I put it to all of us today, are we ourselves guilty of the pretense of leaves? Are we living out our faith in visible and tangible ways every day of our lives or do we put out an image of leaves without the reality of fruit?

Cleansing of the Temple: set between the two fig tree stories, we have a glimpse of Jesus's wrath against the current religious establishment. This can also be seen as a continuation of the condemnation we just talked about with the fig tree – the issue of appearance vs. reality regarding the religious heart of Israel. In Mark 11:15-19, the story of Jesus cleansing the temple brings further clarity as to what the old religious system has become. Here we have the Temple in Jerusalem, the site of Jewish pilgrimage and a testament to God's holiness and might – the place of power of Jewish leadership - and Jesus cleans house. Scripture tells us what Jesus does as well as a clue as to why. As Jesus overturns tables and drives people out, He quotes both Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 when 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." In short, Jesus is angry. Not just angry, livid. Without some context, it can be difficult to decipher specifically why – lets fill in some blanks.

The temple in Jerusalem had many spaces and the temple cleansing took place in what is called the Court of the Gentiles. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, could be there. This area was considered to be a place of prayer and preparation yet, when Jesus arrives, we find money changers and vendors selling "temple approved" sacrificial items. The market atmosphere alone was a problem as it made the desired preparation and prayer in the

only place that Gentiles could worship impossible. What made it worse was that the vendors were openly exploiting pilgrims who had traveled great distances, only to hike up prices on sacrificial animals, namely doves. Vendors prearranged with temple officials to offer “preapproved” blemish-less offerings, officials almost always turned away anything purchased from outside of the temple – thereby gouging the pilgrims out of money very few had. The blatant exploitation of the pilgrims, and the collusion between vendors and temple officials, invoked Jesus’s wrath for obvious reasons. This desecration of God’s holy place was enough to anger Jesus and it was being done under the guise of religion.

Once again, we find ourselves face to face with the issue of the true state of the heart of Israel. The commercialization of the temple coupled with the exploitation of other believers could not more clearly define what was wrong with the old system. Beyond that, there is a final detail to examine in this story that is often overlooked. The Court of the Gentiles did allow for non-Jews to come and worship, but they could go no further. Crossing into the court beyond as a Gentile, the Court of the Women, was punishable by death. When Jesus quoted Isaiah 56:7, “for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations,” He wasn’t talking just about the vending and price hikes going on in the temple – Jesus was addressing the exclusivity of Jewish worship. Jesus was in Jerusalem that Passion Week for the entire world, as had been foretold in Scripture, and His own people had desecrated the only place Gentiles could worship.

The Authority of Jesus is Questioned: In Mark 11:27-33, Jesus returns the following day to the temple with His disciples – a rather bold move after flipping tables over the day before. Jesus is confronted by temple leadership, demanding to know by what authority He single-handedly cleared the Court of the Gentiles – the goal being, of course, to trap Jesus in an impossible situation between being a megalomaniac or a blasphemer. Jesus replies by asking them a question – one that must be answered before He will answer theirs – regarding the nature of John the Baptist’s ministry. Was his work human or

divine? Talk about turning the tables. Jesus has maneuvered them into either admitting that either John's work was divine (thereby admitting Jesus was the Messiah) or that John's work was human, making John a martyr, which would have caused a riot on the spot. So, after some consideration, the leaders answered simply "we do not know." And, as we know, Jesus does not answer their question either. By the Jewish leadership evading Jesus's question, we find our third and final "image vs. reality" collision: spiritual blindness vs. the truth.

This interaction between Jesus and the Jewish leadership at the temple is a prime example of the unwillingness of the Pharisees to face the truth. Jesus knows that telling them the truth of His authority (through God alone!) will fall on deaf ears as they've already rejected Him. They failed to recognize direct Old Testament references from John the Baptist regarding Jesus – something they themselves had dedicated their lives to studying and teaching others! Their spiritual blindness prevented them from hearing the truth despite the fact that the Way, the Truth, and the Life was standing right in front of them. There was no room in their hardened hearts for Him, and they cared more about saving face than making the life-changing admission that they were wrong. They weren't seeking the truth in their questioning of Jesus; they were seeking a predetermined outcome – the arrest and removal of the Messiah.

This section of Mark II leaves it to us (the readers) to provide the answers to both of the questions posed. We know that it through God's authority that Jesus acts and that God worked divinely in John the Baptist but how would we answer these questions if Jesus asked us directly? Would we parley an answer that doesn't resign our own control of our lives or would we answer truthfully and testify that Jesus is Lord of everything we are? Do we truly live under His Lordship or are we struggling to submit to His will and authority? Can we attest to the absolute truth that Jesus is God's Son and our Savior or has spiritual blindness muted our testimony? 1 Peter 3:15 reminds us that we always

should be prepared to give an answer regarding our faith. The Jewish leaders could not and would not answer, and so Mark 11 closes with Jesus still in the Temple but with a distinct lack of resolution in the narrative. To be continued next week!

Conclusion: Mark 11 covered much ground timeline-wise but also spiritually. We saw the glorious Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, followed by the difficult story of the fig tree, the cleansing of the temple, and a showdown with the Jewish leaders the following day. This chapter is punctuated by collisions of perceived images and true reality: the expected Messiah vs. the actual Messiah, the outward appearance of God's people vs. the true state of their hearts, and spiritual blindness vs. the truth. Each of these conflicts speaks to the status of faith in our lives as well as the people in Mark. Their story is our story – don't miss what is being shown to us here! Prepare your hearts now – be ready to receive Him each and every day. We may not be to Palm Sunday yet on the calendar, but every day that we wake up is a chance for us to hail Him as our Messiah and King while never forgetting the end game – His sacrifice for us on the Cross. Amen.