

# Jesus' New World Order

Message 11

## *Treachery in God's Kingdom*

Mark 11:1-12:44

### *The Climax*

Here we are approaching the climax of Jesus' ministry. He has spent three years traveling across Galilee and Judea proclaiming the coming of God's Kingdom. He has been preaching, healing, feeding, casting out demons, and calling men and women to believe the gospel and follow Him. And He has had phenomenal, even supernatural success. Early in His ministry He was attracting crowds from as far away as Sidon in Lebanon to the north and Idumea, the desert kingdom in the south. We are told that on one occasion He fed 5,000 men – and we suppose at least as many women and children.

What was His secret? How could He maintain a ministry like this year after year? It is too simplistic to say that He was the Son of God, although Mark tells us at the beginning that this is the case. No, God never forces or manipulates people. There was something about Jesus that inexorably drew people to Him. The draw was the combination of His authority and His compassion. They saw with their own eyes His ability to perform great, miraculous works – works that only God could do. No one had ever before, on His own authority and by His own word alone, healed the sick, cast out demons, stilled the storm, and raised the dead. And at the same time, no one had ever cared for the poor, the sick, the lonely, the possessed, the lost the way Jesus had. People had seen and experienced power, and it terrorized them. Many had known the compassion of family and friends, but it was helpless to rescue them. Here, finally, is the greatest power and the deepest compassion they have ever seen. Is it any wonder people flocked to see Jesus? You would, too. You would leave your studies, abandon your friends, forget about TV and video games, and cross seas and continents to find someone you could fully trust to care for you – if you were sure such a person existed.

So when Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the heart of Jewish life, it is no surprise to find a crowd waiting to escort Him into the city. This is where He belongs. Didn't Bartimaeus just proclaim Him the Son of David? Well, then, He must sit on David's throne. This is the moment of victory. After centuries of brutal oppression, first by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and now by the Romans, at last the people will be set free! Surely Jesus has the power to throw off the Roman yoke. Surely He understands how much the Jews have suffered under their pagan masters and empathizes with them in their suffering. Surely He will use His power and compassion to save His people.

### *The Savior*

It is very hard for us to grasp the longing and desperation of the Jews. Not only did they yearn for the days in which they were a free people, their faith in God was wrapped up in God's promise to deliver them. As long as they were dominated by foreigners, it was easy to dismiss those promises as dusty, ancient, irrelevant fairy tales. It is hard for us in America, who have never known foreign oppression, to comprehend the agony of seeing your friends tortured, your children murdered, and your cities burned to the ground. Warfare is never pretty, but the ancients were particularly skilled in gruesomeness. The Babylonian exile was a devastating shock to the Jews from which they never fully recovered. More recently, their Greek masters had embarked upon a systematic campaign to Hellenize the Jews. Antiochus Epiphanes was the Seleucid king in the second century B.C. who brutally tried to erase the Jewish religion and way of life. He enforced the death penalty for circumcision and Sabbath observance. He destroyed the scriptures, set up a statue of Zeus in the temple, and sacrificed pigs on the altar. The people were finally so enraged, they revolted, and with much bloodshed drove out the Greeks. But internal problems weakened the Jewish state, and when the Romans arrived, they took over with little difficulty.

Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion;  
put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city;  
for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean.  
Shake yourself from the dust and arise;  
be seated, O Jerusalem;  
loose the bonds from your neck,  
O captive daughter of Zion.

Isaiah 52:1-2

Many Jews read this and laughed. “How silly,” they thought. “Jerusalem will never match the power of Rome.” They adopted Greek customs and Roman habits. But there also remained many faithful Jews who continued to believe God’s Word. They knew He would return to save them. God continued in the book of Isaiah,

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news,  
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,  
who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”  
Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem,  
for the LORD has comforted his people;  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.  
The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations,  
and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Isaiah 52:7, 9-10

Now what would you expect, when you see Jesus walking through the hills of Galilee, preaching the gospel, proclaiming peace, and comforting the people? No one could deny that this is, at last, the fulfillment of these prophecies. So when Jesus begins to move His ministry to Zion, the center of Jewish life, we know that the end of oppression is near. This is a great victory celebration. The people are cheering their hero, anticipating the final relief from their suffering. So they give Jesus a royal welcome. The colt, the carpeting of clothes and branches, and their praise are all part of a royal passage. They cry out, “Blessed is the Kingdom of our father David,” expecting Jesus to drive out the enemy, sit on the throne, and rule in peace and righteousness. What a glorious day! What soaring hopes! What a thrill to be there when God returns the throne to David!

### ***The Arrival***

But when Jesus actually entered the city it was an entirely different story. He did not go first to the palace to claim His throne, but to the temple. And what did He find there? The holy place, the place of prayer and worship of God had become a marketplace. The primary issue was not holiness, but profit. Worship of money had replaced worship of God. It was stunning. It was an outrage! Jesus said not a thing, but left for the evening. The next day He returned and purified the temple, driving out the merchants and throwing away their merchandise. He cut right to the heart of the issue. “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’” The thieves were not happy to be dispossessed of their wares and their choice location. They tried to think of a way to kill Him, but they could see that to do so would cause the crowd to kill them in return. They silently seethed in anger. Malachi’s prophecy thus came true.

And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple;  
and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight,  
behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.  
But who can endure the day of his coming,

and who can stand when he appears?  
For he is like a refiner's fire  
and like fullers' soap.  
He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver,  
and he will purify the sons of Levi  
and refine them like gold and silver,  
and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.  
Malachi 3:1b-3

The scribes and priests *claimed* to look for the coming of the Messiah, but when He came, they were swept away. They were evil, impure – and when Jesus purified the temple, they were removed like the slag is removed from silver ore when it is purified. The big difference between the Jewish leaders and silver slag, is that they had no intention of being swept away passively.

The incident with the fig tree brackets the cleansing of the temple and – you guessed it – is a parallel story. Jesus cursed the fig tree because it bore no fruit. It was a worthless tree, and it deserved to be replaced. The fig tree naturally represents Israel, as in this passage from Hosea, “I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree...” (9:10) Israel is often pictured in the Old Testament as a tree or a vine of one sort or another, and the most natural understanding of this passage is to see Jesus making a statement about the nation of Israel. He seems to be saying that Israel’s time is up. The time of putting up with her while she bears no fruit is over, and she will be destroyed.

Now let’s step back a bit and ask, what should have happened here? Malachi said the priests claimed to be seeking the Lord, but in reality they were unprepared for Him. Obviously, they *should* have been prepared. They *should* have truly sought God, not profits. The joyous celebration that began out on the road into Jerusalem should have continued right into the temple. Jesus *should* have found people in prayer and worship, not in commerce. They *should* have turned their praises to the Lord as He entered the temple. Jesus *should* have been enthroned, but in the temple, not the palace – for His Kingdom is the Kingdom of God, and God’s palace is the temple. However, when Jesus entered the temple He found leaders who wanted to kill Him, not enthrone Him.

### ***The Vineyard***

The whole story is told by the parable in chapter 12. It is a simple story of a practice common at the time. During the empire most of the land was owned by large landholders who lived in Rome or grand villas somewhere and rented the land to tenant farmers. These farmers would till the land and give a set portion of the produce to the owner as rent. But this story has a shocking twist. The tenant farmers refuse to pay their rent! They even beat up the rent collector. We would expect the landowner to send troops to force them to pay, but here is another bizarre twist – the owner gives them another chance. He sends another rent collector. These tenants are dead-set in their refusal to pay, so they beat up this collector, too. Amazingly, the owner gives them yet another chance. Why would he do something so generous? He must be crazy! These tenants deserve to be beat up in return. They should be sent to the galleys or the salt mines to learn what hard work really is. Maybe after ten years there they would be grateful to farm the vineyard – if they survived that long. What has gone wrong here? This story makes no sense! No tenants would be so stupid to rebel against their master like this, and no landowner would tolerate such rebellion.

But now the story turns from the bizarre to the absolutely frightening. As a last resort the owner sends his son to collect the rent. How crazy can you get? Put yourself in His shoes. If you owned a business, and all your employees were constantly being injured and wounded, would you send your son in to work there? How about if you were the son? How would you feel if you knew that your father was consciously sending you to work in a place where all had been injured and some had died? The only thing sensible about

this story is the ending. Finally, the owner sends in the troops and destroys the rebels. He kills them and gives the vineyard to other tenants who will pay their rent.

Again, this story is about God's relationship to Israel. You can see that by the context, but Isaiah gives us a clue here as well. In chapter 5 Isaiah sings the song of the vineyard.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! (vv. 1-7)

"The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel." It couldn't be any clearer, could it? Jesus is essentially retelling this parable, applying it to the situation in His day. As in Isaiah's time Israel was in rebellion against God, so now the Jews are in rebellion against God. Then, He sent in the Babylonians to destroy them for their wickedness. What will happen this time?

### ***The Cornerstone***

To cap off this parable, Jesus quotes from Psalm 118 (22-23). There He is, in the temple. We can imagine the temple builders carefully fitting each stone together. The stones have all been shaped at the quarry, numbered, and hauled to the temple site, for it was forbidden to use a tool at the temple site itself. Now here comes a stone that does not fit. The builders try first one place, then another. Finally they throw it aside. But then along comes the master-builder. He finds the rejected stone and, Voila! It fits right in the corner, where it becomes the reference point for all the other stones. The rejected stone is in reality the most critical stone of all. The builders should have known. After all, they are supposed to know how to build. That is their job. They should know you cannot build a solid structure without a secure cornerstone. But they completely failed. They did not ignore the strange stone. They carefully examined it – and concluded it was useless. Only when the master-builder showed up was the key role of the cornerstone recognized. The master-builder rejected the decision of the builders and gave the rejected stone the most prominent place.

Do you see how this parable follows the other one? Do you see what they mean? I hope so. The Jewish leaders did. The text says the Jewish leaders tried to kill Jesus, for they could tell that this parable condemned them. They are the vinedressers in God's vineyard Israel. They are the builders of God's temple. God sent messengers to Israel calling His people to serve Him, but the prophets were ignored or mocked or killed by the priests and kings. Finally God sent one last messenger, a very unusual messenger – one who did not fit any of their categories. They looked, and listened, and thought, and discussed, and concluded that He was useless – so they rejected Him. They planned to kill Him. It turns out that this last messenger was God's Son, and God will not let the death of His Son go unavenged. Furthermore, God's Son – not the Jewish leaders – is the foundation of His Kingdom.

We are coming to the end of the story. Soon we will see who survives – Jesus or the Jewish leaders. They are bent on killing Him, but Jesus seems to be saying that He will kill them if they do not accept Him as their Messiah. This parable is Jesus' strong warning to the scribes and priests not to go on rejecting Him. All along in Mark's gospel Jesus has been warning them to abandon their pride and follow Him. If they

refuse, disaster awaits.

***Application***

But what does this have to do with you? Where do you fit into the parable? Do you see that you also are God's servant and owe Him His due? All men and women are vinedressers in the Lord's vineyard, for the whole earth is the Lord's. Every human being owes allegiance to God, and God has sent His prophets and evangelists into the world to collect what is owed to God. Their message is that God is your creator and owner. He rightfully rules you and demands your allegiance. You must obey and worship Him. But you reject God's messengers. You ignore God's word, you mock His evangelists, you despise God's laws and hate God Himself. Even if God's Son were here in the flesh, you would seek to kill him, just as the Jewish leaders did. So what is your fate? You will be destroyed! What else would you expect? How could you possibly escape? That would be ridiculous. God would be a laughingstock if He allowed you to mock Him with impunity. What would *you* do in God's place? Do not tell me you would let the hateful rebels go free. That is a lie.

The parable of the vinedressers clearly states that you will be destroyed if you rebel against God and reject His messengers. There will be no escape. God, who has all knowledge and power, will hunt you down and destroy you. But this same God also did something crazy, so crazy, it boggles the mind. He sent His own Son into the midst of the rebellion. Why? We can understand that God would destroy the rebels, but why would He send His Son into that outbreak? You would not, I would not – why would God? There is only one possible reason. He loves them. These miserable wretches who deserve only destruction – God loved them so much, He used the ultimate tactic – He sent His precious Son. “They will respect my son,” He said. What is appealing about rebels? Nothing! But God loved them anyway. And He refused to give up on them. He loved them so much, He allowed His Son to die so that He might rescue them from destruction.

You deserve to die – you and everyone on earth. You were born in rebellion against God. You rejected His messengers, despised His gospel, and hated His Son. You were headed for destruction. But God loved you so much, He sent His Son to die for you. And now that Jesus has been exalted to the most prominent position in the Kingdom. How can you not love Him? How can you not worship Him? Are you so cold-hearted that you still want to live for yourself? Deny your self and follow Him, Jesus who loved you to the death.

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