

Mark 11.20- 12.44: Jesus Answers Questions
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1. To continue our discussion of the temple clearing and the withered fig tree, let's look again at the way Mark sandwiches the temple clearing story between the halves of the fig tree story. In the Old Testament, the fig tree is a common symbol for Israel. Read Hosea 9.10 and Nahum 3.12.
 - Vs. 20 records that the fig tree had withered from the roots up. Why is that detail significant?
 - After Peter notices that the fig tree has withered, Jesus responds with a series of instructions in vs. 22-25. Following on his clearing of the temple and cursing of the fig tree, why are these instructions important?
 - For another spin on the fig tree story, read what Cyril of Jerusalem had to say:
Remember at the time of the sin of Adam and Eve they clothed themselves— with what? Fig leaves. That was their first act after the fall. So now Jesus is making the same figure of the fig tree the very last of his wondrous signs. Just as he was headed toward the cross, he cursed the fig tree—not every fig tree, but that one alone for its symbolic significance—saying: “May no one ever eat fruit of you again.” In this way the curse laid upon Adam and Eve was being reversed. For they had clothed themselves with fig leaves.
(*Ancient Christian Writers* 160)
Based on this quote, if we read Jesus' cursing of the fig tree as a symbolic action, what then is he actually cursing?

2. From the fig tree, we move to another agricultural image, the vineyard in 12.1-12. The vine is a familiar symbol to us (“You are the vine, we are the branches”). This parable of Jesus, the last recorded by Mark, uses the vineyard to construct an *allegory* about God's relationship with His people Israel. Identify the parts of this allegory and what they represent. What does it mean, at the end, when the owner of the vineyard kills the present tenants and gives the vineyard to others?
 - Isaiah 5.1-7 is, similarly, a song of the vineyard. Read this passage and compare its message with that of Jesus' parable.

3. Now read 12.28-34, Jesus' pronouncement of the greatest commandment. Unlike the other questioners in this section, this teacher of the law seems more interested in hearing Jesus' answer than in tricking him: of the 613 commandments identified by the Pharisees, which is most important?
 - There is a similar story of Hillel the Elder (40 BC -10AD) being asked by a Gentile, “Teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Hillel's reply was, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it” (Williamson 226). How does Jesus' response create a slightly different emphasis? What does Jesus mean by “neighbor”?
 - The teacher acknowledges that loving God and one's neighbor is “more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Considering especially that

this conversation is taking place in or near the Temple, what is the significance of this man's reply?

4. Jesus confounds his critics: Read 11.27-33, 12.13-17, and 12.18-27. In each of these three sections, a group of people attempts to corner Jesus by asking him loaded questions. However, in each case, Jesus skillfully evades their trap while still giving substantial answers.
 - Mark's gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. Why is it important that Jesus refers to John's ministry here? How does his reference to John lead into the parable of the vineyard?
 - In the section on taxes, the Pharisees and Herodians—an unlikely combination—again team up to trap Jesus. Jesus answers their question by referring to a coin with Caesar's image on it and differentiating between what we owe to Caesar and what we owe to God. We know that we are made in the image of God and that the earth belongs to God. What does it mean to "give to God what is God's?"
 - The Sadducees also question Jesus about the resurrection. We know that Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (the afterlife), only accepted the Pentateuch as scripture, and did not ascribe to the oral tradition as the Pharisees did. Their question is essentially scornful in tone, intended to present a ridiculous situation and thus mock Jesus. His answer draws on the Pentateuch, the part of scripture they accepted. Why does Jesus refer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? What should we learn about the afterlife from Jesus' answer?
5. Read 12. 35-44. What's the point of Jesus' reference to David? What's the answer to his question about David's lord?
 - Contrast the widow's offering with the behavior of the teachers of the law.