

Sermon Summary #34  
"Who is Jesus?" Revisited  
Mark 11:27-33; 12:1-12

People in America are obsessed with so-called "Top Ten" lists. . . .

I mention this simply as a way of highlighting what we are witnessing in the final six chapters of Mark's gospel. Imagine that you are alive in the first century and are working as a journalist for the *Jerusalem Daily News*. It's late December in the year 40 and your boss asks you to compile a list of the "Top Ten" news stories of the previous decade. You finish your work, present it to the editor of the newspaper, and shock him with the announcement that **all of the decade's most important, life-changing, history-making events occurred in the same week of time**. These events were not spread out over ten years but all transpired **within a span of seven days!** Those seven days happen to be what we call Passion Week, the final week of our Lord's earthly life, the week that we are fast approaching and will celebrate beginning with Palm Sunday, April 17, and concluding with Easter Sunday, April 24.

I'm not suggesting that these weren't important events occurring throughout the Roman Empire during the decade under consideration. But without question, the most important events, events that would forever alter the course of human history, both now and for eternity, all occurred in that span of time from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday.

The last time we were in Mark's gospel I pointed out to you that **beginning with chapter 11**, verse 1, we are at the beginning of that week, and that the final six chapters of Mark's gospel, chapters 11 through 16, are devoted entirely to a portrayal of the events of the final week of Jesus' earthly life: his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his judgment of the Temple, the last supper with his disciples in the Upper Room, his agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal by Judas and trial before Herod and Pilate, and of course his crucifixion and resurrection from the dead. **No other events in that decade or any other in the course of human history could rival the importance of what Jesus did and said.**

All of Mark's gospel, of course, is concerned with answering the question: **Who is Jesus and why does it matter to you and me?** But it is especially in these final six chapters, as seen in the events of Passion Week, that the question of his identity comes to the forefront in a way that exceeds anything that has gone before.

Let me try to set the scene for you. We must remember that it was only yesterday, in the narrative we are reading, that Jesus had entered the Temple and violently disrupted the commercial transactions that were taking place, turning over tables and sending sheep and goats running down its hallways. Now, on the very next day, **Jesus has the courage to return to the Temple**. He goes back to the scene of the crime, so to speak! Of course, what he did in the Temple was no crime. The crime was committed by those who had turned the Temple into a place of commercial enterprise. But look at v. 27. . . .

The "scribes" were the religious scholars of the day and the "elders" were non-priestly members of the Sanhedrin, heads of the most powerful and influential lay families.

They are probably more than a little surprised to see Jesus show up again in the Temple following his outburst of the previous day. They approach him and, in effect, say:

"Who the heck do you think you are! Who gave you the right or authority to do what you did yesterday? You made a wreck of this place! You disrupted everything we were attempting to achieve. And now you've got the unmitigated gall, the audacity, to show up again today. By what authority did you act in this way? Show us your credentials! Where are your ordination papers?"

This question wasn't motivated by a desire to know who Jesus is, but rather a desire to put an end to his ministry and influence and perhaps to ensure him in such a way that they would have grounds for having him arrested. They obviously wanted to **embarrass** Jesus. If he admitted he had no credentials from the religious leaders or that he was acting on his own authority, he might lose the respect of the people. On the other hand, if he claimed authorization from God they would have grounds for charging him with blasphemy.

Jesus' reply is masterful! He responds to their question with a question of his own. This is not the same tactic that we often employ, something that most of us find rude and evasive. It was common practice in rabbinic debates in those days.

"John's baptism" is a reference to his entire ministry, his message concerning the coming of Messiah, his call to repentance, etc. *"Has it from heaven or from men?"* This is not a rebuke or a trick question. If they answer correctly they will have the answer to the question they asked of Jesus.

They huddle up to figure out a response!

"Oops! We're in quite a pickle now! If we say that John ministered on a commission from God, he'll want to know why we didn't believe him and obey him. And since John's ministry and message pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, to affirm that John's authority came from heaven is to affirm that Jesus' authority likewise is from above, and we can't do that! But if we say that John's authority was only human, the people will turn on us because they believed in John and held him in very high regard."

Jesus has exposed them as frauds! They are men who make important decisions based on expediency rather than principle. They are men who decide important questions on the basis of what public opinion will let them get away with. The highest consideration in their minds isn't *what is true* but *what is safe?* Thus, their answer, "We do not know," was a lie motivated by fear. It indicated that they weren't at all concerned about who Jesus was. They were only concerned with covering their backsides.

There is no question but that Jesus is frustrated, even angry, with these men. So he immediately shifts gears in his teaching method and employs **parables**, the first of which is a stinging indictment of the religious leaders of Israel not only in his day but in the history of the nation.

Let's begin by trying to make sense of the details of the passage.

The "winepress" (v. 1) –

The "fence" (v. 1) –

The "tower" (v. 1) –

The actions of the landowner were all quite normal for that day and time. Absentee landlords were common. They would lease out their estates and were interested only in collecting rent money at the right time. Sometimes it was paid in coinage, at other times it was paid in whatever crop or fruit was being grown. Such absentee landlords were often resented; they never did anything until it was time to collect their profits.

**But the tenants in this story do more than simply complain.** They want more, perhaps all, of the fruit of their labors. They refuse to honor the original contract. This isn't some politely worded protest. Nor do they go on strike. The landlord sent a servant to collect what was due (vv. 2-3), and the tenants beat the "you-know-what" out of him!

He then sends another servant, perhaps thinking this was a one-time outburst and surely they wouldn't dare do it again. But they "struck him on the head and treated him shamefully" (v. 4). The landlord continues to send servants, but according to v. 5 they were all treated with equal and even increasing contempt: some of them they only beat up, while others they killed. **Finally**, the landowner plays what he believes is his **trump card**: he sends his "beloved" son! Surely they will respect him (v. 6).

But the tenants, true to character, kill the son, and throw his body out of the vineyard! They don't even grant him the honor of a decent burial. They probably thought the landowner had died and that the son had come to take over his inheritance. If we kill him, they thought to themselves, it will be ours. In Jewish law a person who could prove three years' undisputed possession of a property could claim ownership.

The tenants had badly miscalculated: the landowner responds by destroying them and giving his vineyard to others who would be more diligent and faithful.

Some have objected by saying that the story goes beyond the boundaries of reason. In the ordinary course of life no landowner with a lick of sense would have continued to send servants to tenants who repeatedly violated and even killed them. And surely he would never have exposed his beloved son to the possibility of such abuse. But, remember two things: (1) this is a parable; we shouldn't be surprised at odd elements in the story; no one would read this as literal representation of life; (2) the point of the parable is to depict and describe the worst imaginable wickedness; the point is to highlight a love that is incomprehensibly great and a sin that is equally incomprehensible in its darkness and depravity.

The meaning of the parable is actually quite obvious. In fact, according to v. 12 the religious leaders **knew** it was about them and they would have arrested Jesus were it not because they feared the people.

- The Landowner = God
- The Vineyard = the kingdom or God's redemptive rule on the earth
- The Tenants = the religious leaders of Israel
- The Servants = the prophets throughout Israel's history
- The Son = Jesus Christ

This, then, is the story of God sending the prophets, one after another, all throughout biblical history, patiently calling the people of Israel to repentance and to be faithful and godly in their oversight of God's kingdom on earth. It is the story, likewise, of their violent rejection of this calling and their rejection of the prophets and the word of God that came through them. Obviously, it is also the story of their consummate rebellion in the killing of the true Son of God, Jesus.

Jeremiah 7:25-26 . . .

- Elijah and Amos had to flee for their lives
- Isaiah was seen in two
- Ezekiel was rudely rejected
- Jeremiah was stoned
- Zachariah was murdered
- John the Baptist had his head cut off!

From almost the beginning of his public ministry Jesus has been telling his disciples that the rulers and religious leaders in Jerusalem would kill him. Now he tells the rulers themselves! I'm sure they remembered these words of Jesus just a few weeks later on the Day of Pentecost when Peter stood up and preached, saying, Acts 2:23-24, 36 (see Mt. 23:37-38).

Jesus saw in this story the fulfillment of what was prophesied in Ps. 118:22-23. But what does it mean?

The picture is of craftsmen and architects carefully selecting stones for a large building. They sift through the many stones at their disposal, and one in particular they judge as useless and of no value, a stone that is, by their assessment, qualitatively inferior and not fit for use in the building. As things turn out, this one stone is eventually found to be the most important one of all: it is in fact the cornerstone, i.e., the stone that is placed at the top corner where two walls meet; its proper placement and alignment is essential for the stability of the entire building.

For centuries the nation Israel had been the chosen "stone" which the empire builders of the world had rejected as insignificant and despised. But in God's plan for history, Israel was chosen from among all the nations of the world to be the chief cornerstone, the nation to whom he revealed himself and from whom the Messiah would come.

But the great and tragic irony is that whereas Israel was originally the stone that was rejected, now Jesus is the stone and Israel is herself doing the rejecting!

Acts 4:10-12. The ultimate fulfillment of the Psalm is not Israel, but Israel's Messiah: Jesus! The stone rejected was the crucified Christ. The chief cornerstone is the resurrected Christ!

**What an incredible claim Jesus is making for himself!** If there were any doubts as to his identity, he does away with them here and now. Jesus sees himself and declares himself to be God's final and decisive messenger to mankind. On the one hand, he stands in continuity with the prophets of the OT who had been sent by God but were killed. But on the other hand he is altogether different and unique. They are but servants. He is the Son! Heb. 1:1-2; Acts 4:10-12.

But we must also deal with v. 9 (see esp. Mt. 21:43). Israel's history was one of repeated failure and apostasy and rejection of the prophets. Finally this rejection took the form of the violent and unjust crucifixion of the Son of God himself. The response of God is to take the vineyard away from his tenants, Israel, and to give it to a "nation" that will truly and finally bear the fruit that God desires.

Who is this "nation"? It is the Church – See 1 Peter 2:9-10.

Jesus is the cornerstone of a New Temple, the Church, the true people of God. See Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Peter 2:6-8.

The Church, which is made up of believing Jews and believing Gentiles, is the new tenant of God's kingdom on earth. We are the stewards of his dominion and lordship and reign among men. And anyone who follow Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, is a living stone in this new temple in which God is pleased to dwell!

**Response?** There are only two options. On the one hand, you can choose to respond as did the religious leaders. All they were concerned about was debating who Jesus was and discussing the matter and trying to figure out ways of exposing him as a fraud. They were all about being clever and finding ways to avoid having to deal with his claims. They considered themselves to be the power elite with all the privileges of the people of God. They refuse to repent and submit to the Lordship of Jesus, the chief cornerstone. Instead, they try to get rid of him. They want him arrested. The only thing that stands in their way is their fear of what the reaction will be among the people. Pragmatists to the end!

I want to address those of you who are on a journey of exploration, you who are still asking questions, you who have not embraced Jesus and yielded to his claims and cast your souls in trust upon his work on the cross for sinners. **What holds you back?** Is it really that we have not given you good answers to your questions? Is it really that Jesus is not sufficiently good and glorious and true and kind and loving? Or is it that you are paralyzed from moving forward for the same reason the religious leaders and elders in the first century were?

Note that it is stated twice: first in 11:32 and then again in 12:12. They were afraid of the people. The fear of man hindered their movement toward Jesus. Their fear of what others would think. Their fear of what others might do. Their fear of losing face. Their fear of losing power and position and prestige. I'm asking you to be honest with yourself today. **How much of your hesitation and alleged doubts and unanswered questions is really a mask to hide your fear of what faith in Christ might cost you socially, culturally, relationally, financially?**

My appeal to you is to look once more into the face of this Jesus. Listen once more to the words he speaks. Watch once again as how he loves the unlovely. Ponder once more his claim to be God. Reflect yet again on his willingness to endure the wrath of God that sinners like you deserve.

I said there were two options. The first is to respond as did the Pharisees and scribes and elders and be controlled by fear. That leads to only one thing: **"So they left him and went away" (2:12b)**. The other option is to see him as the stone who has become the very cornerstone of life and hope and joy and forgiveness. Others cast him aside as unworthy. He is just one stone among thousands of others. He is no more than common.

Or you can say, in the words of 2:11, *this person Jesus, this man who is God, this one who by his sinless life and sacrificial death and powerful resurrection has become the cornerstone of all that is good and glorious and holy and right and true, this Jesus is my only hope, my only source of life, my salvation. And it is marvelous in my eyes!*