

THREE SYMBOLIC ACTS AND THE LAST PRESS CONFERENCE

Mark 11:1–12:44

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I think of the Lord in terms of the Father who knows there is danger that is going to happen in His house of children and who Himself rises in the night to meet whatever is most fearsome and dangerous, successfully encounters it and defeats it although He loses it and the house is made secure. We see Jesus now in the Gospel of Mark, today Mark 11 and 12, risking Himself, making Himself vulnerable and penetrable as He goes into Jerusalem mounted on a donkey.

Jesus taught so often by means of symbol. He taught in parables, and by parables, of course, we look at simple homespun story-like events which upon first hearing them we're not always sure as to their message. But that is a compliment. It's as if our Lord was saying, "Figure what I am telling you out for yourself." Once the story is figured out, then, because it's taught in such a simple way, it becomes memorable. Jesus taught in stories.

He also acts in symbols. We see events before us today, some symbolic acts—three of them in particular in Mark 11—acts that teach us some tremendous lessons about the Lord. Then, beginning with verse 7 of chapter 11 through chapter 12, the Lord's last press conference. The last time He answers questions of men.

I. As we look at these symbolic acts, the first one we see is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, mounted upon a colt.

We should try to do something more today, other than simply look at the history of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. After all, since we were youngsters we've been told that story and it should be familiar to us by now. But we should look beyond that perhaps to see some of ourselves in the story. If it were possible, I would ask you to place yourself in the position of being the city that

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receives Christ or the temple that may be in need of cleansing or the tree who He is coming to looking for fruit. All of us are somewhat like the city of Jerusalem, at least in this respect. Jesus is seeking to enter us.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus, up to this point, had been in Jerusalem a number of times. The sequence of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke has not emphasized this aspect of Christ's ministry as it has His Galilean ministry. So Mark is concerned to tell us about the one time that Jesus entered Jerusalem as King. It may be that, up to this point, you have had encounters, occasions where the Lord has made His presence known in your life, but today we see Him in the unique way of asking to make an entrance as King.

There are some ways that the Lord enters Jerusalem like in our lives.

A. One thing about His entry into Jerusalem is that it is deliberate. He knows what He's doing. He sends in advance two of His disciples to get a colt upon which no one has sat, bring it to Him for Him to ride into the city. Advanced preparations. When they see Him coming in, they throw their garments down on the road and they have hastily cut palm branches and they strew them in front of Him. Their response is sudden, it is momentary, and it is a very instantaneous kind of event. His preparation is deliberate.

He has thought for a long time about how He might enter the city. In relationship to our own lives, the Lord has thought a lot more on how He might enter us than we have ever thought on how we might receive Him. He has plotted very deliberately to come into our lives in such a way that we could recognize Him as King.

If you feel like the little girl did just recently that we read about in the papers, who despaired of life and, at the age of 17, because she couldn't figure out what life was all about she did what she did... if you feel like life has that meaningless flow to it, then you should consider how very

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much the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ, has plans that He wants you to act upon, plans to enter your life. His coming into the city or our hearts is very deliberate on His part. He wants to come.

Never does He want to stay away. No matter what our response to Him might be. He takes the risk of coming.

His coming also is a coming of peace, it was into the city and it is into our hearts. Coming in peace. He comes not on a white stallion, which would be the symbol of conqueror. And He does not come with a marching army or with swords brandished or guns displayed. He comes very gently, on a domesticated animal, signifying that the reign which He is going to bring into our lives is a reign of peace and tranquility, that He seeks to end all the old wars replace them with His presence, which is the instrument of peace.

There is something of His coming in peace and His action that really belies the tremendous miracle that is occurring as He rides into the city. The donkey we see as a symbol of peace, but those who know the inner story, know that there is a miracle involved in that this donkey has never previously been ridden. And who would like to ride a donkey that has never been ridden, let alone ride it into the kinds of throngs that would have been surrounding Jesus on that particular occasion. But His peace is so great that it even comes upon the animal on which He sits.

There is a day, the Book of Revelation tells us, that He will return again, this time not on a donkey but upon a white horse. The picture is described for us in the Book of Revelation. It indicates that there will be an age in which the Lord will come triumphant and with a host of heaven with Him. But He has chosen again by this symbol, which is revealed to us here in the Gospel of Mark, to indicate the quiet but miraculous way He has of slipping into our lives. We

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see it as a tremendous event. But anyone who has ever had their emotions and sinful wills ridden on personally by the Lord Jesus Christ knows what a miracle this is.

B. Also, we should see His coming into Jerusalem is a wordless coming. In the text in the Gospel of Mark, once Jesus gets on the donkey, from that point on no word is said by Him. His act is demonstrated by entering the city. Now, response is called for in the hearts and the mouths of those who watch. That's very fitting too, because there are times the Lord has done His entry into us in which He has said all that He can say, and there comes a time of response when we say, like the pilgrim said, "Save now, Hosanna. Save now!"

I trust that today if there emanates that same kind of response, reckless response if you will, on the part of the crowd toward Jesus. They trusted Him as a King. They certainly did not know the full implications of what His kingship meant, that His kingdom was invisible in the world and was over human hearts rather than over physical things; but they would come to understand that, I'm sure.

I realize that it's popular to say that the same crowd that sang "Hosanna" when Jesus entered the city was the same crowd which four or five days later was fickle enough to turn around and say, "Crucify Him!" I'm not sure I buy that! I don't buy it from the standpoint that Jerusalem was a city of maybe about seventy-five thousand people at this time. During the Passover season, the population could be tripled in size. It's very conceivable that the crowd welcoming Jesus are His loyal supporters. The Galilean pilgrims coming into the city, the loyal people in the city that were coming out to meet Him and saying this genuinely. And later in the week, maybe it's another crowd, this time a crowd under the jurisdiction of the religious establishment that is saying "Crucify Him!"

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But I like to think that when I say to the Lord, “Save now! Save now!”... there’s something permanent about that. That it does really reflect what I feel. And that it’s not something fickle that a few days later is going to be changed by an event which will happen to try to take away its power. He comes riding as King. He comes into our life, wanting rule and control. It’s a symbolic act.

II. Another symbolic act of the Lord’s here is the cursing of the fig tree.

Of course, if you read between Matthew and Mark you see immediately and, by way of footnote, I’ll mention this: there is a difference in chronology in Matthew and Mark. Matthew is not as conscious of the flow of time as Mark. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus enters Jerusalem and cleanses the temple. Matthew doesn’t take the time to point out that there’s a lapse of two days there. Mark says He entered the city, looked around, came out, and the next day, cleansed the temple. The same thing happens with the fig tree. In Matthew, it’s eclipsed into seemingly a moment, but in Mark, we’re shown the sequence. The Lord first cursed it. The next day they come back and they notice it and say, “Look, Master, the fig tree You cursed has withered.”

What is the significance, the symbolic significance? One thing is, His other miracles are blindness, speechlessness, whatever. All those areas He has come to loose. But now, in respect to this fig tree, He exercises destructive power. He does it from the vantage point of teaching His disciples and us some lessons. Mark reveals the kind of thing that makes us wonder if Jesus really is being reasonable with that crazy fig tree. Verse 13, “When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs” (NIV). Then He proceeds to curse it. We think immediately, “How unjust of Jesus to do this!”

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But don't worry. Mark wouldn't have made note of that fact unless he were familiar with the reason why Jesus had cursed it and he was also familiar with the nature of a fig tree. He was a horticulturist!

Fig trees are perhaps one of the longest fruit-bearing trees in existence in that they can bear fruit over a period of about ten months in a twelve-month year; there's a possibility of harvesting three crops off a fig tree. One crop is in the late fall. Another crop is in the early spring, which is a very tasty crop, and there is kind of a small budding of the fig tree, a spring crop. It's a little fig that's immature that grows to about the size of cherry. When in the spring a fig tree begins to leaf, if it is going to bear fruit that year, it brings forth these small little buds. The wind comes along and blows them to the ground and the peasants come along and eat them, much like we eat crabapples before they become apples. Some like things that are sour and some like these kind of immature figs.

Jesus, being hungry, came to the tree and saw on it only leaves. It was an indication that that tree that year would not bear fruit. It was simply a botanical law. If the small figs are not here, there is no fruit later in the year.

To understand Jesus' action, we may need to compare it with a parable He told in Luke 13, on His way into Jerusalem. He teaches the parable of the fig tree, which He's about to cut down, but He is begged not to cut it down, but to give it more time, to dig around it, fertilize it and then maybe it would produce some fruit, so He gives it more time. Now we see the time has gone and the fact that the fig tree is not bearing fruit is a parable of the fact that Jesus came to His own looking for the fruit of profession in God and, instead, found only the profession itself. He came looking for love and found only the profession of love. He came looking for true holiness and instead found the profession of holiness—leaves. He came looking for joy and only found the

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profession of joy. His cursing of the fig tree is His indictment upon a life that promises much but delivers nothing, a life that has leaves but no fruit. Therefore, His judgment on the fig tree is not simply a judgment against His nation, from whom, after Him, would come no more prophets.

But His judgment is upon all of us who are ever tempted to go in the direction of faith without the evidence of faith. Lip service without the quality of life flowing through.

The Son of Man is hungry, and there is something within us that we are to be developing that He is hungry for, something that gives Him hunger for us. He likes to taste our joy. He likes to taste our love and our warmth and our happiness and our zeal for Him, and our holiness.

III. Another tremendously symbolic act, which occurs during this time, is the cleansing of the temple.

The temple itself was only one of a kind. There is no temple now in Judaism. There have only been three temples. This was the third temple. The temple is different from a synagogue. There are many synagogues. The purposes of the two are different. But the temple was designed as a place for God to be worshipped, a place where sacrifices occurred. The temple itself occupied acres and acres of land. It's estimated, for example, that in the Court of the Gentiles five hundred thousand people could be there at one time without crowding. That's how big it was. The temple area itself was divided. The main part of it was the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles. Then there was a smaller area, the Court of the Women. Inside that was a smaller area, the Court of the Men. Inside that, there was a smaller area, the Court of the Priests, and inside that, a smaller area, a physical structure called the "temple building." The temple itself. Right outside the temple, on the altar of burnt offering, in the courtyard of the priests, the sacrifices for Israel were offered and the Levites sang their choir music of worship to God.

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Jesus, however, comes into this outer court and sees how busy it is. It's run by the religious establishment, in this case, presided by a Sadducean high priest by the name of Annas. Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century, gives us some insight into Annas when he says his sons had control over the financial merchandising that occurred within the temple area. The common people (tongue-in-cheek) called the whole temple money making the bazaars of "the sons of Annas." They were known for their racketeering and profit making.

They had two ways of making money off of worshipers, making money illegitimately. One was through the rejection of sacrifices that were brought which were homegrown. Instead the temple kept its own sacrifices which, of course, they had found to be without blemish. Naturally—like at Disneyland, with monopoly on something—prices are a bit more.

They also had another way of making money that was through the temple exchange. Each Jewish male was expected, once a year, to give a half shekel tax for the support of the temple. The half shekel had to be in a particular kind of currency, the temple currency. There were pilgrims coming from all over the world. They might have Phoenician currency, Egyptian currency, Roman currency—it didn't matter what—they had to get it exchanged for the right coins. The place to do that was the money changing tables in the temple, where there was a 15 percent mark-up charged for taking the coins of the pilgrims. So, again, that was very lucrative!

So Jesus did a very popular act. That's why no one dared touch Him. He singlehandedly did three things. He chased the things out which were being sold because it was a racketeering device. He overturned the tables of the money changers—Passover time would have been the worst time to mess up their bookkeeping records. And the third thing which He did was forbid anyone to carry anything through the temple. The temple rules had grown rather lax and the temple outer court provided a shortcut from the Mount of Olives into the city of Jerusalem.

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People that were carrying things to the market would just enter the gate on one side, slip through the outer Court of the Gentiles, and get through the temple without ever bothering to worship there. They were just taking a shortcut. This can't be! This is designed as a house of prayer for all nations.

I think to feel like Jesus must have felt we should dip, for a moment, into the Book of Acts. In Acts 8, there is a story of a eunuch who is from Ethiopia who has come to Jerusalem as a pilgrim. He's traveled 500 miles, not by jet, not by car, not by bicycle, but by a horse-drawn cart. No Howard Johnsons or Holiday Inns along the way. Anybody that goes 500 miles to worship has got to have hunger in his heart. He gets to Jerusalem, but he's not allowed to go past the area of the outer court. What does he hear in the outer court? The cattle, the bleating of sheep, the rattle of money being changed, the raucous calls of traders and bartering. Never does he hear the words of prayer nor can he even pray with all that distraction. Never is he able to hear the choirs sing as they minister in the Holy Place or outside the temple. Never does he see or is he able to present a sacrifice. That entire trip for nothing, and he's on his way home. In order to give him a relationship with God, the Lord pulls Philip out of Samaria and sends him down the road to Gaza, and there has him reach the man's hunger that had been so great. The point being, a Gentile coming into the temple area didn't have a ghost of a chance of worshipping God. And Jesus cannot let that be. This outer court was designed as a place of prayer, so He brings the money changing to a halt, all the screeching activity. Instead, He imposes an order of worship. How beautiful Jesus is as a reformer. Not only does He tear down that which was wrong, but He replaces it with that which is right, so that Matthew says that in the temple the children came to Him, the blind and the lame came to Him and were healed. He restored the temple to its proper usage.

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I think of this Scripture from the vantage point that it's not enough for me just to historically know about the temple. My life is like a temple. Within me, there is a holy place which none but I and God know and go. Within me also there are holy places where my worship is sensed with other people of God. But my life, like the greater part of the temple, is an outer court. Hours and days lived in concourse with others, in meetings and in the home, and in the work-a-day world where there is plenty of noise, plenty of people, plenty of exchange. What Jesus simply wants in our lives is for the outer court to, in some way, be a reflection of what the inner court is like. If He were to come into our lives, since the epistles call us the temple of God, I know that the area He would have to move in first and foremost would be the outer court. Out in my life, where perhaps my activity and my being caught up in busyness keeps who I'm relating to from seeing the worship that is ascending to God in the inner man.

Jesus' cleansing of the outer court is suggestive of saying that, in the totality of our lives, as the temple of God, whatever station we are at is meant to be a place where persons can be in worship to God so that, even in the outer court of our life, the nations or the Gentiles or the non-Christians can experience meeting God.

Jesus has done these courageous acts, particularly two of them, in public—the entry and the cleansing—which could have provided Him an immediate assassination attempt. But there is none tried at this particular moment.

The opposition then begins to gather around Jesus, we see this in verse 27. First, the chief priests come for the press conference. Their question is one of authority. They recognize He does have authority. They're coming to that but they're not willing to say, at this point, who the authority is from. Since they're concerned with authority, since they have charge of the temple, they ask Him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" (Mark 11:28, NIV). He responds, of

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course, with a non-answer and with a question, “I’ll tell you more if you follow the principle of ‘to him who has, more will be given.’ You have the ministry of John the Baptist. Make up your mind whether that’s from heaven or from man. If you haven’t made up your mind, then you’re in no place to make up your mind about Me. Therefore, when you make up your mind about it, I’ll tell you about Myself.” He puts them off.

Then He goes on to teach them many parables. Mark selects one parable, which is particularly incisive, the parable of the vineyard, which is also told in Isaiah 5. Isaiah used the same parable to refer to his people, eight centuries earlier. The fantastic point of this parable is that it is directed right to the question: by what authority? Because Jesus is saying in this parable that He is the beloved Son and His Father has the authority to evict the tenants who have treaded on God’s long-suffering and patience by continued rejection of the prophets and finally the well-beloved Son.

There’s a fantastic statement in this parable that indicates that when the Son comes; those tenants said to one another, “This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours” (NIV). By saying this, Jesus is saying that He doesn’t quite buy the idea that the religious leadership doesn’t know who He is. He rather buys the notion that they really do know that He is the heir, that their hostility toward God through His life is finally being exposed to the uttermost, and that they willfully, deliberately and premeditatively, in the first capital degree, put Him to death.

And in a way, isn’t Jesus stripping away so many of the arguments we hear as to why God is not accepted, the Lord is not received? That they didn’t know enough or didn’t know about Him. Or, how do you expect everybody to believe? All the while, Jesus is saying, deep down intuitively, there is an understanding of His identity; an ability to see that He is the well-beloved Son. And

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that it's not so much a matter of ignorance as it's a deliberate matter of wanting not to accept His evidence.

Having dispatched the question of the chief priests, in which they discerned the story being told is told against them, then another group comes—the Pharisees and Herodians; by putting the absolute left wing together with the right wing of society and getting them to agree on something. The Herodians' theme was "Better Red than Dead!" And the Pharisees' theme was "Better Dead than Red." But on Jesus, they could agree. So they come with the question of taxes. If flattery could get you anywhere, it would really have gotten somewhere here, but Jesus knows flattery and recognizes it. "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth" (Mark 12:14, NIV). They really don't believe that but think they'll soften Him up for their questions.

So Jesus says to them, "Why are you trying to trap me?...Bring me a denarius and let me look at it" (verse 15, NIV). As if He'd never seen a Roman coin! But what He does is focus all the attention on what He's going to do. He's creating a suspenseful atmosphere. The good Pharisees, by the way, didn't like to carry coins which had Caesar's inscription. That was not being religious. So probably they had to send a messenger to go get a coin, maybe a Roman coin that was outside the temple area. Finally, they bring it. Jesus looks at it. He knew what was there all along but He says, "Whose inscription is there?" Caesar's. Then He says, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." That pleased the Herodians. They wouldn't be able to report him as political revolutionary. "And give to God the things that are God's." What has God's inscription? Money? Never. The soul, yes. The life, yes. We were made in the image of God, not in the image

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of Caesar. What Jesus is saying is, “Give to God that which is God’s.” He’s saying to the Pharisees, “Give God your life.”

Then the Sadducees come. The Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection. (Someone has said, “That’s why they are sad, you see.”) They had no doubt many times afflicted the Pharisees with their crazy riddle about the gal who was unfortunate to have been, in order, married to seven brothers. Seven times she has been to a funeral. Never has she had a child. Of course, what is being referred to here is the Levitical law of marriage in Deuteronomy 20. So the Sadducees with tongue-in-cheek say, “At the resurrection [they don’t believe in the resurrection, but say “at the resurrection”] whose wife will she be?” (Mark 12:23, NIV).

Jesus faults them on two accounts. They don’t know the Scripture and they don’t know the power of God. The Sadducees are faulted for not knowing the Scripture. They accepted the first five books of the Old Testament. The Pentateuch was inspired, but the Prophets—they thought—were a human addition. It was the prophets who introduced the notion of resurrection, which the Pharisees picked up. Jesus, when He quotes from the Old Testament, quotes right from the Pentateuch itself, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Mark 12:26, NIV). The “I *am* the God” is used instead of “I *was* the God”. “I am” involves two things. He says, “I am,” therefore, Jesus says, “You don’t know the Scripture.” They teach immortality, an ability to go on and live. Then, He says, “You don’t know the power of God either.”

So having put them aside, then a scribe comes to Jesus, and when Jesus gets an honest question, He gets an honest answer. They have been trying to spring a trap on him. And Jesus, instead of having the trap sprung on Him, leaps out of the trap. It is sprung and it entangles those who have sprung it!

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But here, a man has a sincere question, and Jesus gives an answer. “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus wraps it up in a four-letter English word: “love.” Love God and love your fellow man. One’s obligations to life are summed up in these words. Not fear, not duty, not requirement, but love—freedom to respond. Jesus says that’s the greatest, and the man agrees. Jesus then asked the question to the audience, “David’s son, who is He? How can David call Him ‘Lord?’” Of course, the religious opposition believed that the Messiah would come, but they had not seen the divine dimensions of the Messiah, that, not only was He a descendent of David, but He was the Lord of David. So Jesus is saying both things are true. The Messiah is David’s Lord. The Messiah is divine. And the Messiah is David’s son, he’s human.

Then Jesus proceeds, in verses 38–40, to the fuller context of what is noted in Matthew 23. He says that the scribes devour widow’s houses for a prayer. Many widows couldn’t read or write and, when they wanted a prayer written, they’d hire a scribe to do it and, of course, he’d charge them a handsome fee. Or he’d monkey around and do funny things with their titles to property so they wound up giving more to things they didn’t know they were giving to because of the slick legal maneuvering of the scribes. Not all lawyers are that way. But then, they would turn around after the damaging deal was done and pray for someone they’d just inflicted with their wrongness. Jesus, of course, deals with that.

Then Mark goes on to tell us that Jesus sat down near the treasury and He watched people putting in their gift. He was probably sitting in the area near the entrance of the women’s court. Thirteen large trumpet-like boxes were there, that were designated for various kinds of gifts. If you wanted to give for the wood that kept the sacrifices burning, you could drop your money in this trumpet-like box. There were thirteen such special designations. Mark says, “He sat down.” Luke says, “He looked up.” I’m wondering why, after this whole engagement, Jesus hasn’t sat

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down and put His head in His hands over the way things were going in the temple. But He looks up. He sees people dropping stuff in. And some, with great ostentatious display, and others with great riches, dropping in much. But then, His eye catches the widow who has two small coins to give, one quarter of a cent. It was equal to one eightieth of a normal day's salary. That's how small it was. The rabbis said no one could give less than two in an offering. That's why the woman threw in both, maybe. This was required if she was going to give anything, to not split it but to give both. Jesus, looking at her, says, "You've given more than anybody. You've given out of your heart and you have given it all." He judges that gift as great. And that verse, by the way, has been known down through the years of the church's experience. To those who've had little, give their little to the Lord but have given it all. Even that contribution is immensely significant—far more significant than the person who gives much but proportionately has not given as much.

That experience of the woman's giving is, of course, an example of the Lord's giving. He had everything to give and the woman had little to give. And she gave it all.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is giving, giving in personal relationships, giving to the Lord. We sometimes too glibly sing the song "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a treasure far too small. Love so amazing so divine, demand my soul, my life, my all." Upon singing that, we should consciously recollect what the elements of our giving to the Lord consists of. I'm not simply talking about finances. That's a part, but the giving of our time, the giving of our devotion, the giving of our will, the giving of our love to the Lord. He gave it all. We're to respond.