

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN MARK'S GOSPEL – CHAPTER TWELVE

The story was now approaching its climax as they came close to Jerusalem and the dramatic events of the final week. The manner of Jesus' entry into the city was His first direct challenge to the Jewish leaders. The Lord chose to ride in on a donkey in deliberate fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 that the Messiah would arrive in this way as a humble king who came to lead by serving. The donkey was borrowed from one of Jesus' unnamed friends who had presumably at some time said that all he had was available to the Lord. The young colt had never previously submitted to any man, a reminder of what needs to happen first in all our lives. The crowd welcomed Jesus in the manner instructed for the Feast of Booths, (Lev.23:40) perhaps sensing that special occasion as somehow foreshadowing what they were witnessing. Their choice of Ps.118:26 to greet Him again confirms that they knew Who He was, the One who would be rejected by their leaders, but chosen by God. (Ps.118:22) For Jesus this day was a token of what was to follow. (11:1-11)

Our first impression of Jesus cursing the fig tree is probably puzzlement. Was He so ignorant of what He had created that He did not know when fig trees had figs on them? Was He in a bad mood that day, so lost His temper with an unlucky fig tree? Obviously not! Fruit on a tree is a common New Testament picture of God's plan for our Christian lives. (Jn.15:1-8; Gal.5:22,23) The original plan of the Creator was that trees would bear fruit all year round. (Gen.2:9; Ezek.47:12 and Rev.22:2) His desire for our lives is nothing less than this, Christ-likeness in all seasons. (11:12-14)

Jesus' actions in the temple were equally surprising. He evicted the traders from the temple courtyard not necessarily because they were dishonest although their prices may well have been inflated but because they had perverted the message of His house. The business world of the city outside had invaded the temple. The plan of God is that Christians who are constantly fruitful should instead be invading the outside world. The chief priests who profited from the trading and saw their business of exploiting people threatened were murderously furious. The ordinary people were intrigued. What would He do next? (11:15-18)

Next day Jesus and His disciples were on their way back to the city when they saw the withered fig tree. Jesus challenged them to consider the potential of faith in Him which could move mountains. Was He explaining to them how they too could cause trees which did not please them to wither? He was talking of the simple secret of constant fruitfulness as we let Him live in us all day long. Faith in Christ allows us to witness to Him 'in season and out of season' (II Tim.4:2) Such fruitfulness springs from a prayer relationship with God in which we are listening to His plan, moment by moment, so that what we ask has first been revealed to us as God's plan. The first evidence of faith that moves mountains is not world shattering events but simple forgiveness of those with whom we have been in conflict. Unless this comes first we do not even enjoy our own forgiveness from God. The mountain they would have been passing was the Mt of Olives where Jesus would need in the next few days to forgive betrayal by Judas and desertion by the rest of His disciples. He demonstrated constant fruitfulness. (11:20-26)

The first direct confrontation between Jesus and the chief priests began with a simple question about authority. To religious leaders authority over others is everything. Again the issue is the one of the nature of leadership, to control or to serve? Jesus responded to a question with another question about John the Baptist. Ordinary people had recognised the authority of heaven in the compelling teaching of John which had meant that as far as they were concerned, He did not need a licence from the chief priests. Their silence was acknowledgement that for the moment He had trapped them in their hypocrisy. (11:27-33)

My suggestions for titles for chapter 10 are as follows – verses 1-12 transformed marriages; verses 13-16 transformed families; verses 17-22 transformed ownership; verses 23-34 transformed friendships; verses 35-52 transformed ambitions. The obvious divisions of chapter 12 seem to be verses 1-12; 13-17; 18-27; 28-34; 35-37; 38-40; 41-44 but you may wish to divide it some other way, which is fine.

Section 1 - verses 1-12 Q.1 Jesus' parable here is drawn from Isaiah 5. Who according to Isaiah was the vineyard owner and what was pictured by the vine? What did He expect His vine to produce? How is the

same picture used elsewhere in the New Testament?(Jn.15) What would be the purpose of the wall, the vat and the tower? How do these things represent what God does in our lives also?

Q.2 Who in the Old Testament would have been the vinedressers? Who were they in Jesus' time? (v.12) What was their true responsibility? Who in the OT were the slaves? Give examples of how they were treated.(Gen.37; I Sam.18; Jer.20:2) And what had happened to one such slave in the New Testament? (Mk.6:25)

Q.3 Who in this parable is the 'beloved son'? How does this story help to explain the hostility of the religious leaders to Jesus? How does it also make clear why the NT shows that false teachers have the most to fear from the judgment of God? Again look up the quote in verses 10&11 from Psalm 118:22,23. Most people at the time saw the crucifixion as a defeat for Jesus. How did God see it?(Eph.2:20) What does this teach us about the meaning of seeming defeat in our lives?

Q.4 At the end of chapter 11 the chief priests asked a question and apparently did not get an answer. How is this parable a very powerful response?

Section 2 - verses 13-17 Q.5 What is surprising about the Pharisees and Herodians coming with a question together? Do you suppose they normally got on well? What answer did each group hope to hear from Jesus? Why therefore is it a trap? How are people still divided today on the issue of our relationship with secular government?

Q.6 What is so hypocritical about their question? How did Jesus recognise their hypocrisy? Why did He answer them at all? Why not refuse as He did on a previous occasion?(11:33)

Q.7 What is Jesus' answer? What does it mean in practice? In what way was it so clever? If the image of Caesar was imprinted on the coin, whose image is meant to be imprinted on our lives?(Gen.1:27) How can it happen?(Rom.12:2; 8:29)

Section 3 - verses 18-27 Q.8 What was the Sadducees question? Do you think the situation they described actually happened? Where did they get this teaching from?(Deut.25:5) What do you suppose was God's purpose in giving the Israelites this instruction? What was their real purpose in bringing up this question? What wrong teaching underlies it?

Q.9 Jesus answered the question in three ways. What were they? The first is a very strong statement about the intellectual position of all who take a liberal approach to the Bible, denying its full inspiration and accuracy. What does it mean? The second is information about heaven which Jesus implied they could have got from a believing approach to the scriptures. How could this be? The third is a direct answer to their wrong teaching. What does His answer mean? How was it such a good answer? How can we use it today with those who do not believe in life after death?

Section 4 - verses 28-34 Q.10 A scribe was someone whose job was to copy the scriptures by hand. He would presumably be a Pharisee and therefore very concerned about rules. What was his question? Why would someone very interested in rules ask this? What do you suppose has impressed him about what he has heard so far?

Q.11 What answers did Jesus give him? Look up Deut.6:4,5 and Lev.19:18. How do they sum up all the other commandments in the Old Testament? Why would this answer have such a big effect on someone brought up to think only in terms of rules and who had the job of telling others how to apply them?

Q.12 How did the scribe respond to Jesus' answer? What indication do we have as to where his heart was towards God at this point? What does it mean in practice to be 'not far from the kingdom of God'? How can we recognise this in others? How should he respond when we do see it?

Section 5 - verses 35-37 Q.13 Jesus now took over the questioning. What was the point of His question? Look up His quote from Psalm 110:1. How does David in this Psalm continue in a way that can only refer to Jesus? (Heb.5:6) Why would the religious leaders be so upset by being reminded of this scripture? What are the effects of having an inadequate view of who Christ really is?

Section 6 - verses 38-40 Q.14 What 6 charges did Jesus make against the scribes? What would be modern day equivalents of their hypocrisy? Why did He say they will receive greater condemnation, after all they were very religious weren't they?(Matt.23:13)

Section 7 - verses 41-44 Q.15 The chapter closes with a simple event and Jesus' comment. What did Jesus observe? What was His comment? Why did He see the widow's action as so important? Doesn't God's approval of us depend on how much money we put in the offering on Sunday? How does this story sum up all that has happened in this chapter? How again is it an example of 'transformed' living? What is the condition for transformation?(Rom.12:1,2)