

The King in the City: Unexpected Entrance

Mark 11:1-18

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Prior to coming here Nikki and I lived in South Korea for four years and loved it. We loved the culture. We loved the food. And we loved being English professors at a university. It was a prestigious job for a couple young kids.

And one of the things we particularly enjoyed was how Korea had a culture for dressing professionally. The whole country dresses professionally. Everyone wears a suite, and everyone carries a briefcase. And so we did too.

And I remember one day walking out of University with Nikki, both looking great. And there were these two Korean men who were looking at us with respect. Or maybe they were just checking out Nikki.

And so we walked down the big staircase from university and across the courtyard and down towards the street where we had parked and all the while these two guys were watching us.

And then we approached our car. Now your car is a very big status symbol in Korea. Nobody invites you to their house because everyone lives in an apartment, but wealthy people drive big, black cars, and everyone wants to look wealthy, so everyone drives brand new big black cars in South Korea.

Well we didn't get that memo, and honestly we weren't interested in impressing people, so we bought the oldest, smallest car in Korea – a 1990 KIA Pride – a little brown hatch back. And we paid \$200 for it.

And as we climbed into our car that afternoon those two Korean men burst out laughing. Not with malicious laughter, but simply because we appeared to them to be in both positions of respect and poverty, two things that could never go together.

- 1.) What is your name?
- 2.) Have you ever seen another culture? What differences did you notice?
- 3.) Without fighting about them, what issues in our culture are people getting excited about right now?

Today we are starting a new section in Mark. So Mark is divided into three major sections. In the first Mark answers the question "Who is this guy who speaks with authority and performs miracles?" And Peter finally gives us the answer – "You are the Christ, the Messiah." But of course Peter's both right and wrong in that moment.

In the second section Jesus heads out on His way to the cross. And three times He tells His disciples that He is going to overcome evil and injustice by being killed by it.

And today we enter the third section as Jesus enters the holy city, Jerusalem. The King is in the city. So, if you've got a Bible go ahead and open it up to Mark 11. And would you stand with me as we come before God's word. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 11:1-18]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Three stories: the triumphal entry, the curse of the fig tree and the clearing of the temple. And in these stories we see the contrasting character of Jesus, His incredible power, and His desire to reproduce His power in us.¹

So first let's look at Jesus' character as He is hailed King. So Jesus enters Jerusalem the way a king should. There are crowds of people shouting, waving branches and laying down their jackets for Him to walk on. This is the equivalent of a red-carpet entry into Hollywood, except for one thing. Jesus is driving a KIA Pride.

So kings rode horses, particularly large white ones. But Jesus shows up on a colt. And the word here refers to either a baby horse or a donkey. And since there were a lot more donkeys in Israel than horses it's likely that's what this was. And baby donkeys were the KIA Pride of the first century.

I mean no adult with a real job would be caught dead riding a baby donkey. It's like a 55cc moped – do you want one? But here we see Jesus embracing both kingly majesty and humility. Jesus is both. This is His character.

It's like when John is brought up to the throne room of heaven in Revelation 5. He's standing before the throne and the question is asked "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll." Who is worthy to bring evil and injustice to its ultimate end? And nobody's worthy. And then, as John is standing there devastated, a mighty angel approaches him and says "Look the Lion of Judah has triumphed. He can open the scroll." And John looks for the Lion and we read:

Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered (Revelation 5:6a)

Now lions and lambs are not the same. They don't give the same message. Lions excel at strength and majesty. And lambs excel at meekness. Lions are ferocious predators and lambs are sacrificed for human clothing and go well with mint jelly. Nobody would ever confuse a lion and a lamb. And yet Jesus is both.

In Jesus there is this combination of attributes that naturally never occur together. He's meekness and majesty; authority and humility; sovereignty and submission; aggression and mercy. He's a towering cedar and a fragrant flower. He's things no one would tie together. This is who Jesus is. This is His character.

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-final-temple-6047/> (Accessed September 29, 2021)

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Now jump forward to verse 15 and look at the power of Jesus. The power of Jesus is how His character works itself out. And what Jesus does is head straight into the temple and starts flipping tables.

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So at the center of the temple was the Holy of Holies. It was where God's presence resided. And there was a huge purple sheet hanging in front of it that protected humanity from God's consuming presence. And out from here you had the Holy Place where the priests would go. And then out from there you had the inner courtyard where all Jews could worship. And outside this was a huge outer courtyard called the court of the gentiles or the court of the nations. And anyone could get in here, and this is where all the temple business occurred.

Now what temple business? Well, if you traveled to Jerusalem to make a sacrifice you wouldn't bring a lamb with you. They don't fit nicely in saddle bags or gloveboxes. So you buy one there.

And it was Passover season as Jesus is entering the temple. And that meant, according to a first century historian named Josephus, over 2.5 million people would be in and out of the temple that week. And to accommodate them, over 250,000 lambs would be bought, sold and sacrificed.² And to afford this there would be hundreds of foreign money changers working. And all this would have been going on in the outer courtyard of the temple as Jesus entered.

Now I know a thing or two about noise – I've got four kids gifted with large lungs. But to imagine the intensity here you need to spin the dials to 11. Imagine being in Rogers Arena for the Stanley Cup playoffs – it would be electric. And then add a New York stock exchange – all the passion of financial wins and losses. And then, into the middle of it all just start killing sheep. It would be crazy. And this is where gentiles prayed.

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So I wonder, have you ever had a prayer meeting at a hockey game? Actually the evidence is in, Canucks fans don't do this nearly enough. But prayer would not be easy and Jesus wasn't impressed. And so His character leads Him to an act of power and aggression. He starts flipping tables. And when security arrives He tells them, verse 17:

My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17)

Now security hadn't heard this one before so they reported it to the priests. And the priests were so shocked that verse 18 tells us they started looking for a way to kill Him. Jesus dies because of this act.

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Now why? Why was it shocking to religious people that Jesus wanted a better space for gentiles to pray? Why was this so scandalous?

² <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/main-articles/second-temple> (Accessed October 1, 2021)

Well predominantly it's because religious people believed the Messiah would come to cleanse the temple, but they thought that meant He would kick the foreigners out. But Jesus makes space for them - He uses His power to pursue justice for the marginalized.

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Alright, jump forward again, this time to today. Right now there are two major conversations going on in Canada. And one of these topics is getting a fair bit of attention in churches, and the other is getting more attention in the media.

So objectively, from a global perspective, Canada is one of the best places in the world to live. Nobody's begging to emigrate to Afghanistan. And one of the best things about Canada is freedom.

And so there is consternation right now surrounding the response to the pandemic and specifically the government stipulating what must be put on our faces and into our bodies. And people don't like being told they can't go certain places because they don't have a passport. And the people at the forefront of the push back to this encroachment on our freedoms are primarily conservatives and Christians.

Now wherever you come down on this debate it is an important topic. The fact is if freedom isn't valued it goes away. And really the vast majority of the world has no choice about things like this. And so there isn't an easy answer. On one hand people are dying from a very serious virus and on the other hand many people die in countries without freedom. So what do you do? What should Christians do?

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That's one conversation that is going on, and there is a second. The second conversation surrounds the fact that within Canada there are people groups that are less equal than others. Life is harder here for some. And in fact there are nations among us who have had hundreds or thousands of their children die while under the supervision of our government and our churches.

And this is a conversation that is huge in the liberal, secular media right now, and pretty quiet in church. So one conversation about rights and one about injustice.

Now see the parallel: the scandal of the first century was that Jesus, the Messiah, was more concerned about justice for the marginalized than with the issues that were pressing to the religious community. And this ticked religious people off so bad they wanted to kill God.

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Now hear me. I'm not saying both topics aren't important, and neither have easy answers, but friends, as Jesus followers we need to make sure our character aligns with His, and we use our power to do what He does. So dream friends, about how we can make space in Canada for the marginalized to come to God. That was Jesus' passion.

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Now, to understand why, and to see how this all fits together with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the temple we need to go back to the beginning.

So in the beginning God made a sanctuary where people could be in community with each other and our Maker – a garden. This is what He wanted for us.

And God was in the Garden. And this meant that there could be no death or decay or corruption there. Life was perfect and abundant and peace reigned supreme.

But when people decided to center our lives on something other than God – when we let other things give us our ultimate meaning and identity, we lost that sanctuary. And Genesis 3 tells us that when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden:

The LORD God... placed a flaming sword that flashed back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24)

What's this all about? Well, when we center our lives on other things – on power, money, sex, popularity, ethnicity, gender, whatever – when any of these things form our identity there are horrible consequences.

And we see this all over Canada right now. Our country world is full of angry people trampling each other because our identities and rights have been and are being infringed upon.

And here's why, deep within all of us is an innate desire for justice. We want things to be made right. And we aren't talking about vindictiveness or bitterness here. If you've been wronged deeply everyone recognizes that for justice to reign some kind of cost has to be paid. You can't just say "I'm sorry."

And that's why the sword is at the edge of the Garden flashing back and forth. No one can go back into the presence of God unless you pay. And of course no one can pay. And that's the problem Canada is wrestling with right now. How can we bring peace to these big debates? There isn't an easy answer. But if we are going to follow Jesus we need to pursue these answers no matter the cost.

And this was the Eden problem – people couldn't get back to the presence of God. And the temple was established to give the answer. But it was only a partial answer.

You see nobody except the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and this only happened once a year. And then only when accompanied by the blood of a sacrifice. That was the only way past the sword.

And as such it was only a partial fix. It was just the high priest who got to come to God. And so the question still remained, how are we going to get back to the Garden? And so God began speaking through the prophets:

Rejoice, O people of Zion!...

Look, your king is coming to you.

He is righteous and victorious,
yet He is humble, riding on a donkey...

On that day the LORD their God will rescue His people, (Zechariah 9:9;16)

And then a little later the same prophet says:

In fact, every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD of Heaven's Armies. (Zechariah 14:21)

Now what do cooking pots have to do with God's rescue? Here it is: In the Holy of Holies there were some special pots that were sacred – they were the only ones used to bring sacrifices to God. But the prophet says a time is coming when every pot will be sacred; everyone will be able to approach God. And this will mark a return to the Garden.

And this is what Jesus uses His power to accomplish. He takes the sword so we can enter the garden.

Or it's as Aslan tells the children in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe:

"When a willing victim who has committed no treachery, is killed in a traitor's stead, the stone table will crack, and even death itself would turn backwards."

That's the power of Jesus. His death brings an end to injustice and a return to the way life was created to be. And when we trust Him we get to live in this now, and one day He will fill this whole place with His power and renew everything.

So we have seen the character of Jesus – He combines kingship and humility. And we've seen the power of Jesus, He takes the sword so we can enter the garden. But there is one more thing in this passage, and that is the strange thing Jesus does between the triumphal entry and the temple cleansing – He curses a fig tree. What?!

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Wow Jesus!?! You are obviously a bit high strung. All the fig tree activists bemoan the injustice. But there's a point here. This fig tree is on the hill overlooking the temple. So Jesus is not down on figs, He is speaking to the religious world. And He sees lots of busyness but no connection with God. Nobody is praying. Nobody is caring about the marginalized. And Jesus curses that. Jesus hates religion that doesn't bring people to God. And He wants something different for us. In fact He died to make us into something different.

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So He is saying, if through my taking the sword, you have entered the Garden of God's presence, then your life is now a temple of the Holy Spirit. Every pot is sacred, and that means I want something in you and from you. I want My power to change you and to change what you love. And if you will not bear this fruit you will have no part with Me.. That's the fig tree.

So brothers and sisters, is your character changing to be more like Jesus' unique character? He wasn't nice. There were combinations of traits in Him that you never normally see in a person. He was powerful and humble; He was brilliant and sensitive; He was confident and submissive. He was the King on a donkey. And, by His Spirit, He wants to bring His character to life in us. Jesus wants to change you to be like Him.

And this isn't just a personality thing. You see temperamentally you have extroverts and introverts. There are thinkers and feelers. There are decisive people and thoughtful people. And that's okay. But the kind of character Jesus produces in a person happens because of the gospel.

You see every other religion says you get to God by your moral struggle. Do these things and you will live. Attain to the standard and be saved. But if that is true then these traits; boldness and humility, majesty and meekness, power and submission will never be combined. And here is why:

If you are saved by your works here is what happens. If you are nailing it at life and living up to the standard, you will be confident and feel good about yourself. But you will also be self-righteousness. You will look down on those who aren't nailing it. And you will say "Suck it up, come back when you get your act together like me." You will be bold and kingly, but not humble.

On the other hand if you are failing to live like you know you should you will be depressed and anxious. Oh you will be humble and understanding of those around you who aren't perfect, but you won't be confident. You won't be bursting with affirmation and joy. If either of these positions are true in your life it's because you're living out a works salvation.

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But here's the gospel: if you are saved because of what Jesus has done in spite of your flaws; if your relationship with God is dependent not on your past but Jesus past; not your performance but Jesus' performance; not your life but Jesus life, then you will be simultaneously confident because you are loved and delighted in by God and yet absolutely humble and accepting of those around you.

The gospel will convince you that you are in fact so bad that the God of the universe had to die for you. And at the same time you are so valuable that He delighted to do it.

It is in coming face to face with the gospel that Jesus' character develops in us. And Jesus' character is powerful. Being nice isn't powerful. But looking like Jesus transforms the world we live in by radically confronting evil and injustice. And Jesus wants to birth this power in His church because we are His light in our world.

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Brothers and sisters, we worship the Lion who is a Lamb, He is the King on a KIA. And He calls us to look like Him and love like Him. And if we are willing He will fill us with His Spirit to make this a reality and our city and our nation will be transformed. Do you see Jesus?