

Warnings Concerning God's Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we thank you for your word. We pray today that as we hear it, you might be at work among us. Father, please help me to speak clearly, or speak clearly from your word.

Please help us to listen. Please help us to be obedient. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Friends, I wonder if you've got this piece of paper.

That's one set of readings. You can just set that aside just for a moment, because we're going to come back to it. In your Bibles, I wonder if you could open them at two places. First, open them at Jeremiah chapter 7, the page number of which I've forgotten, but someone can yell it out to me.

617. Just put one finger in 617 and Jeremiah chapter 7, and another one in Malachi chapter 3, which is on page 778.

Okay? So just keep your eye on those, because we're going to get to them in the next two or three minutes. Okay.

[1 : 0 7] Friends, the passage we are going to look at today is a passage about the temple in the time of the New Testament. However, if you really want to understand the passage we're looking at today, you have to start well, well back in the Bible.

In fact, you have to start at the very beginning of the Bible. You see, when you really think about it, the temple, or a temple, is a place where God and humans can meet.

That's what temples are about. It is a place where God is seen to be present among His people and for His people. Now, when you think about it, that's what Genesis 1 and 2 describes, isn't it?

God creates the world. He creates a place where He and humans can be together. However, humans break fellowship with God and God acts to distance Himself from them by throwing them out of the garden, out of His presence.

And then later on, when God redeems His people, that is, brings them back, He gives them a temple, a meeting place, a tabernacle. The tabernacle in the Old Testament was a sort of portable temple.

[2 : 0 8] You could just put it on your shoulders and off you go, take it with you. The ark and the tabernacle together were a sort of non-verbal indication from God that He was with His people.

He lived among His people. He was with them. He was at the centre of their existence. And because of this, the tabernacle came to be a place where people came to pray.

Moses did it, and many others did it as well. They came to bring their fears and their doubts. They came to hear God's voice and to request that God did something.

So there are two things about the tabernacle. It was a non-verbal indication of God's presence with His people. It was a place where they could seek Him in prayer. The tabernacle, therefore, represented security, didn't it?

It was a place of security. Now, the very next thing that happens in the history of temples comes during the time of King Solomon. In King Solomon's time, God endorses the building of a permanent structure.

[3 : 09] And when it was built, God indicated that this building was to continue to perform the same function as the tabernacle before it. God even came in a cloud and non-verbally indicated again that He'd dwell in His people while ever the temple remained.

Solomon asked God that He might also continue to do what He'd been doing, that is, to hear all prayers offered in this place or even toward this temple.

In other words, the function of the physical temple was exactly the same as the tabernacle before it. It gave security and safety to the people of God. It was a place where they could come and talk to their God.

And it was a place where perhaps He could even communicate to them. So it came about that the people of God came to believe that the temple existed, that while the temple existed, God would be for them.

God would guard them. God would keep them. God would watch over them. And when you think about it, there's a risk with all of that, isn't there? What is the risk? Well, the risk is that with such sort of thinking, you can begin to think that while you've got the temple, then you have God.

[4 : 20] You might even think that you have God and that He's for you no matter what you do. And that is exactly what happened with Israel and the temple. And Jeremiah the prophet spoke to this.

So here's your first reading. So pick up your Bibles again and have a look at Jeremiah 7. What happened in Jeremiah, in the book of Jeremiah, is that people began to say, Oh, this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

Despite the fact that their lives were corrupt. In other words, they thought, we've got the temple, it doesn't matter what we do, it'll all be okay. God is for us. So what do you reckon God might do in that situation?

Because He did do it. He took their temple from them. And then in His compassion, He gave them back the temple. But He warned them that they could not do what they'd done before.

And that brings us to Malachi. So have a look at Malachi. In Malachi, He warned them, have a look at Malachi chapter 3, that He would visit His temple again.

[5 : 25] Now I want you to look at this verse very carefully. Have a look. Malachi chapter 3. See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple.

The messenger of the covenant of whom you delight. Indeed, He's coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming? And stand when He appears? For He's like a refiner's fire, like full of soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. And He'll purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offerings of Judah and of Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old, as in the former years.

You see, God's going to come. He's going to visit His temple. And when He does, He's going to refine His people. Now, with that in mind, friends, we can have a look at Mark chapter 11.

So turn now on your outlines here to Mark chapter 11. And I'd love to spend some time showing you the intricacies of how this wonderful passage is structured. Just to tell you briefly, there are two major sections.

[6 : 34] The first one runs from chapter 11, verse 1, to chapter 12, verse 12. The parable of the tenants in chapter 12, 1 to 11, binds the preceding section to the succeeding section.

That stretches all the way to chapter 3, verse 2. 13, verse 2. It binds them together. Let me tell you a bit more of the background of this passage. From chapter 4 through to chapter 8, Jesus is mainly based in Galilee, up to the north of Jerusalem.

In chapter 9, He begins to travel. And as He travels, He tries to get through to His disciples, who in Mark's Gospel are a bit thick to tell the truth, that there are things waiting for Him when He finally gets to Jerusalem.

Journey's end. The disciples, they don't seem to grasp fully how things are. But now in chapter 11, He finally reaches His destination, Jerusalem. We know that this is where the conflict that has been growing through since chapter 3 will escalate.

So with all of that in mind, let's now go into the text and have a look at it. Let's have a look at this first section and see if we can work out what God is saying to us through it. Look at chapter 11, verses 1 to 11.

[7 : 51] When you look at it, the story is straightforward enough and well known. Jesus approaches Jerusalem. He tells His disciples to prepare for His coming to Jerusalem. And then He goes into Jerusalem, sitting on a cot.

And then the people shout out, Hosanna, which means save! And they go ahead of Him, quoting from Psalm 118 in reference to Him. Then Jesus does an inspection of the temple.

He looks around at everything that is there. Then He goes on to Bethany. Now, I want to show you just a little bit behind the scenes. Let me tell you some Old Testament scriptures which I think form the background to this passage.

And if you know them, as many of the people reading and hearing this story would have, you would see them as well. The first passage comes from Genesis. In Genesis chapter 49, Jacob gives a blessing to his son Judah.

And he says to Judah, the scepter, that is the rule, will never depart from you until it comes to whom it belongs. And he will tether his donkey to a vine.

[8 : 59] His cot to a choicest branch. That's scripture number one. You see, Mark is repeatedly using the language of donkeys and colts and tying and untying to help us make the link with Genesis chapter 48 or 49.

Clearly, he wants us to understand that Jesus is the ruler of Israel. Coming to his people. Scripture number two comes from the book of Zechariah. In Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9, The prophet urges the people of Jerusalem to rejoice.

And he urges them to rejoice because he says, Your king's coming. And he's coming in righteousness and having salvation. And what's more than that? He's going to come, humble, and ride on a donkey, a colt.

The foal of the donkey. The illusions are clear. The implications are clear. By untying this donkey that has been tied, by riding it into Jerusalem, Jesus is making an announcement.

He is Jerusalem. He is Jerusalem's long-awaited king. He is coming to his city in fulfillment of scripture. That's scripture number two.

[10 : 07] Scripture number three is the one that occurs in verses 9 and 10. It is taken from Psalm 119. It's slightly adapted, but the picture is clear.

A Davidic king, identified as the son of David, coming to the city of David to receive the kingdom of David.

That's scripture number three. I suspect there's a fourth, maybe even a fifth scripture that sits under the surface. So let's see if we can have a look at them. Look at verse three. Look at how Jesus identifies himself.

He says, When his disciples are questioned about this donkey and so on, they say, the Lord needs it. It is the Lord, therefore, who is coming.

And as we can see in verse 11, his first port of call is the temple. So perhaps you can guess which scripture is scripture number four. We've had it already. Think about it.

[11 : 05] Malachi chapter three, verses one and two. It's already been quoted by Mark in chapter one of Mark's gospel. And I suspect it sits below the surface here. And as Jesus enters the temple precincts and looks around, he is coming as not only the king, but the Lord.

The Lord has come to his temple. He does a kingly and a lordly inspection. I can imagine him, because the text says he just looks around. So there he is walking into his domain, looking, seeing what is there, taking it all in, observing.

But there may be one more echo of scripture, a fifth text. You see, later in this very passage, Jesus will quote Jeremiah seven. Do you know what Jeremiah says? Jeremiah seven says that the Lord has been watching.

Chapter seven, verse 11. And here the Lord does the same. Enters the temple, looks around, watches. And with Malachi and all these other scriptures in our brain, we can't help wondering, can we?

Who will be able to endure the day of his coming? And who will be left standing at his appearing? But we won't know till tomorrow.

[12 : 24] Having conducted a kingly and divine inspection, he exits the city, goes off to Bethany for the night, and we wait for the dawn to come, and day two. Day two, the events of this day are clear as well.

Jesus again journeys towards Jerusalem, and as he goes, he's a bit hungry. I don't know, perhaps he missed breakfast or whatever. But he spots a big tree, and he curses it for not bearing fruit.

And then he visits the temple, and he tells off the religious authorities for their misuse of the temple. It, he says, is meant to be a place of prayer, but they've made it into a place of business, in a robber's den. Now, I want to focus in on what happens from verses 15 to 19.

And by the way, if you've got some concerns about the fig tree, then be assured, we're coming back to it in a moment. And I don't think it's just that Jesus has had a bad day, or got out of the wrong side of the bed, or whatever.

Okay? After all, he hasn't finished with that fig tree. Let's wait. Let's hold off to see what happens with it. Anyway, Jesus had already returned from his royal inspection.

[13 : 27] Now he visits again. This time, he doesn't just look around. He acts, and he acts firmly and strongly, quoting scripture in support.

Now, in order to understand what he's doing here, we need to understand the scripture that he uses. The first scripture is from Isaiah 56, verse 7. The temple had always been known as a place of prayer from its very inception, as tabernacle.

However, only Isaiah had called it a place of prayer for the nations. So at least part of what Jesus is doing here is saying, I want to protect the rights and privileges of the nations, that is the Gentiles.

And you see, what was happening is, business was being conducted in the place where Gentiles normally went, and the only part of the temple they had access to. Jesus then goes on to quote Jeremiah 7, a passage we've already looked at.

And in Jeremiah 7, God challenges a false view of temple. A false view of temple is one which thinks that you can commit crimes outside the temple, and then retreat into the temple, and think that you can be safe and secure.

[14 : 43] It's sort of like marauders, who go around marauding around the countryside, they've got their own little cave, or a little hideout, and they retreat to the hideout, and then look at their money, and think, oh, we're safe and secure here.

What's happening is, the spotlight is falling on the religious authorities. We already know from chapter 3, verse 6, that they have plotted the destruction of Jesus. In verse 18 of this very chapter, we'll be told that they'll do it again.

Later in chapter 12, Jesus will tell us that they're people who devour widows' houses. And here they are, engaging in business in a part of the temple precincts that was set apart for use by Gentiles who hadn't yet become full proselytes to Judaism.

They are doing this in contravention of Isaiah 56. Can you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying, your corruption reeks from every part of your existence, and the temple has become for you a robber's den where you retreat, and where you just soak up what you've got from elsewhere.

And what Jesus is saying is, you should not think that the temple is going to keep you safe. Can you hear what's being said? The Lord and King has visited His temple. He's found it full of bandits.

[15 : 56] And robbers who think themselves safe from the hand of God. And as Jeremiah makes clear, God's resolution is to take away this safe place so they cannot hide in it any longer.

And He did it when the temple, He did it, you see, when the temple became corrupt in Shiloh. He did it in Jerusalem, to Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day. And a clear indication from Jesus is that He's going to do it in this day as well.

And with that ominous threat, we move to day three. And immediately we're confronted with that fig tree again. And it was created to bear fruit, but it hadn't.

As a result, it came under a curse. And you need to understand, prophets often did this sort of thing in the Old Testament, and Jesus still stands within the Old Testament, as it were. And what He's doing is a prophetic sign.

So it's not to say He's got something in for the fig tree. He wants to demonstrate something. And what He did before and what happens after shows what it is really about.

[16 : 59] You see, the fig tree is an image of what Jesus is saying about the temple. And the message is clear. The temple is failing to be used in a proper fashion.

And hence, the temple will suffer the same fate as the fig tree. It will be destroyed by God. And with that noted by Mark, we move to verse 22.

Jesus is going to give some teaching on prayer, on faith. Now friends, I think as we read this passage, our temptation is to say, we've got a bit of a breather here. This is a separate little section about prayer and faith. But it's not.

Well, it is. But it's integral to everything else that has come before and it will go after. Let me explain what I think this section is about. I want you to think about the context. Jesus has just built the end of the temple.

Now what does the end of a temple mean? Well, it means the end of sacrifices and the end of a place of prayer. Jesus, therefore, urges his disciples to join him.

[18 : 03] He urges them to have faith in God as he does and he urges them to have a particular focus for their prayer. It is to be focused on God's purposes and we know what they are because the text has just told us what they are.

They are the end of this corrupted temple which rests on a particular mount, on Mount Zion and so they are to pray that this mountain might be taken up and thrown into the sea.

They are to prayerfully line up with God in his purposes and as Jesus has felt them out confident that what seems to be overwhelmingly impossible for humans is possible for God and this prayer will be answered not because of the willpower of the person praying but because the faith is being exercised in a true God and his true purposes.

However, think about it for a moment. If the temple and its authorities are judged, if the temple does become like the fig tree, if it is cast into the sea, then there is an associated problem, isn't there?

What is it? Well, there is a problem of sin and forgiveness, isn't there? Because that is really what temples were for as well. And in chapter 2 we have already heard though that Jesus can forgive sins without temples.

[19 : 27] Do you remember the blind man let down through the roof and Jesus pronounces his sins forgiven? So temples really are unnecessary for the forgiveness of sins. The prospect is therefore enormous.

You see, in Jesus forgiveness of sins is available directly. It will be achieved through his death but it is available directly and it will be available for all, even Gentiles.

But more than that, forgiveness of his people will be matched by their forgiveness of each other as this text says. Forgiveness will be their distinguishing mark. I wonder if I could just stop for a moment and just push this home to us a little.

What Jesus envisages in these verses is the replacement of the temple and it will no longer be a place where one person rips off another person, where one group of people rip off another group of people.

No, it will be a place marked by confidence in God, his goodness, his purposes, faith in him, a place marked by forgiveness, our forgiveness of others and the forgiveness offered to us in Christ.

[20 : 33] It will therefore be a place of reconciliation and peace. These friends are the marks of true Christian community. They are confidence, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, no self-interested robbers, no ripping off of each other, no antagonism toward each other, no exclusion of others, acceptance of all, forgiveness of all.

These are the marks of Christian community, the marks of us as we gather here together. This is what we are to be, not like what was going on in that temple.

Now let's move to verses 27 to 33. Remember I said in Mark 3, 6, the Pharisees and the Herodians begin plotting as to how they are going to kill Jesus. Now in verse 18, the chief priests and teachers of the law look for a way to kill him.

In verse 27, it's the latter group along with the elders who come to Jesus and raise some questions about his authority. And Jesus delightfully dodges their question and says, oh, I'll pose one back to you.

And he says, look, I'll discuss authority and my authority with you if you discuss John the Baptist's authority with me. The reason they can't, though, is because of their vested interest because people will form certain views about them according to how they answer.

[21 : 52] They don't want that. In doing so, they demonstrate something about their own authority in which they're not willing to confess. Their authority is dependent upon humans. So Jesus has not answered their question directly, but he has answered it indirectly.

Or he will answer it indirectly, and he does so with a parable. Look at chapter 12, verses 1 to 12. Parable is clear. You've got a vineyard.

It's owned by a man. The man rents out a vineyard. He then sends some servants to collect the produce of the vineyard because he expects it to yield fruit. The servants are beaten up.

Eventually, he sends his son to the vineyard owners. The tenants kill his son also. Jesus then poses some questions to those religious authorities who came to ask him questions about his own authority.

Again, they're afraid of the people and they leave. Let me see if I can show you what's going on here. You see, this parable is a mirror image of what we've just seen happening in the previous chapters.

[22 : 58] Let me show you. I've got a diagram that hopefully will appear. Sorry, I was going to... There it is. Have a look at this diagram. It represents this parable.

We have a vineyard, we have an owner, we have some tenants, we have some murderous plans, and we have a son. The owner gets no produce or fruit from his vineyard and the son is killed.

That's the result of the whole thing. Now, I want you to put the mirror image beside it. So, that's the next slide. I want you to see what's there. In the preceding chapter, we had a temple, we had God, we had the religious authorities, we had some murderous plans, and we had the son of God, Jesus.

The parable of the fig tree indicates what Jesus finds, no fruit. So, you tell me, friends, when you look at that mirror image, where is this going to end?

It's clear, isn't it? It's going to end in the death of the son, Jesus. No wonder they perceived that this parable had been told against them. But there's one question left from this parable, and that question is, who are the others in verse 9 that will be given this vineyard?

[24 : 13] My suggestion is it's the new people of God. In other words, it's the disciples and those who will join them. In other words, it's us, Christians. We are those who have been given the vineyard.

And might I suggest, while this is an awesome and great privilege, it also comes with a great responsibility. And you know what? I'm rather overawed by this as I thought about it yesterday.

Parts of the New Testament indicate that the Lord keeps just as rigorous an eye on us. For example, I want you to think about the letters to the churches in the book of Revelation.

What do they tell you? They tell you that the Lord of the church pays regular visits to his vineyard, to his churches, and he knows everything that's going on in them.

And he knows everything that is going on here in ours. And it's clear that judgment can be promised and will be forthcoming. That's an awesome thing, isn't it?

[25 : 16] That our Lord is here not just to answer our prayers, but he walks around among us, knowing the good and the bad things, and even stands ready to judge the bad things that he sees.

That is an awesome thing to have the Lord visiting, because he comes not only to answer our prayers, but to judge our shortcomings as well.

Now, at this point, I've got to take a really quick skim through chapter 12 and the first few verses of chapter 13. So stick with me. Unfortunately, David's done most of the work for me in his kids talk, but let's see how we go.

Most of this chapter is taken up with questions from religious authorities and dialogues with Jesus. However, I think I can highlight just three things. Let me show them to you.

I want you to look at the first question posed by the Pharisees and the Herodians, chapter 13, sorry, chapter 12. It is a question about taxes, and to whom those taxes are due.

[26 : 19] And Jesus responds by saying, you should give to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, and to God that which belongs to God.

Now, I don't have one with me, I wish I did, but a Roman coin bears the inscription of who? Caesar. Therefore, it is part of his property.

However, the question is, what is it that belongs to God? We know that coin belongs to Caesar. What is it that belongs to God? Well, this is the second thing I want to say. Genesis 1 says that we bear the image of God.

We are therefore his. That is what belongs to him. But this passage spells out a bit more about what it means. Look down at verses 28 to 33. Jesus is confronted by a scribe.

He's asked which commandment is the most important, and he answers that the most important one is about loving God with, remember, all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength.

[27 : 27] But what would that look like in practice if you loved God with all of that, with all your being? Well, the second commandment gives a little bit of an indication, I think. It would mean loving your neighbour as yourself.

However, within the passage, there is one solid example of what it looks like in practice, and it's toward the end. That's the third thing I want to say.

Look at the story told about this widow. She is contributing to the temple collection. And as our children pointed out, she gives everything, all that she has to live on.

love. This is her living, tangible, practical expression of loving her God with all her heart, soul, mind and strength.

It was not her money that belonged to God. Sorry, it was not that her money belonged to God, and that she was just giving him back what she owed him. No, it was that she belonged to God, not to Caesar.

[28 : 37] And as she dropped the coins in the slot, she showed that she bore God's stamp. She was in his image.

She belonged to him. She had already given herself to God, and the coins in the collection box were merely a demonstration of who it was that she belonged to.

Friends, there's so much more that could be said in these passages. There is such rich treasure here, it tormented me to cut out so much of it. We could spend hours and hours exploring it.

However, at its core, this passage has exposed what is the best and the worst of people who identify themselves as related to God.

At one end, there are the religious authorities who live for themselves and for the praise of people. They live at the beck and call of their own ambitions and their own self-interests.

[29 : 40] And on their way to fulfil these calls, they tarnish nearly everything they touch. Temples are turned into robber's dens, and the pursuit of God is turned into a plan to kill God's own son.

And they demonstrate that actually, they are not related to God at all. There is nothing in common between them and God except some external edifices and some religious practices.

At the other end of the spectrum is the son of God, who openly heads toward Jerusalem and embraces his own death for the sake of his father and his people.

Now, somewhere between these two extremes, but definitely toward the end that the Lord Jesus is on, and close to his kingdom is an honest biblical scribe.

Even closer is this widow and her might. heart. For the mind is actually a representation of a heart entranced and captivated by God.

[30 : 52] A love of the heart, soul, mind and strength. A love of God with all her being. And a love that flows out into a life filled with willing sacrifice and service.

Friends, I wonder where you are in the spectrum. I wonder where your heart lies. To whom do you belong?

Whose mark do you bear? And how does it show itself in the life that you live? Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for your son.

Thank you for his way of just cutting through everything in order to expose just where things are, what is wrong and what is right. Thank you for the way that you have exposed us through him and his word today.

Amen. Please help us, Father, to love you with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. To love our neighbour as ourselves.

[32 : 17] Please help us to bear your image proudly and gladly and to live as your people. For, Father, we acknowledge today that you own us and we would serve you and serve your son.

And we pray this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.