

6NT504 Greek Exegesis

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Final Project:

Exegesis and Presentation of Mark 11:12-25

Brian M. Sandifer

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1 Translation of Mark 11:12-25

And the next day when they were going out from Bethany he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree from afar having leaves he went *to see*¹ if therefore he might find any *figs* in it. But coming to it he found nothing except leaves, for the season was not for figs. And he answered and spoke to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you any longer.” And his disciples heard.

And he went into Jerusalem. And after going into the temple he began to cast out those who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those selling doves, and he was not permitting that anyone should carry goods through the temple. And he was teaching and saying to them, “Has it not been written that my house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a hideout of robbers!” And the chief priests and the scribes heard and were seeking how they might destroy him, for they were afraid of him, for all the crowd were astonished because of his teaching. And when it became late, they went outside the city.

And while they were going past in the morning they saw the fig tree had dried up from its root. And after Peter remembered he said to him, “Rabbi, behold the fig tree that you cursed has dried up.” And answering Jesus said to them, “Have faith in God. Truly I say to you that whoever should say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that which he says is, it will be to him. On account of this I say to you, all that you pray and ask for, have faith that you have received, and it will be to you. And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have something against someone, in order that also your Father who is in heaven will forgive you your trespasses.”

¹ Words in italics do not appear in the Greek text but are added to smooth out translation into idiomatic English.

2 Major Manuscript Witnesses to Mark 11:26

Reading:	Εἰ δὲ ὑμεῖς οὐκ ἀφίετε, οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.			
	Byzantine	Alexandrian	Western	Others
Uncials	A (5)	C (5)		Θ (9)
Minuscules		33 (9)		f ¹ f ¹³ 88
Versions		bo ^{pt}		

Reading:	—			
	Byzantine	Alexandrian	Western	Others
Uncials		Ⲡ (4) B (4) L (8) Δ (9)		W (4,5) Ψ (9,10)
Minuscules	700 (11)	892 (9)		565 (9)
Versions		sa bo ^{pt}	sy ^s	

I. Evaluation of External Evidence

- a. Date and Character. The reading in the text (the omission of v. 26) has strong early attestation from three uncials dating from the fifth century and earlier, two of which are fourth century Alexandrian text types. There are three other uncials supporting the reading in the text which date later (eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries). Additionally, three significant minuscules from the ninth through eleventh century period and three important versions (two from the Alexandrian text type, although one only partially) support the omission. The textual evidence for the inclusion of v. 26 also contains a few significant MSS. There are two uncials dating from the fifth century, one from the

Alexandrian but the other from the less reliable Byzantine text type. The only other uncial evidence for the addition of v. 26 dates from the ninth century. Significant minuscules include one ninth century Alexandrian MS, MSS from families 1 and 13, and the Majority Text. There is also partial attestation in an Alexandrian text type version (split between inclusion and omission of v. 26).

- b. Genealogical Solidarity. There is not sufficient textual evidence to support any genealogical solidarity for the MSS that include v. 26. However, it is conceivable that the two significant MSS from the Alexandrian text type which omit v. 26 and both date from the fourth century may have been copied from a common source. Thus the date of the reading which omits v. 26 may be pushed back for non-extant Alexandrian MSS perhaps to the third or even second century (which is very close to the date of the original).
- c. Geographical Distribution. There does appear to be some geographic distribution for both the inclusion and omission of v. 26. Regarding the inclusion of the verse, there is textual evidence from the fifth century in both the Alexandrian and Byzantine text types. Distribution extends by the ninth century when one Alexandrian minuscule, one “Other” text type uncial, and the Majority Text share the variant reading of the inclusion. Regarding the omission of v. 26, there is early geographic distribution between two fourth century Alexandrian uncials and one “Other” text type uncial dating from the fourth and fifth century. By the tenth century there are multiple extant MSS in the Alexandrian and “Other” text types, and by the eleventh century the reading with the omission had spread to the Byzantine text type. By way of the versions, the omission of v. 26 is found in Alexandrian and Western MSS.

- d. Summary of External Evidence. The reading with the omission boasts the earliest MS evidence which are from the most reliable Alexandrian text type, genealogical solidarity that may arguably push back the reading to within a century or two after the original writing, and representation in all three text types (including the “Other” category type). Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that some texts which include v. 26 are early (fifth century) and occur in both the Byzantine and most reliable Alexandrian text types. On the whole, it seems that the earliest and best textual attestation supports the omission of Mark 11:26.

II. Evaluation of Internal Evidence

a. Transcriptional Probability

- i. Intentional Errors. There does appear to be a reason that a scribe would intentionally add the words of v. 26 to the end of the passage in v. 25. It is conceivable that a scribe familiar with Matthew’s rendition of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount would recognize that Mark 11:25 is a quotation (or at least a strong restatement) of Matt. 6:14. Matthew 6:15 completes the thought of v. 6:14, but if this thought were not included in Mark after 11:25, a scribe could have added it to harmonize Mark with Matthew 6:14-15. It is much less likely that a scribe acting as a theological maverick would omit the sentence of v. 26 due to a desire to purge Mark’s gospel account of any indication that God is not forgiving, or for some other ideological reason.
- ii. Unintentional Errors. There does not appear to be a good reason for a scribe to unintentionally omit Mark 11:26 from the text since many of the words common to vv. 25 and 26 vary in form and order (in other words, a mistake of haplography is

unlikely because of the word differences in the verses). And due to the different words in vv. 25-26, it also seems unlikely that a scribe had a major mental lapse during an audible copying session at a scriptorium, thus hearing the wording of v. 26 and thinking he had already written them in v. 25. It seems best to conclude that this variant is not a good candidate for an unintentional error.

b. Intrinsic Probability

- i. Context. Since Matthew 6:14 and Mark 11:25 contain parallel ideas and similar wording, some might argue that this is evidence that, based on Matt. 6:15, Mark 11:26 is original. But the immediate contexts in Matthew and Mark are not at all parallel, thus this argument has no contextual bearing on establishing the text. Rather, the context must be constrained to Mark, and specifically to the immediate Markan pericope. If the inclusion in v. 26 is original, the thrust of Jesus' concluding words is effectively reversed. The disciples are amazed that the fig tree has dried up at Jesus' curse. He replies with a saying of encouragement to have faith in God, to believe that God will grant what you ask for, and to ask for it in good faith (e.g., not asking for something like forgiveness of sin while denying forgiveness to another). Jesus' words are exhortative. But if v. 26 is added, then Jesus ends his stirring exhortation with such a stern warning (that God will not forgive you if you don't forgive others) that it would likely drive his disciples back to despair of themselves rather than to confident trust in God. In other words, adding v. 26 reverses the concluding thrust from exhortation to warning. Verse 25 offers a more consistent conclusion to the pericope than verse 26.

- ii. Style. While the idea in Matt. 6:15 is clearly also in Mark 11:26, the wording of Matt. 6:15 and Mark 11:26 is different. It seems that the Matt. 6:15 ideas have been adapted in Mark 11:26 to fit the style and wording of 11:25. Thus the words and their form are consistently similar in Mark 11:25-26. Mark does not use the grammatical construction οὐδὲ ... ἀφήσει (neither...will he forgive) anywhere else in his gospel, but this is not significant because it is rare in the entire NT. Thus the style of v. 26 is consistent with Mark as far as we can tell from v. 25, but this proves little because there is so little data.
- c. Summary of the Internal Evidence. The internal evidence points clearly in one direction. The reading in the text (where v. 26 is omitted) is preferred.

III. Conclusion

- a. Conclusion of External and Internal Evidence. It seems probable that the textual variant (v. 26) was an intentional (yet well intended) scribal change to harmonize Mark 11:25 with Matthew 6:14-15. It is clear that the reading in the text fits the context of Jesus' teaching most naturally and is thus probably the original Markan reading. The variant reading was introduced into the MS tradition in the fifth century in both the Byzantine and Alexandria text types, but certainly by only one scribe as its originator since v. 26 is not a direct quote from any other verse in the NT. The variant reading eventually found its way into the Majority Text and thus into many of our modern translations which use it. The reading in the text has the earliest and strongest MS support in the highly regarded

Alexandrian (and Other) uncials. Metzger agrees the variant reading is likely not original.²

- b. Significance of the Reading in the Text. As previously argued the omission of v. 26 allows Jesus' words to end in exhortation and not with a stern warning of not receiving forgiveness from God. The context of Jesus teaching his disciples is exhortative through and through. Consequently, the pericope of the parable of the fig tree (with the sandwich of the judging of the temple) seems to instruct the disciples to look at the faith of Jesus and to believe God will accomplish that which seems impossible.
- c. Significance of the Reading in the Variant. Again, as previously argued, the inclusion of v. 26 shifts the focus of Jesus teaching his disciples from exhortation to warning. The pericope (with v. 26) of the parable of the fig tree (with the sandwich of the judging of the temple) seems to have a different purpose than without v. 26: the instruction is not so much to externally behold the faith of Jesus and to trust God to accomplish the seemingly impossible by faithful prayer, but rather to focus on making sure we forgive others so that we may experience forgiveness from God.

² Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 1994), 93. "Although it might be thought that the sentence was accidentally omitted because of homoeoteleuton, its absence from early witnesses that represent all text-types makes it highly probable that the words were inserted by copyists in imitation of Mt 6.15."

3 Exegetical Outline – Mark 11:12-25

- I. After entering Jerusalem and the temple (with a royal procession preceding and following him, declaring him the Davidic king), and observing everything in the temple before he returned to Bethany, on the next day Jesus gave the beginning of a two-part object lesson to his disciples by cursing a fig tree for not bearing fruit (vv. 12-14).
 - a. On the next day when Jesus and his disciples were leaving Bethany, Jesus became hungry (v. 12).
 - b. Then Jesus saw at a distance a fig tree in bloom, but when he arrived at the fig tree he saw it had no figs to eat because they were not in season (v. 13).
 - c. Then Jesus spoke directly to the tree, cursing it to never bear fruit to eat again, so that his disciples heard it (v. 14).
- II. Jesus then entered the temple in Jerusalem, and with great authority forcibly enacted symbolic judgment on the temple and those in charge of it, and taught that the temple is supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations (vv. 15-17).
 - a. Then Jesus went into Jerusalem (v. 15a).
 - b. Jesus entered the temple and began casting out the merchants and their customers, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of the dove sellers, and preventing anyone from carrying merchandise through the temple (vv. 15b-16).
 - c. Then Jesus began teaching from the Scriptures that buying and selling merchandise in the temple had turned it from what it was intended to be (a house of prayer for all nations) into a hideout of robbers (v. 17).
- III. The Jewish religious leaders, for fear of Jesus and his growing influence among the common people, began to seek an opportune occasion to kill him, after which Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem (vv. 18-19).
 - a. When the chief priests and scribes heard what Jesus did in the temple, they began to plan to kill him because they were afraid of him and of the influence his teaching was having on the multitude (v. 18).
 - b. At the end of the day, Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem (v. 19).
- IV. Jesus concluded his two-part object lesson of the dried up fig tree by teaching his disciples that he has the authority and power to bring down judgment on faithless and unrepentant Israel, and therefore if the disciples do not doubt but have faith in God and live a life of forgiveness, whatever they pray for will be done for them also (vv. 20-25).

- a. The next morning the disciples noticed the fig tree that Jesus had cursed was now dried up from its root (v. 20).
- b. Astonished, Peter recalled what Jesus had said to the fig tree and called Jesus' attention to the tree (v. 21).
- c. Jesus replied to all the disciples, exhorting them to having faith in God (v. 22).
- d. Jesus then taught his disciples that true faith in God, not mixed with doubt, can accomplish that which seems impossible (v. 23).
- e. Furthermore, Jesus expanded this lesson on faith to prayer, teaching his disciples that whatever they ask for in prayer will be theirs if they believe they have received it (v. 24).
- f. Then Jesus concluded his teaching on faithful prayer with an example regarding sin and forgiveness, explaining that they must forgive someone whom they have something against so that God their Father will forgive their own sins (v. 25).

Exegetical Proposition:

Jesus is the righteous Davidic king who with great authority purges the temple of sin to symbolically demonstrate that judgment has come on Jerusalem and the temple, and he gives this authority to his disciples if they have faith in God and pray with sincerity and a forgiving heart, believing and not doubting that they have received it.

4 Exegesis of Mark 11:12-25

4.1 Jesus curses the fig tree (11:12-14)

Here Jesus and his disciples left Bethany on *the next day* and Jesus became hungry (v. 12). This chronological marker “the next day” is meant to connect the episode of the fig tree with the immediately preceding pericope.³

On the previous day Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem in triumph, accompanied by the shouts and praises of the people hailing him as the one who brings the kingdom of David. Jesus entered the city, surveyed the happenings in the temple, and then returned to Bethany with the twelve disciples (v. 11). Mark records this incident to prepare the reader that Jesus is the one who comes to his people in the Lord’s name, with the Lord’s authority, and with the authority of King David.

After this event which begins the Passion Week, Jesus returned to Jerusalem and the temple. On the way from Bethany, he spotted at a distance a fig tree with leaves but ended up cursing it for not bearing figs (vv. 13-14). Many interpreters have been uncomfortable with this account of Jesus, seeing it as out of character, foolish, or even mean-spirited. What makes Jesus’ action even more puzzling is that the author informs the reader why the tree had no fig—it was not the season for them (v. 13)! Some commentators attempt to remove any appearance of ignorance on the part of Jesus by pointing out that it could have been the season for small edible fig buds. “In the region referred to here in Mark, the early or smaller figs, growing from the sprouts of the previous year, begin to appear at the end of March and are ripe in May or June...It

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 443, notes that temporal markers in Mark are infrequent before the Passion narrative (when they become much more frequent). Therefore temporal markers that occur beginning at chapter 11 may possibly serve as structural clues to link themes and events in individual pericopes to one another.

is important to point out that the earlier figs...begin to appear simultaneously with the leaves. Sometimes, in fact, they even precede the leaves.”⁴ Hendriksen is transparent with his reason for importing local horticultural facts into the text—his comments on verse 13 indicate he is trying to answer the question of whether or not Jesus is omniscient. But this is not a question addressed by the text. It is better to view the entire account of the fig tree in the overall structural context, which directs the reader to an interpretation that sees more than a mere reporting of a historical incident. France agrees, “In view of this embarrassment over the story, it is not surprising that commentators have seized eagerly on the possibility that it not only lends itself to a symbolic interpretation but also was so intended by Jesus...”⁵

The fig tree incident is actually narrated in two parts, and is also connected chronologically to the events of the previous day (and most likely to the day after too; see v. 20). France has proposed a chiasmic narrative sequence that includes a double intercalation, placing the judgment act in the temple at the interpretive center.

- A First visit to the *temple* (11:11)
- B Cursing of the *fig tree* (11:12-14)
- A Jesus takes action in the *temple* (11:15-19)
- B The *fig tree* is found to be dead (11:20-25)
- A Jesus returns to the *temple* (11:27)⁶

This clear example of a double intercalation (or double Markan sandwich) helps provide the interpretive key for the fig tree incident. But the reader (or hearer) is unaware that the story of the fig tree is narrated in two parts until after Jesus judges those who are in the temple. “At this point, these two pericopae could easily be regarded as being complete in themselves, for the

⁴ William Hendriksen, *Mark* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1975), 442.

⁵ France, *Mark*, 439.

⁶ France, *Mark*, 436.

outcome of Jesus' curse on the fig tree might have been left to the reader's imagination."⁷ Even so, the very nature of Jesus' words to the fig tree invites the reader to see in the episode a prophetic or symbolic act akin to those found in the OT.

Although not explicitly suggested in the text, the author likely has in mind the OT prophetic use of fig trees and their fruit to picture God's people and their obedience to him. Mark's readers who were familiar with the OT would be reminded of passages such as Jer. 13:8, 24:1-10, Hos. 9:10, 16-17, and especially Mic. 7:1-6, which involve judgment on Israel for not bearing good fruit (or fruit at all). The point is that Jesus approached a fig tree in leaf, which gives the hope of ripe fruit, but instead proves disappointing. The tree is (in a sense) boasting to have fruit but in reality is fruitless and therefore useless. Israel, symbolized in the fruitless fig tree with leaves, with all its promise as the people of God, proved to be without substance on its day of visitation and therefore received the judgment of curse from its Lord.

Cole summarizes how we are to read the cursing of the fig tree:

"Unless we realize that this whole event was an acted parable we shall be puzzled by all sorts of irrelevant questions. The tree gave outward promise of fruit but nothing more: so its punishment was to remain eternally barren. In a sense, this withering of the tree was only a perpetuation of its present fruitless condition. The fig tree and the vine are two time-honoured symbols of Israel...to whom God's Son had now come, looking for fruit and finding none, though there was outward religious profession in plenty. Henceforth, Israel was to be withered and fruitless..."⁸

4.2 Jesus symbolically judged the temple (11:15-17)

After cursing the fig tree, Jesus entered Jerusalem and subsequently the temple. It is commonly understood that the section of the temple where this account takes place was commonly called the Court of the Gentiles. "This court was given its name because, though both Jews and Gentiles were welcome here, the latter were not allowed to proceed any farther toward

⁷ Stephen H. Smith, *A Lion With Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (vol. 38 of *The Biblical Seminar*; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 140-41.

⁸ R. Alan Cole, *Mark* (rev. ed.; TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 250.

the interior.”⁹ This court was designed to be the closest place within the temple complex where the Gentiles could approach God in worship and prayer. But Jesus did not find it set aside for Gentile worship. Instead he saw merchants selling animals for sacrifice, shoppers, and money-changers, which created a noisy market atmosphere. Lane writes, “The installation of stalls for the sale of animals and of other requirements for the sacrifice such as wine, oil and salt, had the effect of transforming the Court of the Gentiles into an oriental bazaar and a cattle mart. Jesus was appalled at this disregard for the sanctity of an area consecrated for the use of Gentiles who had not yet become full proselytes to Judaism.”¹⁰

But it is important to note that what Jesus witnessed was not a complete disregard for temple worship. The market was there in order to aid the worshipper in obtaining the necessary offerings for his sacrifice. “The money-changers enable people to acquire the money they need to pay their Temple tax, the dove merchants sell the doves needed for small private sacrifices.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the reader is not surprised to see Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers and the merchants (v. 15), or even that he prevented others from carrying anything through the temple (v. 16). We have already been prepared for some ominous action of Jesus by his cursing of the fig tree. Jesus began the day on a mission of judgment. Here the narrative gives the reader the reason for this judgment.

Jesus taught those in the temple, including his disciples with him, that the temple leadership had not only misunderstood what the temple was for (a place of worship for all the nations), but also accused them of treating it as their robber’s lair. Van Iersel argues, “The primary emphasis lies on the contrast between the Temple as a house of prayer and as a trading

⁹ Hendriksen, *Mark*, 449.

¹⁰ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 405-6.

centre for people bent on profit.”¹² This is at best an incomplete assessment of Christ’s judgment. Certainly the temple was to be a house of prayer, but Mark emphasizes that it should be a house of prayer *πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν* (v. 17a). The first half of Jesus’ statement is an exact quotation from Isa. 56:7 (LXX), which is the only place in the OT where the phrase “for all the nations” occurs in conjunction with the temple being described as a house of prayer.¹³ France does not think that Jesus was specifically concerned with the Court of the Gentiles in the temple being using improperly since Mark does not specifically call it such (for Mark, it is just “the temple”) and his Gentile readers would not be familiar with the various courts contained within Israel’s temple complex.¹⁴ While it is true that Jesus was concerned with more than just the court set aside for worshipping Gentiles, it does not follow that Mark’s readers would not know that there was a Jew-Gentile division in the temple. This information was certainly available since many congregations in the first century consisted of Jewish converts who could instruct Gentile Christians regarding the divided nature of temple worship in Jerusalem.

The second half of Jesus’ statement is more difficult. What does it mean that “you have made it a hideout of robbers” (v. 17b)? Malbon suggests, “The den of robbers is the protected place where the thieves get together in safety to divide up the booty they got elsewhere. Their den is not where they commit the crime. Thus the image suggests that something is wrong outside the temple, and the temple is the place used to bless and protect the wrongdoing.”¹⁵ Dowd takes a similar approach: “[it] should not be understood as an objection to inflated pigeon prices or dishonest exchange rates. In the first place, the word *lēstēs* means not cheats, but

¹¹ Bas M. F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary* (trans. W. H. Bisscheroux; vol. 164 of JSNTSup; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 357.

¹² van Iersel, *Mark*, 357.

¹³ Lane, *Mark*, 406.

¹⁴ France, *Mark*, 445.

muggers or pirates, who use their ‘dens’ not for robbing people, but for evading detection and punishment. This was Jeremiah’s original complaint; the priests were relying on the supposed inviolability of the temple to protect them from the consequences of their faithlessness.”¹⁶ Dowd and Malbon note correctly that Jesus was most likely not concerned with swindling and dishonest exchange rates, which is not a necessary inference from verse 17b. The phrase σπήλαιον ληστῶν is a reference to the language of Jer. 7:11 (LXX) and gives us the meaning of Jesus’ quotation—those buying and selling in the temple were doing so with a false sense of security because they were inside the walls of God’s house. Lane explains that “the distinctive vocabulary is already a part of Jeremiah’s denunciation of the false sense of security bred by the presence of the Temple of the Lord in his own day and may be intended to evoke the larger context of Jer. 7:11 where the destruction of the land is prophesied.”¹⁷ With the background of Jeremiah in mind, it is clear that Jesus’ words and actions communicate that judgment is falling on the temple and Israel, and that those clinging to the temple, assuming that God would not touch his own house, will not be spared. France says regarding the citation in verse 17b of Jer. 7:11 that

when read in its context, [it] vividly recalled the prophet’s denunciation in his great Temple Sermon of the misplaced confidence of those whose behaviour belied their profession of respect for the temple. They went out to “steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely and make offerings to Baal”, only to return to the temple (“my house, which is called by my name”) as to a place of safety; they had made it like the “robbers’ cave” to which villains resort after their criminal forays. Jesus’ use of the phrase does not necessarily accuse the Jews of his day of the same crimes as Jeremiah’s contemporaries (including robbery), but highlights their lack of respect for God’s house by comparing it with that earlier flagrant abuse of the sanctuary.¹⁸

¹⁵ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener’s Guide* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2002), 79.

¹⁶ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Reading the New Testament Series; Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 119.

¹⁷ Lane, *Mark*, 407.

¹⁸ France, *Mark*, 446.

One more question needs to be addressed regarding Jesus' actions in the temple. Commentators are divided whether Jesus meant to "cleanse" or "judge" the temple. Some interpret Mark as stressing the judgment aspect of Jesus' symbolic action. Thus the lesson readers are to draw from the account is that Jesus is through with the temple, its sacrificial system, and its localized plan for approaching God while replacing it with the new way of Jews and Gentiles approaching God anywhere in prayer. Others tend to understand Jesus' actions as a sort of cleansing or purifying of temple worship. The lesson in this view is something like Jesus is zealous for proper worship of God and will take action if the situation needs correcting. A combination of these two perspectives is best, since each contains some truth. Yes, it is proper to speak of Jesus cleansing the temple, but the stress should be on the cleansing as an act of judgment, for a new age of redemptive history is about to begin that will render obsolete the Jerusalem temple since it is part of the old age that is passing away.

4.3 The Jewish leaders seek to kill Jesus (11:18-19)

The purpose of this brief section is to heighten the suspense of the story. Jesus had now arrived in Jerusalem and was causing no small amount of trouble. The reader already knows as early as Mark 3:6 that Jesus was making enemies and they were seeking how to destroy him. At first it is the Pharisees and the Herodians who wanted to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6). Here we discover that the chief priests and scribes also wanted him dead, but did not seize him because they feared the people who were astonished at Jesus' teaching (v. 18). "Verse 18 has the effect of showing that it was not the Jewish people that are rejected but the Temple authorities and their scribal supporters...It also serves to bring Jesus' work on behalf of the Gentiles in close connection with his death."¹⁹ Jesus had also been preparing his disciples, beginning immediately after Peter's

¹⁹ Lane, *Mark*, 408.

confession that he is the Christ, that his enemies will succeed in capturing and killing him (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; 12:7-8). So there is a sense that things are coming to a head and Jesus' doom is near—but not yet, for Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem again at the end of the day (v. 19).

It is important to recognize how the previous two episodes would sound to Mark's readers. Before entering Jerusalem and the temple, Jesus cursed a fig tree for not bear fruit, and did so that his disciple could clearly see and hear what he did. But nothing seemed to come of it except a pronouncement of judgment. Next, Jesus entered the city and the temple where he halted the bustling market in the temple and prevented anyone from carrying anything through the temple. But his actions seem futile because we expect the market to reemerge after Jesus leaves. The reader sees symbolic words and deeds from Jesus, but nothing miraculous happens or is even expected in the narrative. According to van Iersel, "the reader understands that Jesus has as little to expect from the Temple authorities as from the fig tree."²⁰ Up to this point in the narrative, this seems to be the lesson. But Mark will surprise us by revisiting the cursed fig tree, thus framing the temple judgment scene and consequently giving the reader additional insight.

4.4 Jesus teaches about faithful prayer (11:20-25)

Presumably on the next morning, Jesus and the disciples passed by the same fig tree. Peter noticed that it had completely withered and excitedly called Jesus' attention to it. It is obvious that seeing the fig tree has wilted almost immediately under the weight of Jesus' curse changes the reader's perception of the previous day's events. It is now clear that "the withering of the fig tree served as a vivid warning of impending judgment."²¹ Interestingly, Lane further comments that Jesus made no attempt to interpret the fig tree's death for Peter, but rather directed the discussion to faith and prayer based on Peter's surprise at the rapid effect of Jesus' words.

²⁰ van Iersel, *Mark*, 358.

Hendriksen also does not seem to see a close connection to the temple judgment incident because he proceeds to expound generically on the nature of faith and confident prayer.²² But this interpretation does not take adequately into account the Markan sandwich. The two-part account of the fig tree is meant to interpret the temple episode. An obvious link is the symbolic nature of the fig tree representing Israel (especially the temple). “We know that, in the ancient world, temples and trees were often connected—a holy tree, a holy place. Here the fig tree serves as an image of the temple of Israel.”²³ Jesus drew this specific parallel later in the narrative during the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13). But most readers (and even commentators) miss another important link to the temple incident—Jesus’ reference to τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ (v. 23). Jesus refers to “this” mountain rather than a generic example of any mountain. Which mountain is he speaking of? There are only two probable options: the Mount of Olives or Mount Zion where the temple stands. Most commentators say the referent is the Mount of Olives because it is the only mountain named in the gospel of Mark (11:1; 13:3; 14:26) and it is in fact very near Bethany and Jerusalem, which is the location of the events. They argue that Mark’s audience (Gentile readers) would not be familiar with Palestinian geography, so it could not mean Mount Zion because they would be unaware that Jerusalem and the temple stood upon a mountain. But such an interpretation, while connecting the withered fig tree with the temple, leaves Jesus’ response unconnected to the temple judgment. However, if Jesus, while teaching his disciples, pointed to Jerusalem and the temple (which had been his destination each of the past two days) and gave a faith object lesson of Mount Zion being lifted up and cast into the sea as an act of judgment, then Jesus indeed linked the fig tree, “this” mountain, and the temple. Mark’s Gentile readers

²¹ Lane, *Mark*, 409.

²² Hendriksen, *Mark*, 457-63.

²³ Malbon, *Hearing Mark*, 80.

probably could be expected to know that Jerusalem and its temple, which were somewhat well-known to the nations considering their ancient and illustrious heritage, sat on a hill. This reading shifts the focus more to the seeming impossibility of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (who are Jesus and his small band of disciples compared to the magnificent temple of the Lord and all the authorities of Israel?) rather than to some undefined thing which seems impossible.²⁴ But the Mount Zion interpretation, while possessing theological and thematic strengths in the context, is difficult because it ignores the explicit mention of the Mount of Olives in 11:1 and finds a different, never-mentioned mountain between the lines. Nevertheless, whatever mountain Jesus had in mind, the saying seems to have a proverbial ring to it. France thinks the near demonstrative pronoun “this” ultimately refers to a generic mountain, for “all that is required to make sense of the passage is a proverbial statement of the impossible, and any more specific allusion must be regarded as not proven.”²⁵ This interpretation seeks an idealized interpretation, but cannot connect all the pieces of the Markan sandwich in 11:12-25 tightly together. It is probably best to say verse 23 is proverbial as Jesus further explains in vv. 24-25, and yet it has theological application to the destruction of the fig tree and the temple. Whether Mark meant to connect the fig tree and the temple with “this mountain” is difficult to determine. At least we may confidently assert that Jesus equated the fig tree symbolically with the temple and Israel, and that the destruction of both, while seemingly as impossible as a mountain being lifted up and thrown into the sea, is possible for those who have faith in God. That is as far as verse 23 takes us.

But Jesus was not finished teaching. He began verse 24 with the words *διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν* thus drawing a conclusion from the mountain saying in verse 23 and also from the lessons

²⁴ France, *Mark*, 449, presents and critiques this interpretation as proposed by Telford. See also fn. 70.

of the fig tree and the temple in the preceding pericopes. The teaching moves from specific to general truth as Jesus crystallized the lesson, moving from redemptive-historical categories to a more general lesson on prayer. This shift, which begins with Jesus' reply in verse 22 to Peter's astonishment, is the introduction of practical material that is applicable to Mark's original readers (and even to us today). Jesus taught that if his disciples do not doubt but have faith in God, whatever they pray for will be done for them also (v. 24). His last point is that prayers must not just be offered confidently (without doubt), but also must be offered in good faith. God will not answer the prayers of hypocrites—those who pray to God for forgiveness must not be withholding forgiveness for another (v. 25). These verses (20-25) thus serve as teaching that forms the faith community that follows Jesus.

The efficacy of prayer is guaranteed by the power of God to do that which is impossible for humans and is available to a community in which faith and forgiveness are of primary importance. As we have seen, "faith" in the Gospel of Mark is unswerving confidence that the power of God at work in Jesus is able to heal and transform those who seek Jesus' help. It is the certainty that "everything is possible for God" (10:27; 14:36) and, by extension, for the person who places trust in God's power (9:23; 11:22-24).²⁶

Jesus could make these sweeping statements, do these audacious deeds, and confer these impossible powers because he had authority from God. It must be noted that the theme of Jesus' authority runs throughout 11:12-25 and in fact connects the passages preceding and following it. Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt with the royal authority of David as the one who comes in the name of the Lord (11:1-11). Following the lesson on faith and prayer, Jesus again entered Jerusalem and the temple, where the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (his newest enemies; only the Sadducees have not yet joined the group seeking to kill Jesus) approached him and questioned his authority (τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην ἵνα ταῦτα ποιῆς;). Jesus replied by asking them a question about John's baptism (whether it was from heaven or from

²⁵ France, *Mark*, 449.

man), promising to answer their question about the source of his authority to do “these things” (their question referred to the temple disturbance but Mark certainly meant to include the cursing of the fig tree as well) if they first answer him. They perceived the trap Jesus set for them, for they feared the reaction of the people if they reply “from man,” yet if they answer “from heaven” the authority of Jesus is identified and confirmed—for John’s mission was to prepare the way of the Lord Jesus (1:1-3). So those in authority in Jerusalem are confronted with one who is not of their ranks yet who has all authority, therefore they hated him for it so much they conspired to kill him, and soon. So the passage in 11:12-25 is an intercalation, sandwiched again by 11:1-11 and 11:27-33 to form a double intercalation with the central event being the proleptic judgment of the temple with the unifying theme being the authority of Jesus.²⁷

²⁶ Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 122-23.

²⁷ Scott G. Brown, “Mark 11:1-12:12: A Triple Intercalation?” *CBQ* 64 (2002): 78-89, esp. 89, writes that the intercalations in this section of Mark’s gospel extend further. He posits a triple intercalation that additionally incorporates the parable of the wicked tenants in 12:1-12, which links Jesus’ triumphal entry into the temple with the son in the parable who visits his vineyard in search of fruit. “Mark 11:1-11 represents the enactment of Jesus’ role in the allegory of 12:1-12: he is the Messiah (God’s Son) come to the temple in search of righteousness, the ‘fruit’ of the covenant between God and his people. This concept not only frames the central intercalation but is also interwoven with it, enriching the symbolism of the cursing of the barren tree and the clearing of the temple and clarifying the nature of the conflict between Jesus and Jerusalem’s religious authorities.”

5 Theological Outline – Mark 11:12-25

- I. Jesus is the great king who expects his people to bear the fruit of righteousness and is vested with divine authority to judge those who do not bear fruit for his gospel mission.
- II. Jesus will judge his kingdom people who take their privileged position for granted, and who live in such a way as to repel others from worshipping God and thus deny the gospel mission he entrusts to them.
- III. Sometimes the enemies of Jesus are those who outwardly appear to obey God yet secretly hate Jesus, his gospel mission, and the authority he possesses.
- IV. Jesus' authority and judgment come with power, and he gives this authority to his disciples who do not doubt but confidently believe God by praying with sincerity and living graciously.

Theological Proposition:

Jesus has God's authority and power to judge his covenant people for presuming God's blessing without being obedient to his gospel mission and for erecting obstacles that hinder people from worshipping God; he gives this authority to Christians if they have faith in God and pray with confidence, sincerity and a forgiving heart.

6 Sermon Audience

The intended audience for this sermon consists of about 10 men who serve on the PCA Potomac Presbytery's Credentials Committee, gathered to hear an example sermon prepared from my own exegetical and homiletical work for the purpose of evaluating me as a candidate for ordination as a teaching elder in the PCA. Most of the men are teaching elders (pastors) in the presbytery, therefore the entire audience consists of professing Christians, most of whom have varying levels of preaching experience. However, because it is intended as an example sermon to be preached to a hypothetical PCA congregation, the indirect audience is perhaps a congregation of about 200 people consisting in age of young, middle, and old, single adults, married couples, families with children, and perhaps 10% of the audience unbelieving and unconnected to the congregation via membership.

7 Sermon – Mark 11:12-25 (The Authority and Power of Jesus)

7.1 Scripture Introduction

Good morning, people of God! Today we will be learning from God's Word in the Gospel of Mark. Many of you are probably familiar with many stories in the gospels, including the story of Jesus cursing a fig tree for not having any figs to eat and then the fig tree withering almost immediately. I always thought that was such a strange thing for Jesus to do. Why in the world would he pick on some poor fig tree? If you are anything like me, that thought surely has crossed your mind at some time or another. We will be taking a look at that story and will also be considering the famous story of Jesus going into the temple and driving out all the moneychangers and turning over tables. Remember that one? Again, if you are anything like me, you've wondered if Jesus was just acting really out of character there. What in the world is going on there? Well, I hope you are also like me and want to know if there is something we are missing. Is there a side to Jesus that we just don't understand? Is there a purpose important to Jesus that we've simply overlooked? Is there something in our text this morning that Mark set before us clearly but we've never seen before? Philip Yancey of the magazine *Christianity Today* wrote a best seller several years ago called "The Jesus I Never Knew" (some of you may have read it) and its premise was that we all have a picture of what we think Jesus is like, but that picture is often very different than the full portrait of Jesus given to us in the Bible. Let's make a deal this morning. Let's all as a church set aside our preconceived notions of Jesus this morning and learn afresh about the Lord Jesus and his mission. Of course, we always need to be listening to the Bible and hearing from God anew, but when it comes to perplexing passages like this, I think it's especially important. So let's begin, shall we? Our text this morning is Mark 11:12-25. I urge you to pay careful attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

7.2 Read the Passage (Mark 11:12-25)

7.3 Pre-Sermon Prayer

Let's go to our Lord in prayer. Holy Father, we come before your royal throne this morning as your redeemed people. We ask that you would teach us your Word by guiding us into your truth. Reveal to us by the preaching of your Word and through the power of your Spirit, our Lord Jesus whom you have given all authority in heaven and on earth. Teach us O God to love the Savior and to follow his ways. Amen.

7.4 Sermon Body

The basic storyline of our passage this morning is pretty straightforward. Jesus is hungry for some breakfast on his way to Jerusalem with the disciples. He spots a fig tree in the distance, and he's hoping it's got some fruit because the tree is in leaf. But when he actually gets to the tree, there is nothing to eat. It's barren. So Jesus speaks to the tree for all to hear, saying that no one will ever eat fruit from it again. Then it's off to Jerusalem where he goes into the temple and cleans house. I mean, he completely shuts down the market so that no one can buy any animals to offer sacrifices. And he keeps it clear until the end of the business day, when finally he and his disciples go back to where they're staying just outside the city. Then low and behold, that same fig tree pops up again in the story. Only this time it doesn't have any leaves on it. In fact, Peter notices that it's withered all the way down to the root. That's a pretty fast-acting curse! But Jesus is not primarily concerned with the dead fig tree. Instead, he uses the occasion for a teaching moment, like he so often does. He proceeds with a lesson on faith and prayer, telling his disciples that if they have faith in God, that God will answer the most impossible prayer request as long as they don't doubt that God will do it, and on the condition that they forgive others their sins so that God will forgive them of their own sins.

Simple enough, right? But what on earth do the fig tree and Jesus' temple sweep have to do with faith, prayer, and forgiveness? Well, just like everything else in life, things are not usually as they first appear. We're going to have to dig a little deeper and put these events in the wider context of Mark's Gospel to get a clearer idea of how all these things are connected. And really, this is how we should look at any Bible passage. We all know this, but frequently our rush to a settled understanding leaves us with a shallow, or worse, an erroneous interpretation of God's Word. We all tend toward less work when reading the Bible, but shouldn't we labor a little more when handling the living Word? So let's go deeper and wider now, shall we?

The first thing we need to understand is what is happening at this point in Mark's account of Jesus' life and death. The way Mark tells the story, Jesus conducts most of his ministry in Galilee and the surrounding territories until the disciples finally understand who Jesus is—that he's not just any old prophet like those from long ago, or even the great prophet Elijah, but he is actually God's anointed one—the Christ. At that point in chapter 8 when Jesus' true identity is revealed, Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he must now go up to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and after three days rise from the dead. And so they begin the long journey to Jerusalem. Finally, as he approaches Jerusalem for the first time, his followers hail his entrance into the holy city as the great king. Listen to what they shout in chapter 11:9-10, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" Those are lofty words! They are proclaiming Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem as the king's arrival, as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. That's important, because it lies in the background of our passage, so keep it in mind. Then Jesus enters the temple (which happens to be very busy since it's the week before the Feast of Passover—one of the biggest holy days of the year for Israel) and performs a careful survey of everything and

everyone there before leaving the city for the night. That is the immediate background of our passage.

Now, we must understand that this is toward the end of Jesus' ministry and he knows it. In fact, it's his last week, and he plans to spend his final days in Jerusalem. So don't be confused by the fact that Jesus leaves the city several times to go spend the night or teach in the suburbs of Jerusalem. The thrust of what Mark tells us is that Jesus has finally come to Jerusalem, and he will die here before he leaves.

Next, turn with me to Mark 12:1-12. I realize we are already well into this sermon and you're probably asking, "When are we going to get to the fig tree and the temple?" But I think this roundabout way of getting to our passage will help us to truly understand the meaning of the fig tree and the temple cleansing. Remember, all these events and teachings in Jerusalem are in the same context, so they help interpret one another. OK, so in Mark 12 (which occurs chronologically after our passage) Jesus is speaking in parables to the Jews with religious authority. And he told them one parable in particular that was pretty transparent. They knew that Jesus was aiming it directly at them, and they sought to arrest him for it. That's how furious they were about his words. They perceived that Jesus was accusing them of killing all the Old Testament prophets that God had sent to his vineyard to gather fruit, and that now they would even kill God's Son in order to steal his inheritance. But they wouldn't get away with it because God would destroy them and give the vineyard to others. They must have thought to themselves, "Who does this Jesus think he is? Where does this non-Pharisee, not Sadducee, non-priest, non-scribe, non-elder, renegade rabbi get off thinking he has the authority to judge us, we whom God *has* given authority?" But Jesus was really popular with the crowds, and they were afraid of them, and they hated Jesus even more because of it.

So this is the context of what is happening in Jerusalem during this last week of Jesus' life. Now we're prepared to see the fig tree and the temple in their proper context.

The first point regarding our text is that **Jesus is the great king who expects his people to bear the fruit of righteousness and is vested with divine authority to judge those who do not bear fruit for his gospel mission.**

Now that's a mouthful. You don't have to write all of that down since it's written on your sermon handout. Just understand that Jesus is being portrayed as God's great king who has authority to visit his people and to expect of them the fruit of righteousness. This is what Jesus has in mind when he approaches the fig tree but finds no fruit. The leaves held out great promise of fruitfulness. You might say that it was hypocritically broadcasting that it was healthy and "open for business." But in fact it was good for nothing. It promised fruit, but it failed to deliver. So Jesus curses the fig tree for its lack of fruit, basically judging it and supernaturally killing it. You might be asking at this point, "Well yes, that sounds theologically correct, but why a *fig tree*? Does the type of tree have any significance to this story?" And that's a legitimate question. Let me suggest to you that whenever you have a question that pertains to a particular symbol or image that is used in the Bible, search around in the immediate context for a clue, and if you don't find the answer there, continue expanding your search outward in sort of concentric circles—from paragraph, to thematic section within the book, to the rest of that particular book, to other books the author wrote, to the rest of the New Testament or Old Testament (depending on which testament the book is in), then to the rest of the Bible. You get the idea, don't you? That's just good interpretation. Well, we don't have to look too far to find Jesus using the image of a fig tree again in Mark. Turn quickly with me to Mark 13:28-29. Jesus is teaching a lesson using a fig tree again. What is his point here? That the disciples will know

that when the fig tree puts out leaves, the destruction of the temple is near. The destruction of the temple and the fig tree sprouting leaves are related to each other. Jesus is interpreting our passage for us just two chapters later. Isn't that wonderful? We don't have to wonder what the cursing and death of the fig tree mean because Jesus tells us. Once the fig tree puts out leaves, soon after the judgment will fall upon the temple. So what Jesus is doing in chapter 11 is sort of like a live-action parable. Do you see it? It's so clear now, isn't it? The fig tree has sprouted leaves, so Jesus brings down judgment on the fruitless fig tree, and immediately he goes straight into the temple to bring down judgment upon it. Notice his actions in the temple are also like an acted-out parable. They are a symbolic judgment. But remember Mark tells us that presumably the next day the cursed fig tree has already withered down to the root. The judgment that Jesus brings comes with great authority and power, not just striking at the visible façade, but extending all the way to the root—to the very foundation of the tree and the temple.

Now, let's take a closer look at what happens in the temple. Remember that Jesus had already paid a visit to the temple the previous day. He went inside and gave it a thorough inspection. Then the next day he returned and cleared it out. He found a bustling marketplace erected to sell animals for sacrifice to all the Jews arriving from all over the world for the great Passover festival, and moneychangers to make sure all the worshippers with foreign currency would use the acceptable non-pagan currency. Keep in mind that this market was probably set up in the most outer temple court. It was an area that most Jews probably used as a passageway to the inner courts of the temple where things were probably more quiet and holy feeling. The geographical layout of the city also suggests that the Jews used this outer court as a shortcut through the city. But this outer court had a very important purpose in God's plan for worship. It was called the Court of the Gentiles because it was the only part of the temple where Gentiles

were allowed to worship the God of Israel. But notice Mark doesn't pay attention to that explicitly. No, he tells us that Jesus sees all this market trading as infringing on worship in the temple. Read verse 17, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

OK, let's pause for a minute. Honestly, when you heard Jesus call the temple "a den of robbers," did you think of little girls selling home-made cookies in the church foyer? Or a little boy after church making the rounds asking if you would buy a magazine subscription for his school fund-raiser? Yes, me too. But that's not the kind of thing Jesus is referring to here. Notice that most of your Bibles have a cross-reference at verse 17 to two Old Testament passages—Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. These passages give us the meaning of what Jesus is quoting here. We don't have time to look them up, so you'll have to do that on your own. Jesus is accusing the people in the temple of treating God's house like it was "safe." Do you all remember playing tag as children, only there was one place where you couldn't be tagged? What did you call that place? "Safe," right? Well, sometimes we even treat our church buildings as sanctuaries from the judgment of God, don't we? Have you ever thought, "Man, I've been a champion sinner this week! I'd better go to church to get God off my back"? Or how about this: "God's not upset with me because I'm in church every Sunday morning." People of God, listen carefully. Church is not "safe" like that. When we come together as a congregation, the Living God meets with us! He is here to forgive with tender mercies those with repentant hearts. He gives grace to the humble, but he opposes the proud. Don't think for a minute that just because you are sitting here this morning enjoying the music and listening to me, all the while secretly rehearsing your vacation plans, or gleefully replaying that insult you dished out to your spouse, or figuring out how you can get out of doing your chores so you can go hang out with the wrong

crowd, that God does not see you. I know I may be stepping on some toes here. Perhaps all this is just making you angry at God for having authority over your thoughts and actions? Maybe you're just stewing over the idea that God would pay close attention to your innermost secrets despite your good reputation at church and work.

This is the second point of our passage (written on your sermon outline), that **Jesus will judge his kingdom people who take their privileged position for granted, and who live in such a way as to repel others from worshipping God and thus deny the gospel mission he entrusts to them.**

As an aside, notice that the people in this passage who hate Jesus are the ones who appear the most godly. Verse 18 says the chief priests and the scribes heard Jesus loud and clear, and yet they set out to destroy him. The chief priests were the ones in charge of administering the temple and everything that went on there. They are probably something like pastors and elders today. The scribes were the Bible experts. They knew the Bible backwards and forwards. They also are probably like pastors and elders today, and perhaps also like people who make a living from their knowledge of the Bible, maybe those who get paid to teach the Bible or write Christian books. The point is that they are the last people most of us would expect to hate Jesus. But there they are, wanting to kill him. Please listen to me carefully on this one, **sometimes the enemies of Jesus are those who outwardly appear to obey God yet secretly hate Jesus, his gospel mission, and the authority he possesses.** Just because someone wears a minister's robe, or has a fancy, holy-sounding title, or can spout off Bible verses on call, that doesn't necessarily indicate a love for Jesus and a respect for his authority. Be careful people of God that you do not follow those who just want to control your actions and

your outward appearance, especially if it makes them look good. Ask yourself, “Who is getting the glory? Is it God, or someone else?” You will always know a true worshipper of God as he points you away from himself and to the Lord Jesus, because a true shepherd of God’s people knows that the Lord’s yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

Finally, let’s briefly touch on the last point of our passage. **Jesus’ authority and judgment come with power, and he gives this authority to his disciples who do not doubt but confidently believe God by praying with sincerity and living graciously.** I think we all recognize that Jesus is not teaching his disciples that if they don’t doubt their prayers, then they’ll get that new bike, or a date with Suzie, or that big promotion, or to play centerfield for the Dodgers (I tried that one when I was 12). Yes, in verse 23 Jesus uses the memorable image of a mountain being lifted up and cast into the sea as an example of how with believing and confident prayer all things are possible with God. But I think Jesus meant something specific by this general statement. You see, his disciples had just witnessed Jesus symbolically judge the temple, and had seen with their eyes how quickly the fig tree had withered. They perceived that Jesus clearly has great authority and power, but after all, they might have reasoned that it’s just one dead tree, and the temple cleansing was yesterday and today all the merchants and shoppers are back again as if it never happened. And to top it off, Jesus keeps talking about how those guys will kill him and then three days later he will rise again. I’m sure they were thinking, what does all that mean? Are those things symbolic too? Now stay with me here. Let’s be honest with ourselves again. Don’t we occasionally think like that too? I mean, they did end up killing Jesus, and yeah, he rose again—that was a big win for our side. But then he went to heaven and now we don’t see him anymore. And now it seems like the bad guys have the power and authority again. And nothing ever seems to change in this

world. Hasn't everything been the same since he left? And I prayed for God to please turn things around in my life, to take away my father's cancer, to bring the joy back into my marriage, to take away that nagging sin—that thing I just can't seem to stop. And I'm still waiting for God to answer. Do I have a little bit of doubt in my heart? Is that why that mountain remains impossible to move? Well, God understand all of our hurts and longings, and he does answer our prayers, just not always according to our watch. But I think Jesus meant to encourage his disciples in a slightly different way here. I think Jesus was teaching them that with the eyes of faith, the eyes that only God can give, that those people and things that set themselves up opposed to the kingdom of God cannot and will not stand. Jesus has great authority and power to establish his kingdom and nothing can stand in his way. And he has promised to give this same authority and power to his disciples—all of his disciples (including me and you). Only we must be confident and not doubt that God will grant our prayers for the advancement of his kingdom, and we must be humble and forgive the sins of others so that God will forgive us our sins. And you know, I think we can see that God's kingdom has grown with marvelous authority and power. His gospel, which unites both Jews and Gentiles in Christ, has grown from a small band of disciples to number such a multitude that no one can count us. His kingdom has gone out to every land, and nothing has ever been able to stop it. The temple in Israel fell, the Roman Empire finally stopped persecuting Christians because they became Christians themselves, and the devil has not been able to prevent the spread of the gospel to any nation. And God has chosen to graciously accomplish this (and continues to) through the prayers and labors of his people as they humbly live and share that gospel by the power of the Spirit. The power and authority of Jesus is available to us, but he will accomplish those purposes that bring him glory, not us. Isn't that what we really, truly desire? Hallelujah! Let's close in prayer.

7.5 Closing Prayer

Gracious and loving Father, we praise you for being a righteous judge over your covenant people. We pray that we will not presume upon your blessings without being obedient to your gospel mission to the nations. Teach us to not erect obstacles that hinder your people from worshipping you. We thank you Jesus for sharing your great authority and power with those who follow you. We ask that you would grant us confident faith, that you would soothe and help our doubting hearts, and that you would give us the grace to forgive others as you have forgiven us our sins. We pray these things in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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