



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

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WEEK 2 :: JANUARY 8

YOU TELL ME AND I'LL TELL YOU :: MARK 11:27-33

Mark is fond of grouping similar stories together to prove a point, and here we find several stories clumped together on the subject of authority, specifically Jesus' authority. Right before Jesus is to go to the cross, this subject is of particular import, not only for the audience of the scriptures but also for those who were actually there.

Previous to Mark 11:27, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey in the triumphal entry, as a king would ride into his city, to fulfill scripture. Then we see Jesus curse a fig tree with a word, telling it to never bear fruit again. Then Jesus makes one of the strongest shows of his authority yet by going into the temple and driving out the people buying and selling wares, saying that they had made his house a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17). There is a point that Jesus is trying to make with his actions (and with how Mark weaves the stories together): that he holds an authority that has not been granted by this world, that he is outside, above, and beyond whatever religious or social norms might contain other men. He is, in fact, God's son, and will operate in whatever way he pleases.

It makes sense that the teachers of the law were afraid of him and would so try to trap him by questioning his authority: "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?" (Mark 11:28). At this point, if Jesus said it was by God's authority, it would give them ample opportunity to criticize his actions as being ungodly. Instead he posed a question that perplexed them. He would answer them if they could tell him by whose authority was John's baptism, heaven or men? They could not answer because they feared the people. Jesus exposed their own lack of authority and confidence before the people, contrasting it to his own otherworldly composure, making them look smaller and foolish.

The teachers of the law were afraid of Jesus' authority because they might lose theirs in the face of Jesus' teachings. Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, were simply in awe of his authority, and didn't quite know how to react to the kind of heavy and sure way Jesus carried himself. And this was all happening right before his death for a reason. It highlighted the strange paradox of the supreme Son of God laying his life down—that someone with such powerful authority would give himself up to be put to death at the hands of those fearful teachers of the law is a testament to Jesus' incredible humility and obedience. He was not being crushed by the laws of men when he died; he was rather willingly giving himself up under God's greater authority. Jesus' authority was only superseded by God's, and for that reason he was willing to submit himself to the cross.

It causes one to wonder about the nature of true confidence and authority, the type of authority that comes from God and not man.



CONNECTED TEXTS

Hebrews 2:9
Hebrews 5:7-9

DISCUSSION STARTER

Who was the greatest source of authority you had growing up? What was that like? Was it always fair?

QUESTIONS

Outside of God, what authorities do you abide by in life—social, political, etc.? What is the nature of earthly authority? How would you characterize it?

Do you have friends who you would consider authorities that you go to for wisdom? How would you describe their authority in your life? Do they speak with God's authority?

Why is having earthly authority outside of you good?

Do you think that God is really your absolute authority in life, or does his voice often get drowned out by your own sense of autonomy?

How does abiding in God's authority give you a greater sense of authority and confidence in life?

ACTION STEP

Ask God to provide you with a correct view of his authority over you (not tyrannical or too coddling). Ask him to give you insight into this aspect of his character, and offer up yourself fully to be commanded by his loving voice.



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WEEK TWO NOTES



WEEK 3 :: JANUARY 15

TAKING THE VINEYARD BACK :: MARK 12:1-12

Have you ever said something to a group of people that you thought would go over well, then watched as your words seemed to stop in midair and crash to the ground like lead balloons? Perhaps you realized that you didn't know these people as well as you thought you did, and that possibly you'd offended someone in the group with your words?

Any comedian, author, or classroom teacher will tell you: It's important to know your audience.

I have not learned this lesson.

I'm the king of telling a joke or story without knowing exactly who it is I'm sharing it with, only to find out later that my little anecdote may not have gone over as well as I would have liked. I offend more people than I'd like to admit. I'm not trying to, mind you. I just get caught up in my own head, assuming that everyone is like me and has the same preferences, tastes, and temperament. I admit it's a bit insensitive, if not downright arrogant.

Jesus didn't suffer from this particular issue.

Jesus was incredibly insightful as to who his audience was. Apart from being "the smartest person who ever lived, bringing us the best information on most subjects," as author Dallas Willard suggests, he had the amazing ability to cut through the minutiae. Jesus got to the heart of the matter, and he knew exactly to whom he was speaking.

In Mark 12:1-12, Jesus pulls no punches. He speaks in the tradition of Kings David, who described Israel as a vine planted by the Lord, (Psalm 80:8-16) and Solomon, who used a vineyard as a metaphor for a lover (Song of Solomon 8:12), or prophets like Isaiah, who described Israel as a vineyard, painstakingly created by God to bear fruit, but ultimately judged when it does not (Isaiah 5:1-7), or Jeremiah, who accused Israel of becoming a wild vine (Jeremiah 2:21).

The language Jesus used here was not foreign to those who heard it. It was loaded with meaning, and designed to provoke. The crowd around him knew exactly what he was saying and who he was saying it to. He was accusing the priests and leaders, many of them likely absentee landlords of estates that used tenant labor, of neglecting God's vineyard and of hoarding the fruits of its land, justice and mercy.

While many of Jesus's parables were shrouded in mystery and even seemed deliberately hard to understand, this story was explicit and specific. Jesus here reveals his purposes: He knows what has gone wrong, and he intends to make it right.

In the last part of the parable, he makes known how he intends to bring justice to the oppressed. He will enter the vineyard, allow himself to be seized and killed, and see his kingdom built upon the foundation of his sacrifice.



CONNECTED TEXTS

Matthew 13:10-17

Psalm 118: 19-25

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Have you ever been guilty of not knowing your audience? If you have, tell the group about it.

QUESTIONS

How do you think you would have reacted had you been a priest or leader in the crowd as Jesus spoke these words?

In many of Jesus's parables, the meaning was much less clear to those gathered around Jesus (see Matthew 13). Why do you think this parable was so explicitly obvious? What effect does that have on its meaning?

In verses 10-11, Jesus cites Psalm 118: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Why are there so many reversals of expectations in the gospel? What is it about surprise endings that make them so powerful?

ACTION STEP

In what areas of your life can you help to bring the fruits of justice and mercy? Tell the group about it, and come up with ways that you can start to do that in your context.



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WEEK THREE NOTES

**WEEK 4:: JANUARY 23****IMAGES :: MARK 12:13-17**

Picture a bored four-year-old at her brother's little league practice. Unattended, playing in the dirt, found a nail, and proceeded to scratch her name in the side of the car. Evidently she didn't learn her lesson; there was an incident with the coffee table when she was supposed to be dusting and the heirloom family book of poetry. That was me. Once I knew how to write my name, I did! Everywhere.

This is not completely unlike the world explorers in the days of Columbus, et al. They would sail along, hit land, plant a flag, and declare, "Mine!" And what does every two-year-old say when little brother or playmate comes along and picks up a toy? "Mine!" It is in our nature, this spirit of ownership, this need to possess. It is little cute when we see it in a toddler and we can recognize the absurdity: someone so small, demanding, making these big claims. And the naive parent or caregiver only addresses issues of fairness, like who had the toy first and the importance of taking turns. But what about that root problem of ownership and underlying demand to possess?

Yes, I did eventually learn my lesson and resisted the temptation to scrawl my name on things that weren't mine. My mother was one who bragged about the strength of her muscles gained from spanking kids. When the "Law" comes down with associated pain, the brain learns to avoid certain behaviors. What this produces is a black and white thinker, a Law-keeper.

Enter Jesus and His interactions with Law-keepers. Remember, He came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. In this story, as in many others, the Pharisees were already stirred up because Jesus was addressing things that were above the "Law," these gray areas that didn't fit into their black and white categories so painstakingly devised for their own comfort and clarity. He was the wise Caregiver, ready to break up the fight over possession by addressing the heart of the matter.

At first glance, the *fairness* issue is solved when Jesus said, "Pay to Caesar what is Caesar's." Many good church people stop here. I pay my taxes, I don't cheat, I tithe, so I'm a good citizen. God has to be satisfied with that, right? But the spirit of our demand to keep what we believe is rightfully ours remains unaddressed. The absurdity of the two-year-old and his grand claims is really applicable to us. Isn't *EVERYTHING* God's? Isn't that the heart of the matter? The clear lines we try to draw for our own comfort by saying, "This much is for the government, this much is God's, and the rest is mine" are really contrived.

Mark 12:15 says that Jesus knew their hypocrisy, that they were trying to trap Him. "Hypocrisy" is a word referencing Greek play actors, ones who wore a mask. Jesus, the wise teacher, who amazes with His wisdom and insight, wants us to drop the mask, and He invites us to address the inner reality of our hearts. We are so capable of convincing ourselves that we are good, well-meaning, doing what is right, believing appearances, and looking no further. One who asks us to go deeper is considered a threat to the established code, thus the Pharisees wanted to "trap him." Make no mistake, there is a huge power struggle going on. And what is at stake is



relationship. The bent and broken part of our nature so often chooses a semblance of control; to cover our shame and vulnerability we will do anything to appear “right,” to satisfy what is expected, hiding in the safety of keeping the Law. If we were honest, our hearts shout in fear and frustration, “Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it!” Jesus invites us into something so much more complex and overwhelming--relationship with Him, the God of the universe who sees it all, knows all the inner secrets and hidden things, and still loves. The only appropriate response to that is the bended knee, to bow returning worship to Him who made us and everything around us. We are God’s. Give to God what is God’s.

CONNECTED TEXTS

Job 1:21
2 Corinthians 3:1-6
Matthew 5:17-20

DISCUSSION STARTER

It is considered developmentally appropriate to give children simple, black and white categories, instructions, and rules to follow. Adolescence is the period where the brain begins to be capable of developing abstract thought. Share some of the things you used to think as a kid and how they changed as you got older.

QUESTIONS

Why is it so much easier to ask what to do and what not to do, to stay out of trouble? How satisfying is that approach?

Have you ever gotten angry at God, not knowing what He expected in a given situation? How did it resolve?

Think about the different people you know. What is it about some people that makes them easy to be around, that makes you relax internally? What expectations do you feel around other people? Try to describe the differences in terms of possessiveness versus the ability to share freely.

When was the last time you felt like you were wearing a mask? What was going on that made that choice feel necessary at the time?

ACTION STEP

Ask God to show you if there is a possession in your life that that you are unwilling to let go of? Thoughtfully consider giving something of yours to a friend in need, a homeless person on the corner or money to your church to sever that attachment. Then do it!



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WEEK FOUR NOTES



WEEK 5 :: JANUARY 29

THE LIVING DEAD :: MARK 12:18-27

When I was younger, I never believed in ghosts, at least not in the sense that most kids do. I didn't think that the abandoned house down the street was haunted, I wasn't concerned that I'd run into some dead guy walking down a dark hallway, and I certainly didn't believe that the spirits of my dead relatives were still wandering the earth.

Death seemed so final to me, at least as far as an earthly presence was concerned. That person was gone, and maybe they were in heaven or maybe they were in hell, but the point was this: they weren't *here*.

It wasn't that I wasn't aware of a supernatural world. My fears weren't in ghosts or zombies, rather demons and angels. The realization that a divine world existed, that spiritual warfare was a real thing, and that to believe in God meant to believing that other heavenly beings were real too—all of that terrified me.

I guess I could accept a relative passing because it was a tangible thing. That person was here, now they're not. But if I let my mind wander too far beyond that, if I went to what was *not* tangible, that's when I got scared. It was all so unknown, I didn't know how it worked. How was I supposed to process that?

So I guess I can relate to the Sadducees questions. How does the life after this relate to our current life? How much does heaven look like earth?

But the Sadducees weren't acting out of fear, at least not fear of dying. As they've been doing for most of our study of Mark, they were trying to trap Jesus, but they couldn't. As Jesus pointed out to them, heaven is nothing like earth—there is no marriage, no family as we consider family here. But heaven is also everything like earth—God is a god of the living! He created us to *live* and in doing so, we experience heaven on earth in a sense.

Jesus' consideration of death, life, heaven, earth, and resurrection, it was all so different than the way the earthly Sadducee mind considered it. He presents a new way—a third way—of thinking. He points out that death isn't so final, that resurrection is real, and that God remains a god of life even after death; and that life in the Kingdom of Heaven is above the life that we've made for ourselves here.



CONNECTED TEXTS

Exodus 3:6
Matthew 22:22-31
Luke 20:26-34

DISCUSSION STARTER

How did you deal with death when you were young? Heave and hell? Ghost, angels, demons?

QUESTIONS

Talk about a typical Evangelical perspective on death and resurrection. Where do we place the emphasis? How is it like and different from the perspective that Jesus was presenting?

How will heaven be like earth? Or how much of it is unfathomable? Where do you find your comfort—that it is like or different from life on earth?

The Sadducees were trying to trap Jesus by claiming to know the Law. How often do we do this—read, memorize, interpret Scripture and are certain that we *know* the right, absolute way. How often is it probably that Jesus would present to *us* a third way? Give examples of what that might be.

ACTION STEP

Consider some point of faith that you're set on. You're convinced that your way is **the** way. Ask God to show you his third way.



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WEEK FIVE NOTES