



Chapter 21

We all know what it's like to dread something. We dread going back to work. We dread going to the dentist. We dread seeing that difficult person again (or, maybe they dread seeing us!). We dread midterms or finals. That pit-in-your-stomach feeling is a familiar and unavoidable part of life.

Icebreaker:

1. What have you dreaded or are dreading right now? Why was or is it so unpleasant to think about?

The events of the last two chapters are all part of the journey toward Jerusalem. Jesus is on the doorstep of the city. As He approaches, we should be reminded of how completely aware Jesus was of what was in front of Him (see 20:17-19 and 27:22-23). Talk about a time for dread!

Verses 1-11

Jesus moves faithfully toward His destination. In fact, these verses demonstrate how completely sovereign Jesus is over all that's unfolding. His instructions regarding the donkey and her colt make this clear. It's even more amazing, though, when we consider Matthew's comment and citation of Zechariah 9:9 in verses 4-5.

2. Why is the issue of God's sovereignty, or control, over these events so important to how we interpret them? In other words, how would the story be different if God was not fully in control of these events?

A number of contrasts appear. Donkeys were used by kings in times of peace and coronation, but they also depict humility. Moreover, Jesus enters Jerusalem with the look of a *conquering king*, but is preparing for the role of a *suffering servant*—both of which are images from the Old Testament. The cries of praise from the crowd (Hosanna—"Save now") reveal their expectation for Jesus to bring deliverance, but the form of that deliverance will be shocking.

3. Is it possible for us to also worship or celebrate Jesus with faulty ideas in our minds about who He is or what He's going to accomplish for us? If so, talk together about that.

As the Passover week, Jerusalem's population would swell many times its normal level. It's hard to discern between those in the crowds who were "natives" or "outsiders," but the question of verse 10—which has appeared before—is the single greatest question for us to grapple with.

Verses 12-17

The temple represents God's presence with His people, and as such, it's highly significant that Jesus would confront the people there! The activities going on in the temple area should have taken place outside its precincts and this was only a symptom of a greater systemic disregard for God's holiness. The citation of Isaiah 56:7 points to the failure of Israel to live according to God's ways even as it went through the motions of the sacrificial rituals.

4. This passage can surprise us if we think of Jesus as merely meek and mild. Talk about whether you see Jesus's actions here as being out of character. Indeed, *who is this?*

Verses 14-17 should sound familiar. Jesus heals. Children praise. The religious leaders protest. Jesus uses the Scriptures to point out their error. Together, these verses that take place in the temple's shadow depict how one "greater than the temple is here" (12:6).

Verses 18-22

This strange encounter with the fig tree is a further indictment on Israel. The nation that should have been fruitful, given its privileged position as God's people, was actually barren. Like the actions in the temple, this is symbolic of the judgement against Israel. The disciples' amazement leads to Jesus's instruction on the power of "faith-full" prayer. The link between these verses is the idea that fruitfulness is the result of a life of prayerful dependance on God.

5. How does prayer cultivate the kind of faith that in-turn leads to fruitfulness? Have you ever taken steps (e.g., kept a journal, a file, etc.) to record how God has answered your prayers in the past? If so, talk about the impact this has had on your faith.

Verses 23-27

Jesus returns to the temple and, as expected, is confronted again by the religious leaders. Commentators remind us of how these encounters were all traps intended to provide fuel for the fire against Jesus. The leaders grow in their rejection and hard-heartedness, even as Jesus disposes of their best traps against Him. The rest of the chapter is Jesus's extensive reply!

Verses 28-32

It would have been shocking for a child to refuse to work the way the first son does in this parable. The image of verse 29, though, is one of repentance. The second son, agreeing in word only, is a picture of the religious leaders. They saw the "way of righteousness" in John but refused to repent as the first son did in the parable. Meanwhile, many of those who did repent were among the despised—the "tax collectors and the prostitutes." As we've seen, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (19:30).

6. Brace yourself for this one...how does your life compare to the first or second son? Talk about whether you've been someone who has turned to God with your actions or only with your words. We'll pray for each other about this at the end.

Verses 33-46

In this second parable found in verses 33-41, the "master of a house" represents God; the "vineyard," Israel (see Isaiah 5) or the kingdom of God (see v. 43); and the "tenants," the religious leaders. Scholars point out how vineyards would commonly be rented out to tenants who would then pay the owner a share of the harvested crops.

7. As you read the parable, does it make sense to you that a landowner would respond to his situation the way this landowner does in verses 35-36?

Of course it doesn't make sense! As Grant Osborne puts it, "The landowner's failure to act would have been mystifying to the hearers, and as such it pictures the long-suffering covenant patience of God." Jesus's application of the parable draws from another OT image from Psalm 118, which is in-turn also referenced in Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8. Jesus is this "stone" that has been rejected by some, but is the cornerstone of God's mission.

Tying the Bow

Fruit plays an essential role in this chapter. The fig tree lacked it. The second son lacked it with his empty words. The tenants hoarded it. Ultimately, the religious leaders failed to produce it. This chapter that starts off in celebration ends in sharp confrontation, and the core issue is that of fruitfulness. As you close, take a look at Psalm 1, John 15:1-8, and Galatians 5:22-23.

8. What does a fruitful life look like? Take time to pray for each other, that your lives—by God's power and grace—would produce the kind of Kingdom fruit that Jesus desires.