

# Last Days *in the* Temple



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**CONTROVERSY.** Probably all the events of this week’s lesson occurred on the final Tuesday of Jesus’ earthly life. These were hours of fierce controversy as the religious leaders attempted one time after another to embarrass Jesus publicly or to get Him to say something they could use against Him with the Roman authorities. Here we see various groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians)—normally at odds with one another—united in opposition to Jesus.

In the midst of enemies and controversies, Jesus stands alone. No one comes to His defense, but He does not need anyone, for He answers every trick question with insight and authority that stumps and confounds His accusers. Meanwhile, He takes the initiative against them with probing parables and questions that expose their hypocrisy.

At the end of the long, trying day, Jesus casts a last look around Him and leaves the temple. He will never return to that earthly structure.

**The Week at a Glance:** How did Christ respond to those who questioned His authority? What was Jesus’ message in the parable of the wicked husbandmen? How did Jesus respond to flattery? For Jesus, what was the essence of all true religion and faith?

**Scripture Passage for the Week:** *Mark 11:27–12:44.*

**Memory Text:** “ ‘ ‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment’ ” (*Mark 12:30, NKJV*).

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 28.*

## “We Cannot Tell”

**By** cleansing the temple Jesus had clearly set forth Himself as One whose authority was greater than the temple and the chief priests and teachers of the law who served at the temple. It’s not surprising, then, that their first challenge to Jesus on this final day in the temple centered around authority. Study Jesus’ encounter with His critics (*Mark 11:27-33; see also Matt. 21:23-27 and Luke 20:1-8*). **Why didn’t the critics answer Jesus’ question? Why couldn’t they?**

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Jesus never resorted to verbal trickery. His speech was always open, direct, and pure. In turning the religious leaders’ question back on themselves, He was trying to break through the mental barriers they had erected against Him. The answer to His question was the same as the answer to their question. Both Jesus and John the Baptist spoke and worked out of a divine commission; no human agency had given them their task and authorized them. If only the critics could see their own blindness toward John, perhaps their eyes would be open to Him. Jesus, amid such hostility, was, nevertheless, ministering to those who were opposed to Him!

Also, notice their answer to Jesus, “We cannot tell.” *That is, we cannot tell it out loud, for to do so would ultimately expose ourselves to the crowd.* Jesus not only confounded them, He gave them another opportunity to repent, an opportunity that they apparently didn’t take advantage of.

**Why** else could they not answer Jesus’ question? *See Mark 1:7, 8; John 1:29.*

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What a place Jesus put them in. If they acknowledged that John was from God, then what were they going to do with John’s testimony about Jesus? If they acknowledged John’s divine credentials, how could they then explain their hostility to Christ?

**We mustn’t be too quick to judge these critics, though, lest we judge ourselves, as well (*Rom. 2:1*). In what ways, often much more subtle than what appears here, do we try to squirm our way around God’s authority in our lives?**

**Key Text:** *Mark 11:27-33*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To understand why Jesus faced hostility.
2. To emphasize that Jesus' critics were aware of their deceptive behavior.
3. To stress that Jesus ministered even to those who attacked Him.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. Jesus and John** (*Mark 11:30*).

- A. Unlike His critics, Jesus used words to clarify matters.
- B. John's prophetic gift was generally recognized, and he, in turn, recognized Jesus.
- C. Jesus' critics refused to recognize the truth, even when directly confronted with it.

#### **II. The Plot Against Jesus** (*Mark 12:13, 14*).

- A. The alliance of the Pharisees and the Herodians illustrates the nature of their opposition to Jesus.
- B. His critics were willing to falsely affirm Him in order to undermine Him.
- C. This episode illustrates the need to be aware of our speech and our tendency to be fooled by flattery.

#### **III. Trick Questions, Honest Answers** (*Mark 12:18-27*).

- A. For Jesus, a mere knowledge of what Scripture says is not the same as storing the words of Scripture in our hearts.
- B. Like the Pharisees, Jesus believed in the resurrection of the dead.
- C. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus saw those who believed in Him as taking part in eternal life now.

**Summary:** The Pharisees and other interest groups Jesus faced were convinced He meant them harm. Hence, they were willing to do anything to undermine Him. In spite of this, Jesus continued to seek their salvation. He longs for us to follow His example.

## COMMENTARY

This week we study five questions (*Mark 11:27–12:44*) Jesus dealt with in His confrontation with the religious leaders of His day. The encounter took place in the temple precincts on the Tuesday of Passion Week.

### **I. The Question of Authority** (*Mark 11:27-33*).

The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders were behind the plot to trap Jesus with cunning questions. From these groups were chosen the Sanhedrin, with whom rested all religious authority. Hence the

## **The Parable of the Tenants** (*Mark 12:1-12*).

This is one of the most powerful parables Jesus ever told. Its application was so direct and its message so terrifying that it must have had a profound effect on all who heard it. Here Jesus clearly foretells His own death and the rejection of the unfaithful in Israel.

**What** passage from the Old Testament, no doubt familiar to His hearers, did Jesus draw upon in presenting the parable of the wicked tenants? *See Isa. 5:1-7.*

Many of the parables of Jesus teach a single point, and the details do not apply. In this parable, however, we see a clear application for each of the characters and objects.

**Keeping** in mind Isaiah 5:1-7, write down what each of the following in Mark 12:1-11 represents:

**The vineyard:**

**The householder, owner of the vineyard:**

**The tenants (“husbandmen” in the King James Version):**

**The servants sent to collect the fruit:**

**The owner’s son:**

**The wall or hedge (Hint: What did God give Israel to set it apart from other people?):**

**The tower (Hint: What was the most prominent structure in Israel?):**

**What** effect did Jesus’ parable have on the religious leaders? Why didn’t they immediately arrest Jesus? *Mark 12:12.*

These were strong words indeed from the Master. But time was running out—for Him and for Israel. He hoped that this parable with its stern warning might yet cause some hearers to change their course.

**Suppose someone came to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and gave the same message to us as Jesus gave to Israel. How would you respond, and why?**

question: “ ‘By what authority are You doing these things?’ ” (vs. 28, *NKJV*). “These things” referred to Jesus’ cleansing the temple (vs. 15-17). Jesus offered to answer provided His questioners answered Him on another point: “ ‘The baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me’ ” (vs. 30, *NKJV*). The religious leaders found themselves in a dilemma. Attributing John’s ministry to God would have led to the next question: *Then, why did you reject him?* Saying that John was a deluded man would have angered the people, for they loved John’s ministry. But the Jews said they did not know.

Because the Jewish leaders evaded His question, Jesus refused to answer theirs.

### II. The Question of Stewardship (*Mark 12:1-12, 41-44*).

Stewardship is often misunderstood as a matter of money. But more than money, it involves a relationship of faithfulness and total surrender, as illustrated in the parable of the wicked tenants (vs. 1-12) and the story of the widow’s mite (vs. 41-44).

The parable of the wicked servants begins with God, the vineyard Owner. God entrusts to the tenants (the religious leaders) the vineyard (Israel), with the hope they will be faithful in their work and return to the Master His due. At vintage time, the Owner sends His servants (the prophets) to collect His due. But the tenants reject the servants with violence and death. The Owner finally sends His only Son. But the tenants kill the Son, hoping to become owners of the vineyard. Now the question from Jesus: “ ‘What will the owner of the vineyard do?’ ” (vs. 9, *NKJV*). The answer is grave: Rejection of the Son ensures one’s own rejection.

### III. The Question of Tax Payment (*Mark 12:13-17*).

Now it is the turn of the Pharisees and Herodians. The two groups, generally hostile to each other, joined forces to ask Jesus: “ ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ ” (vs. 14, *NKJV*). The question raised a burning issue, aimed at trapping Jesus. If Jesus had answered Yes, it would have pitted Him against the Jews who resented the Roman rule. If He had answered No, they would have made Him face the charge of sedition.

Instead, Jesus asked for a coin and posed a counterquestion: “ ‘Whose image and inscription is this?’ ” (vs. 16, *NKJV*). Caesar’s, of course. Then came Jesus’ answer: “ ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’ ” (vs. 17, *NKJV*).

God or Caesar? The question had persisted throughout history. As citizens of this world we have certain duties; but as citizens of heaven, we have even higher obligations. Thus, Jesus turned the question from a choice between God and Caesar into a call to live on the higher ground of worship and service to the Creator.

## Smooth Words *(Mark 12:13-17).*

The next plot against Jesus brought together two groups that normally did not associate with each other. The Pharisees were strict observers of the laws of Judaism—not just what the Lord had given through Moses but the multitude of regulations that had been added by the scribes over the centuries. The Herodians, however, were a political party rather than a religious sect. They supported the royal family, which ruled as puppets of Rome.

**What** trick did these men try to use on Jesus before asking their question? Who tried the same thing on Him once before? See *John 3:1, 2.*

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“For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned,” Jesus had said (*Matt. 12:37*). In this case, these men by their words condemned themselves, because they acknowledged that He was “true” and that He taught the “way of God.” No doubt, unless at some point they repented, these men will meet their words again in the final judgment.

**Look** up the following texts. What are they all talking about? Why do you think the Bible speaks on this topic as it does? *Pss. 5:9; 12:2, 3; Prov. 20:19; 26:28; 28:23; 29:5.*

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The Hebrew word for “flattery” comes from a root word that can mean “smoothness” or “slippery.” How apt a description of this misuse of language! Indeed, flattering words can be used to slip past a person’s defenses and catch them at their weakest point: their ego and sense of self-worth. Though flattery might work with others, those who tried it on Christ get nowhere with this shameful tactic.

**Though we all need to be on guard against using flattery to manipulate others, we also need to guard against being duped by it. What was it about Jesus that enabled Him not to fall for this trick? How can we, who no doubt like receiving praise, have the same protection ourselves?**

#### IV. The Question of Resurrection (*Mark 12:18-27*).

The Sadducees placed before Jesus an imaginary case of a woman who married seven brothers, after each one died without an issue. Then they asked the question: “ ‘In the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be?’ ” (*Mark 12:23, NKJV*).

Jesus gave a two-part answer. First, on the question of marital relation in heaven: “ ‘Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Isaiah 5:1-7, Mark 11:27–12:44*

- ① “Our problem is not so much that we don’t know what we should do,” said Peter Marshall, one of the twentieth century’s great preachers. “We know perfectly well . . . but we don’t want to do it.”—*Mr. Jones, Meet the Master* (New York: F. H. Revell, 1949), p. 128. How can we avoid the fate of the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ day who allowed their prejudices to keep them from embracing new spiritual insights?
- ② The Jewish religious leaders, hearing the parable of the tenants (*Mark 12:1-12*), “looked for a way to arrest [Jesus] because they knew he had spoken the parable against them” (*vs. 12, NIV*). How would an honest seeker after truth have responded to this parable? Can you think of any applications that are similar to situations we face today?
- ③ In His audience there were surely people eager to anoint Jesus as the Messiah, just as there were certainly people who wanted to be rid of Roman oppression. Yet, Jesus encouraged allegiance to both Rome and God (*Mark 12:17*). How practical is that advice today? Under what circumstances could it be argued that human laws could be ignored for the sake of being obedient to God? Give at least three specific examples.
- ④ The question, “ ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’ ” (*Mark 12:28, NIV*) is a typically pharisaical question. We still debate the “finer” points of obedience. (Is killing someone in self-defense as bad as killing someone accidentally?) Jesus seemed to lead His listeners away from specific behaviors to principled behaviors. For example: What is the spiritual principle behind buying a house? Watching television? Choosing a mate? Deciding where to vacation? Do the same principles apply to every person in every situation?

## A Trick Question *(Mark 12:18-27)*.

The Sadducees were a religio-political party made up of wealthy, liberal, secular-minded people. They accepted only the five books of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy, as inspired, and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Now they came to Jesus with a trick question that they felt sure would embarrass Him. No doubt it was a stock scenario that they had used in arguing with the Pharisees and others against the doctrine of the resurrection (yet, if you really look at their argument, it was kind of ridiculous: a woman who marries seven brothers, one right after the death of the other?). If Jesus disagreed with them, the Sadducees thought they could hold Him up to ridicule; but if He agreed, that would further offend the Pharisees.

**Notice** Christ's first words to them. He hit them right where it hurt. Why were His words such a rebuke to, of all people, religious leaders?

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Because the Sadducees accepted only the books of Moses, Jesus did not quote from other parts of the Old Testament that point to the resurrection, such as Isaiah and Daniel. So far as we know, His reference of Exodus 3:6 is the first time this famous passage was so used. The Sadducees, who considered themselves experts in the first five books of the Bible, suddenly found themselves on the defensive.

**Read** carefully the verse that Christ quoted. How can we understand this in the context of the power of God and the resurrection of the dead? See also *John 11:26; 1 John 5:11, 12*. How does *Mark 12:27* help answer this question?

In Jesus' own teachings to the people, He made the same point of this argument: Those who believe in Him, such as did Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, have already crossed over from death to life and will surely come forth from the grave at His call (*John 5:24, 25*). Even though our body turns to dust, we are bound up in the life of God, and we will live again. No wonder, then, for us death is only a sleep, a quiet rest for those whom, though in the grave, God considers as "living."

**If someone were to ask you, "Do you know the power of God?" what would you reply, and why?**



angels in heaven’ ” (vs. 24, 25, *NKJV*). The Sadducees were guilty of a basic fallacy: They imagined eternal life to be an extension of earthly life. In that they were wrong. The postresurrection life is not an extension but a transformation, an entirely new life free from sin.

The second part of Jesus’ answer dealt with resurrection, and His answer was unequivocal: “ ‘You are therefore greatly mistaken’ ” (vs. 27, *NKJV*). Why should resurrection be impossible? The One who created the humans can also resurrect them.

#### V. The Question of the Essential (*Mark 12:28-34*).

The fifth question came from a scribe: “ ‘Which is the first commandment of all?’ ” (vs. 28, *NKJV*). The Pharisees had identified some six hundred thirteen commandments, and so the question went beyond the Ten Commandments. Jesus’ answer (*Deut. 6:4, 5; 11:13-21; Mark 12:29, 30*) defined not only the greatest commandment but also the very purpose of life: to believe that God is One and to love Him supremely “ ‘with all your heart, with all your

## Witnessing

How do you define the word *neighbor*? Friendly? Nosy? Hostile? Complainer? Helpful? Friend? Enemy?

However you personally define the word, a neighbor is someone who lives in very close proximity to you. Someone who, potentially, has a direct impact, positive or negative, on your life. A good neighbor will brighten your day; a bad neighbor can send you into near depression. Good neighbors “sell” a neighborhood; conversely, bad neighbors depreciate the neighborhood.

In the American Old West, cattle drivers and shepherds made poor neighbors—hence the phrase *fences make good neighbors* was born. Cattle drivers needed large, open areas in order to provide ample grazing for their cattle. They also needed clear trails to drive the cattle to market. So, fences were an abomination to them. On the other hand, shepherds didn’t want their animals to wander. They preferred fencing in the animals to keep them contained. Years of battling each other turned the two groups into bitter enemies. In the end, the law was required to get involved to bring peace, since the groups were incapable of doing it for themselves.

“Love thy neighbor as thyself” (*Mark 12:31*). That’s not so easy at times when your relationship with your neighbor is suffering an all-time low. Yet, Jesus tells us this commandment is second only to loving God.

“Love thy neighbor as thyself.” You’re doing all you can to prepare yourself for Jesus’ soon return, aren’t you? So, have you shared the plan of redemption with your neighbor in the ultimate act of brotherly or sisterly love?

## The Greatest Commandment *(Mark 12:28-34)*.

Read carefully and prayerfully Mark 12:28-34. After reading that, read the following quote from Ellen White:

“The wisdom of Christ’s answer had convicted the scribe. He knew that the Jewish religion consisted in outward ceremonies rather than inward piety. He had some sense of the worthlessness of mere ceremonial offerings, and the faithless shedding of blood for expiation of sin. Love and obedience to God, and unselfish regard for man, appeared to him of more value than all these rites. The readiness of this man to acknowledge the correctness of Christ’s reasoning, and his decided and prompt response before the people, manifested a spirit entirely different from that of the priests and rulers. The heart of Jesus went out in pity to the honest scribe who had dared to face the frowns of the priests and the threats of the rulers to speak the convictions of his heart. ‘And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, He said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.’”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 608.

**Taking what Jesus said, what the scribe said, and what Ellen White said, write what you believe it means for us, today, in the twenty-first century, to love God and love our neighbor. How can we show this love in a practical way? In what ways might we be deceiving ourselves about our so-called “love” for God and our neighbors? What changes might we need to make in our lives that will allow us to better follow these commandments? Share answers with each other in class.**

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soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength’” (*Mark 12:30, NKJV*).

But Jesus did not stop with the first commandment. He told the scribe that love to God has an inescapable corollary: “ ‘And the second, like it, is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” ’ ”

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** “Heathen people who observe brotherly love of Christians toward one another marveled at what they saw and cried out, ‘Behold, how they love one another!’ The renowned Roman lawyer Marcus Minucius Felix, who lived in the second century, became a true Christian, and he testified of the early Christians: ‘They loved one another, even before knowing one another (personally).’ Of course, many heathen people remained what they were and scoffed at Christianity. For example, Lucian, who also lived in the second century, and sneeringly wrote of them: ‘Their Master (Jesus Christ) has made them believe that they are all brethren.’” —*Bible Illustrator* (Parson’s Technology, 1997).

### Thought Questions:

- 1 There are families of murder victims and victims of other heinous crimes who are known to go beyond forgiveness. What do you think their reasons are for doing so? According to Jesus, is going the extra mile of forgiveness really necessary? Are such acts a result of guilt or of true conviction to loving their neighbor as themselves?
- 2 In His dealings with the Pharisees, Jesus was always put in a defensive position. He was made to justify His beliefs and actions. The Pharisees singled Him out because He was different from the other teachers of His time. Similarly, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is different from the other Protestant churches of its time. Our beliefs and actions also are questioned by the majority. How are we to react to this? How can we follow Jesus’ example?

### Application Questions:

- 1 In today’s world showing love and compassion to strangers can often invite danger. What role, if any, does common sense play in our attempts to live the commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself”? When would it be better to act collectively rather than individually?
- 2 Jesus never simply created rules and commandments as the Pharisees did. What can we learn about effective evangelism from the way Christ presented the law?

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 593–616.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is the resurrection of the dead something that we need to take only on faith? Or is there any evidence from the natural world that points to the resurrection of the dead? Do we need any natural evidence in order to believe in it?
- 2 Kathryn Cravens once wrote: “If a man is vain, flatter. If timid, flatter. If boastful, flatter. In all history, too much flattery never lost a gentleman.” Why do you think that people are so susceptible to flattery? How can we as Christians be on guard against both giving flattery or being taken in by it?
- 3 When do we cross the line between giving someone valid praise and flattering them?
- 4 Discuss as a class what your church could do, as a church, to show the world that you are a congregation of people who truly love God and love their neighbors. Are you doing anything as a church that would give anyone the idea that you are following those commandments, or is your church nothing more than a Saturday morning social club?
- 5 Discuss as a class what Jesus meant by rendering to God what’s God’s and rendering to Caesar what’s his. Think of the historical context in which Jesus made that statement. Why, if He had wanted, could He have justified rebellion against such a corrupt system? Why do you think He didn’t, and what lessons, if any, does that have for us today?

**Summary:** In this last, drama-filled day in the temple, we find Jesus put on the defensive but always in command of the situation, ever seeking to reach with His love those who hated Him.