Bartimaeus when he addresses Jesus as "Son of David," and Jesus himself insists that Bartimaeus come forward.

The reason the story reverses the pattern is that Jesus is on the verge of being crucified, and so secrecy is no longer needed. Up to this time, Jesus has attempted to hide his true identity so that people would not keep him from going to Jerusalem and being crucified. Immediately after the healing of Bartimaeus, Jesus arrives in the environs of Jerusalem. Now there is no longer any danger that he will escape death. Indeed, as we shall see, it is precisely by insisting publicly that he is the Messiah, God's Son, that Jesus will force his enemies to kill him.

Questions for Reflection:

Today does the proclamation that Jesus is God's Son comfort the world or fundamentally attack its assumptions and values? Will someone who truly represents "Christian values" have an easier or harder time getting elected to public office or rising in a corporation? Is it faith that heals or is it God? How does Christian faith work differently than such things as "positive thinking" and "self-actualization"?

32. Mark 11:1-25

And when they got near to Jerusalem to Bethphage and Bethany toward the Mount of Olives, he sent out two of his students by saying to them, "Go off into the village opposite you, and as you go into it, at once you will find a tethered colt on which no person has yet sat. Untie it and bring it. And if anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it, and at once he is going to send it back here.'" And they went away and found the colt tethered by a door outside on the street, and they untied it. And
some of those standing there said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” And they told them just what Jesus said, and they let them take it. And they brought the colt to Jesus, and they put their coats on it, and he sat on it. And many spread their coats on the road, and others cut down leafy branches from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed kept shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who is coming in the Lord’s name. Blessed is the coming rule of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” And he went into Jerusalem into the temple, and he looked around at everything, and since the hour was late already, he went out to Bethany with the twelve (11:1-11).

And on the next day, as they were coming out from Bethany, he became hungry. And when from a distance he saw a fig tree with leaves on it, he came to it to see if perhaps he would find something on it. And when he came to it, he found nothing except leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And in response he said to it, “From now on, may no one eat fruit from you forever!” And his students heard (11:12-14).

And they came into Jerusalem. And after he came into the temple, he began to drive out those who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold the doves. And he did not let anyone carry a vessel through the temple. And in his teaching he said to them, “Isn’t it written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a bandits’ den!” And the chief priests and the scribes heard it, and they sought how they might kill him, for they were afraid of him, for all the crowd was astonished over his teaching. And when it became late, he went out of the city (11:15-19).

And as they were going by early in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. And Peter was reminded and said to him, “Rabbi, see, the fig tree which you cursed has withered.” And in reply Jesus said to them, “Have faith in God. Truly I say to you that whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea!’ and does not waver in their heart but believes that what they say will take place, they will have it. For this reason I tell you,
believe that everything you pray and ask for that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, forgive if you are holding anything against anyone, so your Father in heaven will also forgive you your trespasses” (11:20–25).

We must suppose that, in the oral tradition, Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his protest in the temple courts, and the cursing of the fig tree were all independent stories. People would have had difficulty remembering connections between them and surely would have told them separately, at least on occasion. It is striking that John’s gospel does tell the cleansing of the temple separately and, indeed, places it at an earlier point in Jesus’ ministry (John 2:13–22).

Mark however, carefully weaves these stories together. At the conclusion of the triumphant entry, Jesus goes into the temple courts and looks around but does nothing further because “the hour was late already.” Instead, he goes to Bethany. As he is returning to the temple the next day, he curses a fig tree, but apparently nothing happens to the tree immediately. Jesus next stages a protest in the temple and again withdraws from Jerusalem. The following morning, he and his disciples pass the fig tree which now is completely withered.

Because of this interweaving, the fig tree and its fate symbolize the temple. By placing the cleansing of the temple between the cursing of the fig tree and its actual destruction, Mark invites the reader to compare the tree and the sacred place. Just as the fig tree has leaves but no fruit, so the temple is outwardly beautiful but spiritually barren. Just as the fig tree is destroyed after a short interval, so too in a short time the temple will be destroyed. Later, we will see that this destruction occurred about the time Mark was writing and thus had a special significance for his intended readers.

The cursing of the fig tree also brings to a climax the series of decreasing miracles due to decreasing faith. Earlier, we saw how two previous miracles, the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22–26) and the healing of the epileptic boy
(9:14–29) required a little time to take effect. Now, with the fig tree, the miracle apparently does not occur for an entire day. Then, when Peter sees that the tree has withered, he seems to be surprised. In response, Jesus exhorts the disciples to have faith and assures them that if only they do not doubt, they will even be able to move mountains. The implication is clear. The disciples’ lack of faith made the fig tree wither so slowly.

Jesus is free to encourage the crowd to acclaim him because at this point, that very acclamation will lead to his death. Now that he has arrived in the vicinity of Jerusalem, Jesus sets in motion the events that will necessitate his rejection and execution. Thus, Jesus orchestrates the triumphant entry. He sends the disciples to get the colt and rides into the city. The crowd responds by proclaiming that he is the one who comes in the Lord’s name, and in this context, the acclamation suggests clearly that he is the Messiah. Indeed, the crowd exclaims: “Blessed is the coming rule of our father David.” Next, Jesus stages a dramatic—even violent—protest in the temple. The combination of the triumphant entry and the temple demonstration inflames popular enthusiasm, and this acclamation in turn forces the authorities to plot to kill Jesus. Mark explicitly states, “They sought how they might kill him, for they were afraid of him, for all the crowd was astonished over his teaching.” Significantly, this sentence was probably added by Mark, since the story of the cleansing of the temple is complete without it.

Questions for Reflection:

Is the church today sometimes outwardly beautiful and successful but spiritually barren? If so, what leads to this paradox? If a church is spiritually barren, will it ultimately be destroyed if it does not repent? Is it true today that no matter what we ask for in prayer we will receive it if we believe?
And they came back into Jerusalem. And as he was walking about in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things? Or who gave you this authority to do them?” And Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one thing, and you answer me. Then I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. Was John’s baptism from heaven or from human beings? Answer me.” And they discussed it with one another saying, “What are we to say? If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘so why did you not believe him?’ but are we to say, ‘From human beings’?” They were afraid of the crowd, for all held that John actually was a prophet. And in reply to Jesus they said, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Nor am I going to tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (11:27-33).

And he began to speak to them in parables, “A person planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a pit for the wine press and built a tower and leased it to tenant farmers and went off on a journey. At the proper time, he sent out a slave to the tenants to receive from the tenants some of the vineyard’s fruit. And they took him and beat him and sent him out empty-handed. And again he sent out another slave to them. And that one they hit on the head and insulted. And he sent out another, and that one they killed. And many others, some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one more person, a beloved son. He sent him out last to them, saying, ‘They will be shamed by my son.’ But those tenants said to each other, ‘This is the heir! Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!’ And they seized and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. So what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and will give the vineyard to others. And haven’t you read this scripture, ‘A stone that the builders rejected, this has become the cornerstone. This is from the
Lord, and in our eyes it is wonderful’?" And they wished to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd, for they knew that he had spoken the parable against them. And they left him and went away (12:1-12).

And they sent out to him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to catch him in his talk. And they came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are true, and court no one’s favor, for you do not show partiality, but you teach truly the way of God. Is it allowed to give poll tax to Caesar or not? Shall we give it or shall we not?” But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius so I may see it.” And they brought one. And he said to them, “Whose is this image and inscription?” And they said to him, “Caesar’s.” And Jesus said to them, “Give Caesar’s things back to Caesar, and God’s to God.” And they were astounded at him (12:13-17).

And the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him, and they asked him, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if someone’s brother dies and leaves behind a wife and does not leave a child, his brother is to take the wife and raise up an offspring for his brother. There were seven brothers. And the first took a wife and, when he died, did not leave an offspring. And the second took her and died and did not leave behind an offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven did not leave an offspring. Last of all, the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as a wife.” Jesus said to them, “Is it not for this reason that you are mistaken, that you know neither the Scriptures nor God’s power? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But concerning the dead that they are raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am Abraham’s God, and Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God’? He is not God of the dead but of the living. You are much mistaken” (12:18-27).

And one of the scribes who had heard them debating and saw that he answered them well came to him and asked him, “Which commandment is first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Listen,
Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole mind and your whole strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these.” And the scribe said to him, “Well spoken, teacher! You have said the truth that he is the only one, and there is no other than he, and to love him with the whole heart and with the whole understanding and with the whole strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much greater than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered thoughtfully, he said to him, “You are not far from God's rule.” And no one any longer dared to question him (12:28–34).

And in response, Jesus said, as he was teaching in the temple, “How can the scribes say that the Messiah is David's Son? David himself said by the Holy Spirit, 'The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right until I put your enemies underneath your feet.”'” David himself calls him 'Lord.' So how is he his son?” And the great crowd heard him gladly (12:35–37).

In this section, Mark has grouped together a number of originally independent stories in which Jesus spars with various Jewish authorities. Thus, we have a confrontation between Jesus and the chief priests, scribes, and elders over the source of his authority. Then, Jesus tells a parable in which he foretells that they will kill him and ultimately be destroyed themselves. After that, he evades a trap set by the Pharisees and Herodians concerning paying taxes to Caesar. Next, he replies to the Sadducees who try to show that resurrection is impossible. A more friendly dialogue follows between Jesus and a scribe about which commandment is central. Finally, Jesus himself asks his hearers to judge whether the scribes are correct when they claim that the Messiah is David's son.

Of course, these stories taken individually contain some of the most important teaching in Mark. For example, as Jesus insists, loving God and loving your neighbor are crucial.
Scarcely less important is faith in the resurrection, which Jesus eloquently defends against the sophistry of the Sadducees.

Within the structure of the gospel as a whole, however, what is especially significant about these stories is that in them Jesus publicly suggests that he is God’s Son, and he does so in order to provoke opposition. Thus, both the opening and the closing of the section hint strongly that Jesus is God’s Son. The section opens with Jesus suggesting that his authority comes from the same source as John’s baptism, and that can only mean directly from God. The following parable about the vineyard owner and the tenants is a transparent allegory in which the owner of the vineyard is God and his Son is none other than Jesus himself. Moreover, in case Jesus’ hearers—or Mark’s readers—somehow miss the point, Mark then adds a scriptural citation about a rejected stone becoming the cornerstone. The stone in question is Jesus. Jesus, therefore, is God’s Son, and God will exalt him as the “cornerstone” of the coming kingdom. The closing unit in the series also generously hints that Jesus is more than a mere human being. By showing that the Messiah is David’s Lord, Jesus clearly implies that the Messiah is not David’s son, but God’s. Of course, such claims help provoke opposition. At the end of the parable about the vineyard we read, “They wished to arrest him . . . for they knew that he had spoken the parable against them.” In the closing story, Jesus is attacking the scribes directly, since it is they who erroneously teach that the Messiah is merely David’s son.

Because Jesus is fanning opposition which will lead to his death, Mark emphasizes that he is no longer trying to avoid public acclaim. On the contrary, Mark concludes the series of confrontations between the authorities and Jesus with the striking sentence, “The great crowd heard him gladly.”
Questions for Reflection:

If we loved God and Jesus above all else, would we be more popular today or less? To love God above all else, must we believe that “the Lord our God is the one Lord”? If there is one God and Jesus is his only Son, what belongs to Caesar?

34. Mark 12:38-44

And in his teaching he said, “Watch out for the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets, who eat up widows’ houses and for appearance pray at length. These will receive severe condemnation” (12:38-40).

And he sat opposite the treasury and watched how the crowd was throwing money into the treasury. And many rich people were throwing in much. And one poor widow came and threw in two copper coins which equal a quadrant. And he summoned his students and said to them, “Truly I tell you that this poor widow threw in more than all who were throwing into the treasury. For they were throwing in from their abundance, but this woman from her scarcity threw in all that she had, her whole living” (12:41-44).

Mark ends the confrontation between Jesus and his enemies by reminding the reader that Jesus rejects religious leaders who seek their own comfort and praises all who are self-sacrificing. Jesus concludes his attack on the scribes by emphasizing that they seek social prestige and exploit the helpless. He contrasts this self-seeking with the generosity of a poor widow who gives away all that she has. Significantly, Mark tells us that Jesus held up the widow as an example to his students.
Mark is making the same point here to the reader that he made with the passion predictions. Christians—especially, Christian leaders—who seek their own good will come to eternal ruin, whereas those who deny themselves will imitate Jesus and receive his praise. It is also significant that in the next section, Mark will directly attack Christian leaders of his own time.

Questions for Reflection:
Do Christians today sometimes pray only for appearance’s sake? What are the marks of genuine prayer? Do the poor contribute more than the rich?

35. Mark 13:1–37

And as he was going out of the temple, one of his students said to him, “Teacher, look what stones and what buildings!” And Jesus said to him, “You see these great buildings? There will not be left here a stone on top of a stone that will not be thrown down” (13:1–2).

And as he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us when these things will be and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished” (13:3–4).

And Jesus began to say to them, “Watch out, lest anyone mislead you. Many will come in my name saying, ‘I am he,’ and they will mislead many (13:5–6).

“But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. It must happen, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These things