

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

Palm Sunday 2026

“Which Character Would We Be?”

Mark 11:1-19

Take a first look.

I. In the 1980s and 90s, we listened to a gospel-country-pop singer named **Don Francisco** (not the Latin TV personality). He is the author of the song, “He’s Alive!” about Jesus’ resurrection. Around the time he wrote that, he also recorded a song called “Everybody Else But Me.” Here are how some of those lyrics ran:

“Way back there in Jesus’ time
The Pharisees walked so proud.
They thought that they had the way to God;
They prayed their prayers out loud.

But Jesus said they’d have hell to pay
For the pretense and the games they played.
I’m glad that’s not like us today;
We wouldn’t act like that.”

Everybody else but me, everybody else but me,
We’re talking ‘bout those hypocrites and Pharisees—
Everybody else but me.”

II. Um, we hope so. But we can’t miss the irony in the song, can we? Where might we fit in the story of Jesus if He were to come back today? Which character might be closest to us right now?

III. Let’s use our imaginations in the story of Palm Sunday. There are several important players in the narrative of Jesus’ return to Jerusalem. Which might we be?

Take a closer look at Mark 11:1ff. Which would we be?

I. Would we have been the faithful disciples?

1. They practiced risky obedience when they fetched the donkey. All they had to go on was, “The Lord sent us.” And yet, they took the risk and went.

2. They openly worshiped and identified with Jesus without shame. The last time Jesus and His disciples were in Jerusalem, things had gotten quite tense. In fact, the disciples knew that the religious leaders were plotting to kill Jesus. John 11 makes this clear. When word came to Jesus and the disciples that their friend Lazarus was deathly ill, after two days, Jesus said, “Let us go to Judea again” (John 11:7, ESV). Then, John tells us, “The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?’” After further teaching, John reports, “So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him’” (John 11:16). They were under no illusion what identifying with Jesus openly and shamelessly might cost them, but they were willing to do so, anyway.

A—Are we willing to identify clearly and openly with Jesus regardless of how others might react?

I—Take the example of Charlie Kirk. Whatever else we think of his politics, he was a serious and unashamed witness to Jesus Christ as Lord, and he called others to become the same. He called people to recognize the moral precepts that Jesus taught, and he opened debate and discussion with anyone anywhere, especially on university campuses, about these precepts and about what he believed about politics. He believed in free speech and grimly warned that when we quit talking with each other, even arguing with each other, that's when things turn dark and deadly. He was all too right, wasn't he?

II. Would we have been among the cheering crowd?

1. The crowds shouted “Hosanna!” meaning, “Save us!” but did they understand what that might involve? The sentiment was great, but were they quite sure what being “saved” by Jesus might mean?

2. They were expressing a wish to have something for themselves, but did they really recognize Jesus for Who He should be? They wanted salvation—perhaps political and national salvation from Roman occupation—but did they really want a Savior for their souls? Did they want a Savior Who would call them to “deny [themselves], take up [their] cross, and follow [Him]”? (see Mark 16:24).

A—Are we merely admirers of Jesus, or are we truly His disciples?
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I—Christians in Rwanda faced this question. Back in 1994, the Hutu tribe formed militias and strategically and violently attacked Tutsi and moderate Hutu tribal people in Rwanda. An estimated 800,000 people were murdered in the span between April and July. Christians were killed inside their church buildings, hacked to death with machetes, even by their neighbors. Their longstanding tribal rivalry overlapped with politics, and the result was a horrible bloodbath. I read one Christian leader's interpretation of this, when the question came up: How could professing Christians take part in such a violent and cruel uprising? His answer stuck with me. He said that there had been a massive revival prior to that event during which many people had come to profess faith in Jesus Christ. But they were lacking real discipleship. They had not been taught the Scriptures. They knew enough to profess faith in Jesus as Savior and to gather to sing songs of worship, but they had no idea what He wanted for their lives and their relationships. So, when the historic tribal rivalry boiled over, the Hutu people just aligned with their tribe and started killing Tutsis.

I wonder if the cheering crowd had some of these folks in it when Jesus came back to Jerusalem? They knew enough about Him to recognize Him as a miracle-worker, but they had never really become His disciples. They had not listened to His teaching and taken it to heart. Might some of them have joined in a week later when the crowds, led by their esteemed religious leaders, called for His death. How easily “Hosanna!” can turn into “Crucify Him!” As others have observed, Jesus did not call us to *admire* Him; He called us to *follow* Him.

III. Would we have been like the money-changers and merchants?

1. The money-changers and merchants were offering a legitimate service: sacrificial offerings to present in the temple. When Jesus found these guys selling sacrifices in the temple, He drove them out. But, we might ask, were they not providing a useful service to those who came to the temple from a distance? They needed the proper sacrificial animals to offer for their worship of Yahweh, did they not?

2. But these guys had moved right into the outer court of the temple, robbing travelers of any space to worship. The location in the temple in which they were buying and selling was called “the Court of the Gentiles.” This space is where people who had come to believe in the God of

Israel, even from outside of the bounds of the nation, could come and worship. They could not enter, because it was crowded with money changers and merchants. They had found a way to make a tidy living from selling their religious wares. They were using their professed religion for their own gain. The gospels tell this story, some with more emphasis and graphic detail. “My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations!” Jesus roared, “but you have made it a den of robbers!” They might have begun this practice as a genuine service to their fellow-worshippers, but it had turned into a business enterprise only.

A—Are we just into religion for what we can get out of it, or are we truly Jesus-followers?
Which is the means and which is the end?

I—Bill Clinton was a member of a Southern Baptist Church in Arkansas back in the 1990s before and after he was president of the United States. His marital unfaithfulness is well-known (including clear evidence that he had sex with a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office). So, as a faithful church member, was he truly following Jesus or was he identifying with his local culture to win votes? Well, God ultimately knows, but I have my doubts about President Clinton’s sincerity.

Paul wrote to Timothy to train him in perspectives and practices of Christian leadership. By the time Timothy was emerging as a Christian leader in his own right, Paul warned him to beware of those who used their religion as a means to their own ends. Paul spoke rather sternly about such inverted means and ends.

1 Timothy 6:2b-10 (ESV):

These are the things you should teach and insist on. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness,⁴ he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions,⁵ and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.⁶ But godliness with contentment is great gain,⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.⁸ But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”

Note the key phrases: “... imagining that godliness is a means of gain” (v. 5b). “If we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (v. 8). “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (v. 10a—all from the ESV).

I seem to be thinking about the 1980s a lot lately, though I have often said, “I skipped the 80s.” 😊 **We had friends in the 1980s who joined Amway**, a multilevel, direct-sales company offering high-priced soap and vitamins. They told us that they were going to become wealthy within 5 or so years, and that they would be able to support the work of the church fully at that time. But in the meantime, they would be too busy getting their business going to be involved much in the church. With predictability, they fell out of fellowship until their Amway business became a dead end. Slowly, they returned to church life, and these decades later, I am happy to report, they have been involved for many years in growing and serving faithfully.

Some years ago, after I had married, had kids, gone back to the university, and moved back to the town where I attended high school, I became the pastor of the church my father had started in that community. During high school, I had gradually wandered away from following Jesus. I thought it was too important to make friends and keep them than to be faithful to Jesus. I was a coward. But then, after 8 years away, I had become the pastor of the same church my parents had established. One day, I stopped at a **service station** to fill up our car with gas. The station was right at the corner of the state highway and the road that led by the city park, up a hill, and to our church’s facilities. When I walked into the building to pay for my gas, I was surprised to be met by a man with whom I

had graduated from high school and who had been one of my set of friends. He greeted me and then I asked, "How are things with you?" He then launched into his grand scheme to buy that station, to expand his operation by purchasing several more, and to make a small fortune. The room filled up with smoke, figuratively speaking. When he had exhausted his lofty plans, he said, "Frank, what are you doing nowadays?" I took a deep breath and replied, "I am pastoring the church right up the street at the top of the hill." Without a moment's hesitation, he exclaimed, "What!? There's no money in that!" I calmly answered, "Well, [insert his name here], there are other motivations in life than just money." He just shook his head in wonder. At some stage, all of us need to check our motivations. Why do we do what we do? Are we seeking the glory of God in all we do, or are we just in it for ourselves?

IV. Are we more like the religious leaders?

1. Jesus exposed their pretense. They were big on recognition, and not so big on being genuine in their hearts before God. Jesus confronted their hypocrisy directly:

"Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,² 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others" (Matthew 23:1-7, ESV). They preached one way and lived another.

A—We must practice what we preach. Otherwise, we are under the judgment of God.

I—As a current example, **Muslim clerics in Iran preached the absolute subjection of women to men, requiring women to wear the hijab as a symbol of their subjection.** Yet, there are photos making the rounds on social media of those Islamic brokers of power whose children are living the high life in freer countries. They preach one way, and they live another, as it is often said, "Rules for thee and not for me."

It was similar for **the Governor of California back during the height of Covid 19 restrictions.** People in California and many other places, were not allowed to go to restaurants and sit down to eat. Governor Gavin Newsom had just released tighter restrictions on everyone. They could order take-out, but that was all. Yet, Governor Newsom and a small crowd of his friends were photographed enjoying fine dining at a posh restaurant called The French Laundry in Napa Valley, California—unmasked and without "social distancing." He later offered a rather lame apology, saying, "We're all human. We all fall short sometimes." Oh, my. "Rules for thee and not for me" (and mine). Jesus did not make some rules for the commoner and others for the elite. If anything, he held the leaders to a higher standard (see James 3:1 for a clear statement of this).

2. Jesus threatened their power. It is telling that the gospels recount the arrest and "trial" of Jesus in some detail. When the Roman governor Pilate was debating with the Jewish elders about Jesus' innocence, we are given this simple insight by Matthew (27:18, ESV): "For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up." Then later, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the same motive is demonstrated in the religious leaders' opposition to the preaching of the apostles. They were "filled with jealousy" at the Apostles' empowered and courageous ministry (see Acts 5:17). And then later, when Paul and Barnabas were preaching and crowds were gathering to hear them in Antioch of Pisidia, the Jewish leaders were again "filled with jealousy" and did all they could do to oppose them. The truth is,

A—Are we willing to recognize that Jesus is Lord of all, and submit our human positions of power to Him? At a fundamental level, we have One Master, even though for a while in this life, we have various structures of legitimate authority.

I—On that tragic morning of September 11, 2001, The Brooklyn Tabernacle lost four of its members. One victim was a police officer. The officer's funeral was held at the church building, and Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York City, had been asked to share a few thoughts. In his book *You Were Made for More*, Jim Cymbala, pastor of The Brooklyn Tabernacle, records what the mayor shared with the audience that morning:

“You know people, I've learned something through all this. Let me see if I can express it to you.

When everybody was fleeing that building, and the cops and the firefighters and the EMS people were heading up into it, do you think any of them said, ‘I wonder how many blacks are up there for us to save? I wonder what percentage are whites up here? How many Jews are there? Let's see—are these people making \$400,000 a year, or \$24,000, or—?’

“No, when you're saving lives, they're all precious. And that's how we're supposed to live all the time. How would you want the cops to treat you if you were on the seventy-fifth floor that day? Would you want them to say, “Excuse me, but I've got to get the bosses out first”? Not exactly.

“I confess I haven't always lived this way. But I'm convinced that God wants us to do it. He wants us to value every human life the way he does.”

“The words of the mayor moved everyone who had gathered that day for the funeral.

Cymbala concludes:

“I sat there thinking, *My goodness, the mayor is preaching a truth that has eluded so many of our churches throughout New York and the country!* He may have stood for other policies that I could not agree with, but on that day, he was right on the mark. The truth of what he said penetrated my heart.”¹

Take it home (applications).

I. So, as Jesus approaches our lives, **which of these are we more like?**

1. The religious leaders, who were jealous of Jesus' influence, resisted what He offered to them
2. The crowd cheered, but we are not sure that they really meant it from the heart.
3. The merchants and the money-changers were in religion for their own profit.
4. But, the disciples understood what Jesus truly came to do and teach, and they were all-in.

II. Which one are we?

¹ Jim Cymbala, *You Were Made for More* (Zondervan, 2008), pp. 94-96.