

Matthew 21:18-32 – “Exposing the Fruitlessness of Israel’s Leaders”

Last week we looked at the Triumphal Entry of Jesus. It was the first time Jesus allowed Himself to be publicly praised as the Messiah. It was a great day but what we’re going to be seeing is that the praises of the people began to fade away as they started to realize that Jesus wasn’t coming to fulfill their expectations of the Messiah.

We’re in the last few days of Jesus public ministry before going to the cross. Everything we’ve looked at so far in the book of Matthew has been leading to this moment.

So after Jesus cleans house in the temple and confronts the religious leaders on their corruption and greed, He leaves and retreats to Bethany, a town just outside Jerusalem. The last few days here centers in on Jerusalem and is meant to show us that the nation of Israel had by and large rejected their king. Jesus will expose this over the last few days and ultimately is meant to provide one last occasion to accept Him.

Summary Statement: Jesus reveals the fruitlessness of Israel and reminds them, and us, that the way to God is available to all who will surrender to Him and submit to His will.

Now going to Bethany was a familiar place for Jesus. Most likely he stayed in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, close friends that have popped in from time to time throughout the gospels. I’d think Jesus had an open invitation here. I mean, what’s Lazarus gonna say, *‘It’s not really a good time right now Jesus.’* All Jesus needs to say is, *‘Hey Lazarus, remember that time you died...’* 😂

So Jesus leaves Bethany the next morning to return to Jerusalem...

1. The Rebuke of the Fig Tree – 21:18-22

21:18-19 - *Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, “Let no fruit grow on you ever again.” Immediately the fig tree withered away.*

As Jesus makes His way into Jerusalem, He was hungry. Apparently He left before Martha woke up because she probably would have had a 5 course breakfast waiting for Him. Bless her heart.

As Jesus sees this fig tree, He comes to it expecting to get some figs and satisfy His hunger. But there was nothing on it but leaves. So He curses it and immediately the fig tree withered away.

Mark's gospel is the only other gospel to include this account, and it provides some added information for us. It says in **Mark 11:13**, *"And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs."*

Now you can read this and think, if it's not the season for figs, what's Jesus getting so upset about? Is He dealing with some low blood sugar levels? Is He just hangry? Not at all. The issue is that this fig tree put on a show of being fruitful, but was in actuality producing no fruit.

- Normally fig trees don't have leaves without also having figs. If you saw leaves on a fig tree you could expect fruit to be accompanying it.
- This particular fig tree was putting on a display that fruit was present when it was bearing none.

This whole event became an illustrated sermon of sorts for the disciples. In the Old Testament the fig tree was used as a symbol of the nation of Israel.

- **Hosea 9:10**, *"I found Israel Like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers As the firstfruits on the fig tree in its first season. But they went to Baal Peor, And separated themselves to that shame; They became an abomination like the thing they loved."*
- **Joel 1:7**, *"He has laid waste My vine, And ruined My fig tree; He has stripped it bare and thrown it away; Its branches are made white."*

The nation of Israel was just like the fig tree that Jesus cursed. Much of Israel (especially their religious leaders) had put on a show of religion, yet they were lacking any real fruit. They pretended to be representatives of God when their hearts were not really even devoted to God.

The leaves represent religion; it's the works we can try and add in our lives to appear righteous.

- Remember Adam and Eve covered themselves in fig leaves to make themselves presentable to God. But that's not what God had for them. Fig leaves are going to irritate you. Such is the case with religion. We need Jesus and His free gift of salvation. He alone presents us as righteous.

Jesus came to the lost sheep of Israel hoping to see a people respond in repentance and receive Him as their rightful King and Messiah. He longed to see the fruit of righteousness in their lives but because He found dead religion, and because they were unwilling to receive Him, their fate would be the same as the fig tree. The days will come in the very near future where Israel would be stripped of its leaves, and the people and their center of legalistic religion would be sacked by the Romans.

When they could have been rejoicing at the inauguration of the kingdom of God, they will instead be reeling from the judgment that is to come. This judgment is clearly symbolized in the cleaning of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree.

May we be those that are bearing fruit and not getting caught up in living hypocritical lives of trying to put on a show of righteousness when our hearts are not close to God. And that's the key to bearing fruit – just abide in Jesus. Live your life connected to Him where you are not moving away from a daily dependency of Him.

21:20-22 - *And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither away so soon?”²¹ So Jesus answered and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done.²² And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”*

When these disciples saw the response of the fig tree they marveled. They were astonished at seeing this. They questioned how this could have happened. So Jesus uses this as an opportunity to talk about faith.

The lesson here is that faith is a very important resource for overcoming obstacles. And it's not faith in faith. We're not being told to drum up some magical formula to create this faith, it's the object of your faith that is the difference maker. It's faith in a great God. He's the object. It's not about how much faith we have, it's about where our faith is directed. We aren't relying on our faith to do the work, we're relying on God by faith.

Now if God wants to move a mountain, then He can move a mountain. This doesn't have to be the litmus test for our faith.

- In fact, the term mountain was used metaphorically to speak of a difficulty or insurmountable problem. Rabbis often used that sort of language. So to move mountains spoke of the removal of difficulties.

What was the difficulty people were encountering in this day? In our context the people were encountering a difficulty in coming freely to God. There were hypocritical leaders in Israel placing burdens on the people to live a holy life through outward religious practice. It wasn't getting them closer to God but rather putting them in a legalistic bind that restricted them from God.

So if you will have faith to believe that you can come to God, then every obstacle will be removed.

Now verse 22 has been a verse many Christians just love. It's circled and highlighted in their Bibles until it's worn out. But let me clarify some things for us, because this has been taken by many in the name it and claim it, blab it and grab it, prosperity over poverty groups to speak into existence whatever you want.

- Remember, Jesus is not speaking about faith to add things into your life, but faith that will remove things that are hindering you from walking in the fruitful life that God desires for you. Some of you may still be thinking, *'Yea, I'd be super fruitful if I had a few hundred extra G's in the bank.'*

But when interpreting and understanding a verse like this, we must take into account what the Word says elsewhere about these things.

- **John 14:13–14**, *"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."* [See also John 16:23-24]
- **1 John 5:14–15**, *"Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him."*
- **Matthew 6:9–10**, *"In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven."*

In other words, it's the prayer that is in alignment with His will that is answered. And in this case, we know it's in God's will for us to draw closer to Him and be

fruitful. So when we pray for the obstacles to be removed that hinder this, then we can pray that in confidence for it to be done and that it will be done.

2. Jesus' Authority Questioned Again – 21:23-27

21:23 - *Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"*

So here's Jesus coming back into the temple. The chief priests and elders are getting a little nervous. They've just got the tables set back up and dusted off with their currency converters in place and they're worried Jesus is going to start flipping things again.

As Jesus is teaching, they come and ask Him by what authority He's doing all these things by. Imagine the nerve to interrupt Jesus as He's teaching?

- Now these religious leaders were the guardians of Judaism. They were to protect it and be sure nobody was coming in and misleading people. But they should have well recognized by now who Jesus was.
- Nicodemus, a Pharisee, said it well when He came to Jesus at night and said, "*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him*" (**John 3:2**).
- So it's been pretty obvious, but these guys don't want to accept it.

21:24-27 - *But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: ²⁵ The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.*

Jesus throws a question back at them to get them to think through what they're asking. He's not ready to give them a clear answer because He knows they're not going to accept it anyways.

So Jesus asks them about John the Baptists baptism (ie. his whole message and ministry) – was it from heaven or from men?

- This was common rabbinic debate technique. You answer a question with a question.

They didn't answer right away because they were wise to these kinds of tactics. They knew how to trap people, and they see a trap is being set for them. Whatever way they answer this, they know they're going to be in trouble.

John had come as the forerunner of the Messiah. He was a spokesman for God. John spoke to these religious leaders saying, *'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance...'* (Luke 3:7-8)

John would also say of Jesus, *'He must increase, but I must decrease.'* *'I'm not worthy to untie His sandals.'* *'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'*

What John did was put them in their place, and elevate Jesus.

These guys are in a real pickle. If they say John's baptism was from heaven, Jesus will challenge them for not receiving him. If they say it wasn't from heaven, then the crowds will come against these religious leaders because they all believed John to be a prophet.

So they try now to downplay it. ***'We do not know...'*** they say. So Jesus says, ***neither will I tell you*** of my authority.

- We know that if they were to be given the answer, they wouldn't have received it anyways. They already proved that with John.
- In like manner, so many doubters today are not needing proof of the existence of God, they need to believe the truth that's already revealed.

3. Parable of the Two Sons – 21:28-32

21:28-32 - "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.'* ²⁹ *He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. ³⁰ Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him."

In this parable we see a father give the same command to two of his sons, but the responses were very different. The second son is a reference or picture of the Jewish religious leaders. They're the ones that have put on a display of following God and doing His will, but they have been far from it. They've lacked fruit and obedience. They said, *'We're Your guys God'*, but they have not followed through.

Whereas the son that said no to begin with had a change of heart and got on board later on to do the Father's work. That son is a picture of those who originally did not believe but came around at a later time.

- Jesus refers to them in vs. 31 as the tax collectors and harlots. These were people that these Jewish leaders would have looked at as the scum of society. But Jesus says something that would have shook these leaders – this scum of society is entering the kingdom of God ahead of you because they repented.

And Jesus ties in the earlier discussion about John by saying John came to them presenting the way of righteousness but they did not receive it. The tax collectors and harlots did believe it and receive it, but the religious leaders still did not repent.

It's sad that many who feel like they're good moral people, or religious, often fail to see the need for repentance. It's the ones that recognize their sinfulness that are ready to receive the good news of the gospel.

Let this be a reminder as well that there is nobody that is too far gone. God is always ready to welcome the most wretched of society into a relationship with Him when they come with a repented heart.

Points to Ponder:

1. A life surrendered to God is meant to be fruitful.
2. A life surrendered to God is meant to be lived according to His will.
3. A life surrendered to God is meant to see our need for daily repentance.