

# Matthew 21:18–32

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 14 January 2024

Preacher: Bing Nieh

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Again, that's Matthew 21, 18-32. In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry.

And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, May no fruit ever come from you again.

And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How did the fig tree wither at once? And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith. And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching and said, By what authority are you doing these things?

And who gave you this authority? Jesus answered them, I also will ask you one question. And if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things.

[ 1 : 1 2 ] The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man? And they discussed it among themselves, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say to us, Why then did you not believe him?

But if we say from man, we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We do not know.

And he said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. What do you think? A man has two sons. And he went up to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today.

And he answered, I will not. But afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir.

But he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.

[ 2 : 1 8 ] For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. By way of reminder, if you would be helped by a physical Bible, we do have copies in the back on that little library cart.

And on your way in Sunday morning, feel free to take hold of those and use them as they're for you. Let's just pray before we make our way.

Father, we thank you that you are not a silent God. That you are not mute. That you are not aloof, indifferent, uncaring.

But as the song has requested that you would speak. That you would speak through your word, by your spirit, through your messenger.

[ 3 : 3 6 ] And as you speak, may we be those who are attentive listeners. Eager to hear what the word of the Lord has to say.

And so help us in these 30 minutes, we pray. We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. I recall the day vividly.

I was working my first job post-graduation as an engineer. And the day arrived where we received several large crates. Huge wooden crates.

And as we crowbarred them open carefully inside were the remains of the Columbia part, some of the remains of the Columbia space shuttle that had crashed in 2003.

For those of you who are unaware or unborn, the Columbia space shuttle crashed on February 1, 2003. It broke apart as it entered the Earth's atmosphere and all seven members died.

[ 4 : 52 ] Disaster occurred over Texas and while it was approaching Florida, Kennedy Space Center for its landing. My job required me to take the pieces that I had and to analyze portions of the space shuttle's foam to try and see if there were any failures in its structural integrity.

I was to inspect it, to scan it, to measure it, to take density measurements to see what could have gone wrong.

I, among with, there were a lot of people doing this all over the country. But you may know an investigation later determined that the catastrophe was caused by a piece of foam insulation that dislodged during reentry, damaged the shuttle's left wing and caused the tragic accident.

I was there only to inspect the parts after the tragedy. But you don't have to live long to realize that inspections are part of life.

Food is inspected at the source to ensure quality. Businesses are inspected and audited to ensure honesty and legitimacy.

[ 6 : 18 ] Cars are inspected post-production to guarantee safety, and used cars are inspected for emissions.

Technology is inspected after production to guarantee its functionality. Inspections take place all the time and in all places. They are required to ensure quality.

What was intended at the beginning is actually being achieved at the end. If inspections are failed, evaluations are conducted, products at times discarded or changed, and people are held accountable.

I open this way because this morning Jesus shares the results of an inspection. He had processed, as we saw last week, into the city of Jerusalem.

To the shouts and the acclamation of the crowds. He had come to Jerusalem, the capital city, which was stirred by his arrival. His first stop is the temple, the building entrusted to lead and model religious sincerity, devotion, and holiness.

[ 7 : 34 ] And instead of finding devotion, sincerity, holiness, and faith, He finds exploitation and corruption.

A building that was designed to usher people into the presence of God had become an instrument of misuse, taking advantage of the people it was intended to serve.

Frankly, the temple had been weaponized, robbing the people it was designed to protect. That which was intended to serve people had resorted to stealing from them.

And it's certainly sad and catastrophic. And even today, we find churches doing the same. Jesus' re-entry into the city and the temple is found in our text this morning.

Jesus, the inspector, has returned, and the results of his inspection are issued. They had failed. The religious establishment was fruitless, faithless, and futile.

[ 8 : 50 ] And our text this morning, it's going to sound maybe jarring, wants to assert that the one who has all the authority calls us to have faith in him.

My aim this morning is to show you just that. Heaven's authority summons us to faith in him. And we'll undertake the text in two parts this morning, though I think we'll see that they're interwoven. Verses 18 to 22, you'll see we find condemnation. Followed by a confrontation, verses 23 through 32.

Jesus' condemnation of the religious system in Israel leads to a confrontation with her religious leaders. Firstly, condemnation.

Jesus submits his report from his inspection of the temple. We know he's already fed up. He has driven the buyers and the sellers out of the temple.

[ 9 : 52 ] He has overturned the tables of the money changers, as we saw last week. The place where the nations were to gather for prayer had become a place where religious leaders would wring out money, all the money it could from those worshipping.

The temple had become a means of making profit. And as Jesus reenters the city, Jesus provides an evaluation through an interesting miracle.

It's interesting in that it is a destructive miracle. It's the only one of its kind in the Bible. A miracle that instead of bringing life, actually brings death.

In his hunger, he approaches a fig tree, and he sees it full of leaves but absent of fruit. And he verbally pronounces a curse upon it. The fig tree immediately withers and dies.

Jesus is looking for fruit, but all he finds is the appearance of fruit. The leaves are but a show of life, but lack the significance of fruit.

[11:00] It looks good from far away, but up close it contains nothing. You see, a fruit tree that is fruitless, after inspection, does not serve its purpose.

It's intended to yield fruit, to provide sustenance, but this fig tree only yielded leaves. In the language of the Bible, it should be gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

And this is what it means. See, it's an indictment. This is the result. These are the results of my inspection, Jesus is saying. I've walked into the city.

I've entered the temple. And what I observe is fruitless. It had all the pomp and the circumstance. The grandiose temple.

The thorough religious system with its festivals, its rituals, and its holidays. Signs of religion, but absent of genuine faith and life.

[12:07] In modern speak, it had all the light, lights, the smoke machines, the crowd, the hype. But that's all it had. Light, smoke, crowds, and hype.

Jesus, as judge, condemns Jerusalem's religious leadership for her failure to be a light to the nations.

Instead of receiving Jesus' commendation, they receive his scathing condemnation. And in the same way the religious leaders had choked and withered the spiritual life out of the nation, the religious leaders and the temple itself would wither like a fruitless fig tree.

Jesus exercises his authority to judge. His pronouncement is condemnation and in the case of the fig tree, destruction. And it's a picture of Jesus we rarely get in art.

An authoritative judge condemning which is only a facade, attractive by appearance, only shown to be fruitless. You see, religious appearances in the end are condemned and destroyed.

[13:29] It serves as such a blatant warning to us.

We cannot conceive at times of a Jesus that judges in this way. We are led to believe that he always loves and in our own imaginations he would ignore judgment but he won't.

What king does not evaluate his kingdom? He will certainly return to the earth and condemn those who are fruitless and faithless.

His authority is demonstrated in judgment and evaluation for you and for me will be conducted and examination will be given and it will be either followed by commendation or condemnation.

We will, we, it is possible to share the fate of the fig tree. But what's striking is commentators are obsessed or they're plagued with this fact.

[14:47] How could Jesus perform such an act? This decreation act they call it. How could he wither a fig tree?

But that's not what gets the disciples. Do you see what fascinates the disciples? They marvel at it and their question in verse 20 is along these lines, hey Jesus, uh, can we do that too?

In other words, do I have that authority? Can I get that power?

Well, Jesus gives them a lesson on prayer to which he replies, with faith you can not only command fig trees but you can also command mountains to move.

The prayer of faith can accomplish anything and what Jesus is saying here is astounding. You want to use your words? You want to know the mightiest use of your words?

[15:57] Do you want to know Christ's church? What is the most powerful way you could wield your tongue? I've been told, oh, just encourage others, which is true.

Edify others, which is certainly significant, but I think the most powerful way you use your mouth is in prayer.

That you go and ask God for what you do not have, what you cannot do in faith. And it says in verse 22, whatever you ask in prayer you will receive if you have faith.

The most powerful way you can use your words is in prayer. You see, it's a reiteration of chapter 17, verse 20. You remember that the disciples are like, yeah, yeah, I'm on this team and I'm doing all this stuff, fascinating stuff, powerful stuff, and they encounter this gnarly, I think it's a California word, but it's embedded in me, this gnarly demon that just won't leave in chapter 17.

They can't exercise him. They can't cast him out. And finally, they say, Jesus, we need your help because the power you gave to us is unable to remove this demon.

[17:20] And Jesus comes and he casts out the demon. And the disciples go to Jesus and say, hey, how come we couldn't do that? How come we couldn't do it? And he said the same thing that

he says here.

You just need a little bit of faith, just a tiny bit of faith. You can move mountains and nothing will be impossible for you. You see, the lesson that Jesus is giving his disciples is partly on prayer, but he's combating this idea that you and I will always go through life, that his disciples, if one commentator puts it this way, if the disciples model anything in the gospel, it is little faith.

And Jesus, all along the way, chapter, well, I have the references here, 8, 14, 16, 17, he's trying to build in them faith.

Have faith. You need to have the confidence to know that when I leave and you pray, you have everything you need. Faith-filled prayer is a way to, I think this is what I'm using in the context, level up in life.

Faith-filled prayer is the ultimate cheat code. It is where heaven's power is accessed. We are to go to God with faith, confidence, trust, and assurance.

[18:48] And it's certainly, this verse can be abused and misused, and it's often held out as this self-serving tool to achieve our own purposes. Lord, I need this grade so I can feel better about myself.

Help me. Lord, I need success in this relationship so help me out here because it will make me happy. Lord, I don't want any hardship in my life. I need more pleasure and enjoyment.

And certainly those prayers, self-serving, though they may be, and Lord sometimes answers them in his kindness and his goodness.

But that's not what it's saying here. What I think it's saying here is quit praying for yourself. start praying for the kingdom.

Start praying for God to do stuff. And if you look at the Lord's prayer, it's interesting. You know, the disciples go to Jesus and say, hey, Jesus, teach us how to pray. I'll teach you how to pray.

[19:49] What are the personal requests you got to make? Give us this day our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil.

But all throughout the prayer is, well, God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That the prayer is far less about us and far more about his kingdom. And I think here to unlock the power of this type of prayer is, Lord, I'm going to pray for your will be done.

And if I want that, if you need that mountain to move, it will move. And here we find, ironically, the temple was absent of prayer.

But the disciples were to be abounding in prayer. There was a prayer vacuum in Jerusalem, but there should never be a prayer void in here. And it would be a faith-filled prayer that would come into possession of power.

And it would be, we'll get to this, and I'm going to just pave the way. But prayer, I think how this passage links up, I've wrestled over this a lot, is this.

[21:02] It would be prayer that exercises heaven's authority on earth. Because it's all about authority.

And I've already said the one who has authority is calling us to faith in him. And what Jesus is doing here is, I'm going to give you my authority. and you're going to think, oh, I'm going to go feed 5,000, I'm going to walk on water, I'm going to, no, no, no.

My authority will come through you via prayer. Heaven's authority touches earth through prayer.

Well, the condemnation is now followed by a confrontation. As one commentator put it, the villains now take the stage.

And since your Bibles are open, there's a whole bunch of villains we're going to face in the next couple of chapters. Because Jesus enters the temple in verse 23 of chapter 21, and he will not leave till verse 1 of 24.

[22:13] So what you have in the next two and a half chapters is Jesus is hanging out at the temple. and while he is in the temple, he is facing an onslaught of opposition from all of Israel's religious groups.

And Matthew notes them specifically. This morning we encounter the chief priests and the elders. In chapter 22, verse 15, the Pharisees come along.

Verse 16, the Herodians come along. In chapter 22, verse 23, the Sadducees come along. And what Matthew needs us to see is that Jesus enters the temple where the glory of God resides, where the Son of God is standing, and all he gets is opposition.

They want nothing to do with him. Well, in our passage, the chief priests and the elders of the people are now confronting Jesus, and their concern is clear.

The question is regarding Jesus' source of authority. What makes you legitimate, Jesus, to flip tables and drive out money changers? Where is your authority?

[ 23 : 35 ] Four times it's mentioned, twice in verse 23, again in verse 24, again in verse 27. What gives you the right, to behave the way you did in the temple yesterday?

What is the source of your healings, your teachings, your miracles? What right do you have to enter the capital city, receive the acclamation of the crowds?

Who do you think you are? Where are your credentials? That's the first confrontation, verses 23 through 27.

as was common, as was a common rabbinic practice of the day, Jesus responds to their question with a question. He's not skirting their question, but he is well aware of their trapped question.

He has no human pedigree that gives him the right to act on behalf of God or exercise authority in the temple. If Jesus dared claim that he was divine, the religious police would indict him on charges of blasphemy.

[ 24 : 40 ] So Jesus turns the religious authorities, Jesus is now turned to the religious authorities and asks them a question regarding John the Baptist.

John was Jesus' forerunner, the one who announced Jesus' arrival. You see, Jesus' mission was actually tethered to John's ministry.

And he asked the question, was John just a person, just a human? Or was he a prophet sent from heaven? Now you can imagine this.

The question from Jesus comes and they're trying to answer it. They collectively get together and they start discussing. And Matthew gives us behind the scenes discussion.

The chief priests and the elders realize there's a dilemma, there's a trap in this question. If they say John was sent from heaven, and they know exactly what Jesus is going to say, then why did you reject him?

[ 25 : 40 ] Why didn't you believe him? Why didn't you receive him or accept his message? They would be found guilty of refusing one of God's prophets. It would be self-indicting.

However, if they replied, John is a mere man, the crowd would erupt because they believed John the Baptist to be a prophet. public opinion was valuable.

And so, they come up with their answer. We don't know. It's an indifferent answer. The consequences of whichever way they answer would charge them guilty, to be guilty.

So they cower and give the answer we don't know, and then Jesus responds, and he said, well, I will not give you the answer that you're looking for, and since you don't know about John, you will not know about me.

And the truth of the matter is that they knew, but they chose unbelief and rejection. Team Jesus won, religious leaders zero.

[ 26 : 56 ] And what you'll find by the beginning or the end of chapter 23, it will be five nil in favor of Jesus. And the confrontation from the religious leaders resulted in them revealing their position as outsiders of Jesus' kingdom.

See, in Jesus resided all authority in heaven and earth, and the chief priests and elders chose to reject it and disbelieve it. And Jesus follows up with a parable on what it looks like to come under Jesus' authority.

authority. How are you and I to respond to this authority? So he tells the story. A man has two sons. He approaches the first one and says, son, I would like you to go work in the field or the vineyard today.

The son verbally, defiantly refuses. Yet after some time, repents of his refusal and goes to work in the vineyard.

Now the father approaches the second son. The second son receives the word and later reneges and does not go into the vineyard.

[ 28 : 10 ] Which of these did the will of the father? The religious leaders reply, well, the first one. The first one. The first one who is defiant repents and then goes to do the work.

In answering the first, the chief priest and the elders actually condemn themselves. They do not realize they are the second son.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes find their way into the kingdom long before the chief priests and elders because they responded rightly to authority. Their willingness to repent and submit to God demonstrated through their action and proceeding to work the field despite their initial rejection.

The religious leaders initially responded positively but in the end they proved their rejection and failing to obey. They were in the language of our text fig trees that only had leaves and failing to bear fruit.

They had given lip service but their lives were marked by inaction and we saw in their confrontation with Jesus indifference. They said the right thing but failed to do the right thing.

[ 29 : 32 ] They were fruitless and faithless. They wanted nothing to do with John. They wanted nothing to do with Jesus. When Jesus sought fruit and faith they displayed only leaves and lifelessness.

There is much that can be said about this confrontation but allow me to highlight two facets that struck me in application. The first is this.

Note the faith that pleases God is not only verbal. The faith that pleases God is not only verbal. I think sometimes we can fall into this trap that faith is merely or exclusively cognitive and intellectual and I just say it. I am a Christian.

I just need to affirm it with my mouth and my words. But that's not the case. Because the chief priests and the elders affirmed it with their words but denied it with their lifestyle.

[ 30 : 44 ] I remember an illustration a popular pastor once made gave along these lines. Imagine if I tell one of my kids to go clean your room.

Go clean your room. I give them a few hours expecting progress and a few hours I go to their room anticipating completion or near completion. I go to the room and find them sitting there having done nothing.

I ask them what are you doing? Why no progress? And they respond I'm thinking about it. I'm thinking about it.

I've actually studied it what it means to clean my room. I'm assembling my friends together and we're going to have a study session on what it means to clean my room.

I know the Greek. To clean my room. And the illustration is meaningful because sometimes our faith is just that.

[ 31 : 59 ] Lip service. I could tell you it in the original languages. My friends and I study it all the time.

But I have not lifted a finger to actually obey it. The faith Jesus is looking for is more than verbal. And yeah, you might say, hey, there's this instance of this thief on the cross. All he made was a verbal profession and he found his way into the kingdom of God.

And you are right. He repented, spoke, received salvation. But J.C. Ryle, who tells that story, makes it very clear there were two thieves. Only one was saved, so we may not despair.

But only one, so we may not presume. the faith the Lord is looking for is more than verbal. He wants more than your lip service.

[ 33 : 00 ] Secondly, for the one that in this room may be indifferent towards Jesus, may actually reject Jesus, dismissive towards him.

The phrase that I gravitated is mentioned twice in our Bibles, verse 29, verse 32. You can change your mind.

You can change your mind. Perhaps you just thought, oh, he's just this moral teacher. He's just this religious fanatic.

He's this con man that just happened to convince generations of people to give him their allegiance. He has no right to govern my life. He has no rule or jurisdiction here.

He will not be captain of this soul. And perhaps that's you. And this morning, I would like to show you that Jesus wants you to change your mind.

[ 34 : 06 ] You can change your mind. That the gospel show us that he is here to rescue and give life to those who would come in their need.

The tax collector and the prostitute who, they did not approach Jesus because they were poor financially. They did not approach Jesus because there was physical lack in their lives.

They did not approach Jesus because they had no friends. They approached Jesus because they were filled with sin. And Jesus said, I could deal with that.

I could work with that. I could forgive that. I could save that. I will ransom that. I will rescue that. And I will restore that. Four.

He has authority over demons and their devices. He has authority over sickness and suffering. He has authority over physical infirmities and their restrictions.

[ 35 : 09 ] He has authority over the material world and its limitations. He could feed 5,000 out of virtually nothing. He could speak to nature and order it when it's disordered.

And we know he has authority over sin and its consequences. You see, what you find is that Jesus asserts and exercises authority universally.

in all places, in all times, in all spheres, regardless of apparent boundaries. He crosses socioeconomic lines.

He crosses cultural and ethnic barriers. He transcends barriers of gender and age. He's unbound by the seen or the unseen, internal and external.

There is no authority like that operative in our world that exercises itself in this way. Parents have limits in authority. Law enforcement have clear lines of jurisdiction.

[ 36 : 13 ] Militaries have constraints on their own airspace. Regimes and governments have lines and have marked their borders. Interpersonally, we know there are boundaries.

We could certainly act inappropriately or violate those. But it is not the case with Jesus. His authority is universal. He's operating in the highest heavens and the depths of the sea, all things internally and externally, all things visible and invisible.

His mission is to reconcile all things through himself to God. And so he lays claim on everything, on your heart, on my heart, on your family, on my family, on your workplace, my workplace, in your classroom.

He exercises authority over it all because he is boundless in his rule. so, as he lays claim on your heart, he calls us to have faith and to follow him.

Jesus is the one with all the authority and he calls us to have faith in him. Father, we thank you that we bow before a God who has all power, all glory, all honor, all wisdom, and all authority.

[ 38 : 03 ] and as we have seen in your word that the whole world is in turmoil because they want to reject it.

We instead desire to be sons and daughters that not only say yes, Lord, we'll follow in word, but yes, Lord, we'll follow in deed.

And so, Lord, would you empower us to be a people that do so, knowing that all authority belongs to you and you have summoned your people to follow in faith.

So we give ourselves to you this morning, this week, this month, this year, this life. Would you make much of Jesus through us?

We ask these things in his name. Amen. Amen.