

The Judgement of King Jesus Displayed

Matthew 21:18-22

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Introduction:

We have been studying Matthew's Gospel for a long time...

- But ever since we reached chapter 21 of Matthew's gospel,
 - we have seen a change in the nature of Jesus' ministry!
 - This chapter presents to us the events of His last week before the crucifixion.

When the chapter opens, we find Him presenting Himself in Jerusalem as Messiah—

- a Messiah in lowly estate to be sure, without trained musicians and gilded chariots...
 - but still a Messiah coming in open procession...
 - gladly accepting the acclaim of His people and the declaration that He is the Son of David who had come to save!
 - No longer is He keeping quiet the fact that He is Israel's Messiah as He has done throughout His whole life.

And then in verse 12, we found Him entering the temple and driving out those who were buying and selling there along with the moneychangers...

- This is, for the most part, quite uncharacteristic of His ministry up until now!
 - He has all along presented Himself as the One who did not come to judge, but to save what was lost.
 - Yet, in cleansing the temple, He is displaying and exercising His authority as the Lord of the Temple.

And now as we come to Matthew 21:18 this week,

- we find Him displaying in a kind of prophetic miracle His power and authority to curse.
 - This account has caused trouble to some believers because it seems so uncharacteristic of the gentle Jesus to curse a tree simply because it has no fruit...
 - But this was no act of childish temper.
 - It was not really figs about which Jesus was concerned!
 - The barren fig tree with all its leaves is a picture of apostate Israel.

My friends, the cursing of this fig tree is a prophetic object lesson.

- There are several things you need to learn from Jesus' cursing of this fig tree!

First, learn that Jesus is not satisfied with mere leaves on a fig tree.

Second, learn that Jesus will curse every fig tree without fruit.

Third, learn that Jesus will use your prayers to bring destruction to barren fig trees.

Let's look at each of these lessons...

I. Learn that Jesus is not satisfied with mere leaves on a fig tree.

A. Matthew tells us in verse 18-19 that Jesus approached this fig tree looking for fruit, but found nothing but leaves.

1. Now the question may well be asked as to why Jesus expected to find figs on this tree.

a. This is especially the case when you realise that it was not the time of year that figs usually grow around Jerusalem...

- It was only the time of the Passover...which is roughly April by our Calendar.

- Ordinarily, the early figs were just beginning to develop from the sprouts of the previous fall at this time of year.

- Matthew, writing to Jews, does not mention this point because everyone would have known it...

- But Mark, writing his gospel for Romans, tells us when he writes about this account that:

- Mark 11:13: "it was not the season for figs!"

b. With most fig trees in Jerusalem, there were two harvests of figs each year...

- The "early figs" were usually just beginning to grow at the time of the Passover and were not ready for harvesting until May or June...

- And the late figs, which were much larger and better, were usually harvested from August till October.

TRANS> So why did Jesus expect to find figs on this particular fig tree when it was only early April?

2. Well, there was good reason...

a. This particular fig tree—Matthew literally refers to it as "one fig tree" or we might say "a certain fig tree"—stood out from the others...

- It stood out because it had leaves.

- Having leaves at this time of year was just as unusual as having fruit!

- b. It is a characteristic of fig trees that their figs actually begin to develop before the leaves...or at least at the same time as the leaves...
 - That meant that when you saw a fig tree with leaves,
 - you could very well expect to find figs!
 - There were a few varieties of fig tree that did produce figs at this time of year in Jerusalem,
 - and they could be readily spotted because they had leaves when the others did not.
 - When Jesus saw leaves on this fig tree, He had every reason to expect to find fruit on it as well...
 - This explains why He was disappointed when He came near and saw that this tree had nothing but leaves...
 - The leaves of this tree had made a profession that unlike the other trees, this one had fruit!
 - But when He came to inspect it, the profession was found to be false!
- B. Now my friends, this leafy fig tree without fruit is a picture the Jewish Church—the people of Israel
1. It was full of leaves!
 - It gave a loud profession that it was different than all the other nations, and indeed, it was a nation set apart to God!
 - a. The other nations gave no profession or worshipping the true God—
 - They were without leaves in a fallen world...
 - They were like the other fig trees that had no leaves because they had no figs...
 - They did not profess to know the Lord, but worshipped idols...
 - Fruit was not expected from them...
 - It was not the season for fruit until the gospel should go out to them.
 - b. But Israel was different!
 - She was that one fig tree that stood out from all the others because she was in full leaf!
 - She had been entrusted with God's covenant, His Law, and the service of temple.

- She had her priests and her scribes and a glorious system of worship that God had given to her.
 - Her men were circumcised and her people claimed to be the heirs of Abraham.
 - Unlike the other nations, she had the very oracles of God entrusted to her!
2. But when Jesus came to her, expecting to find some fruit, He found nothing but leaves!
- a. It was all an empty profession!
- She had the promises, but she did not welcome Jesus as the promised one!
 - She had God's law, but she did not obey it except in a cold formal loveless way—
 - The very summation of the law was to love God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength...
 - And to love ones neighbour as oneself.
 - But there was nothing of that at all.
 - Her prayers were also cold and formal—
 - ritual prayers offered to God in pride rather than humble prayers offered in a spirit of humble dependence.
 - She had her substitutionary sacrifices, but instead of seeing them as pointing to her need of forgiveness, she took pride in them.
 - All the externals of religion were there,
 - but repentance and faith were not there...
 - She had a form of godliness, but the power of godliness was not being seen.
- b. Jesus was not hungry for mere leaves;
- He wanted fruit!
- 1) His whole purpose in calling Israel was that they might bear fruit.
- He wanted to see in them His own glorious image!
 - He wanted them to reproduce on earth a society of love that was a picture of the society He had lived in for all eternity with the Father and the Spirit...
 - A society where love and service were freely and harmoniously exchanged from one member to another...

- And as creatures, He wanted them to offer true praise and thanksgiving to God in love.
 - He wanted them to delight in Him and in His Father...
 - He wanted to see His joy made full in them!
 - He wanted to see life in them!

- 2) This life was to be found by them through faith in His gracious promises as they waited for His coming...
 - They were to abide in Him all along as the One who was promised—
 - the way Abraham and David and the prophets had done...
 - He wanted them to erupt with joyous thanksgiving when He appeared with salvation for them...
 - the Anna and Simeon did at the temple when He was presented to them...
 - But instead He came to Israel as His own and they did not recognise Him...
 - As John says, “He came to His own, and His own received Him not!

- 3) Now I don’t mean to say that He was taken by surprise in all this...
 - But I do mean to say that their conduct was entirely inappropriate and wicked!
 - They had been given all the privileges...
 - They had all the leaves, and they ought to have had the fruit to go along with it!
 - But there they stood—full of leaves and devoid of fruit!
 - Jesus was not being too hard on them!
 - Their whole existence was a sham and a lie!

C. But my brothers and sisters who profess Christ today—what about us?

1. Can we really say that we are all that different from the Jewish Church?

a. Oh yes, we have our leaves!

- We have the promises and the covenants and the law of God...
- We have our church buildings and our ministers and elders and deacons...
- We have our confessions and catechisms...

- We have our worship services, our baptisms, and our communion services...
- b. I would even say that we have much more leaf than the Jewish Church had!
- We have a now incarnate, crucified, risen Saviour who has poured out His Spirit upon the Church...
 - In this, we have a fuller, more complete revelation of the love of God who spared not His own Son...
 - A clearer view of the holiness and justice of God who required His blood for the remission of our sins...
 - A more glorious display of the power of God who has conquered not only Pharaoh, but Satan Himself...
 - A beautiful view of the wisdom of God's law now that Jesus has come and lived it out before us...
 - We have a more spiritual dispensation by which we may better express our love to God and to our neighbour than Israel ever had...
- c. But where is the fruit?
- 1) Instead of warm hearted acceptance of Christ,
 - we see a church busy rewriting the revelation of God to suit her own desires...
 - to accommodate her egalitarianism...
 - that wants to make the Most High God her equal...
 - to accommodate her immorality...
 - that wants to cast off God's holy law so that she may live in corruption and call it love and tolerance...
 - to accommodate her self-righteousness...
 - that causes her to suppose that she and all other sons and daughters of Adam are worthy of God's love apart from Christ...
 - 2) There are songs of praise and prayers of adoration,
 - but where is the love for God and His Son?
 - 3) There is talk of love,
 - but where does this love go when it is tested?
 - It is a love that can't even keep a marriage covenant!

- It is a love that talks about compassion, but that never truly sacrifices its own comforts to minister to others.

2. Oh brothers and sisters, do not be satisfied with a mere outward profession!

a. Jesus does not want mere leaves... He seeks fruit!

- Did He not tell us just before He died to abide in Him so that we might bear much fruit?
- Did He not tell us that the Father is seeking a people that would worship Him in spirit and in truth?
- Did the Apostle Paul not tell us that Jesus “gave Himself for us in order that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works”?

b. Yes! He is making a people for God!

1) Have you some fruit of the Spirit in your life?

- I hope you truly do!
- I trust that many of you do!
- If you really are abiding in Jesus, you will...

2) But if you do—if you truly have His life in you...

- You will find no room for boasting, but a lot of room for seeking Christ because you will surely see how much you lack...
- And you will yearn for the whole church because you will see how much she lacks!

c. Brothers and sisters, I hope you all have a lovely profession...

- There is nothing wrong with having a good profession...
 - Every believer ought to have a good profession... a lot of leaves...
 - But do not be content with that alone!
- See to it that the leaves of your profession are accompanied by fruit!
 - Your profession tells the Lord to expect fruit from you...
 - Make sure that He will find it when He comes to look for it!

TRANS> Always remember that the Lord Jesus is not satisfied with mere leaves...

- That is the first lesson we learn from this account about the barren fig tree...
- Now let's consider the second lesson...Secondly...

II. Learn that Jesus will curse every fig tree that does not bear fruit.

A. His judgement is very terrible and very much to be feared...

1. See first of all that He pronounces a curse on the barren tree...

a. He says the words:

- "Let no fruit grow on you ever again!"

b. Do you see how awful this curse on a hypocrite is?

- It means that He is destined to go on without ever receiving the life of God!

- He is consigned to spend eternity in the stinking corruption of sin and death.

- He is sentenced to go on forever as He is.

- Can you imagine having to go on without true love, with bitterness, without faith, without the joy of the Lord, without grace to obey and serve and grow?

- To go on without any fruit that pleases the Lord?

- To go on and on under the displeasure of God, alienated from Him forever who is the source of every blessing?

- It is a terrible thing!

2. See further the dreadful effect of the Lord's curse...

a. Verse 19 goes on to explain what happened after Jesus pronounced this curse:

- "Immediately the fig tree withered away."

- The disciples marvelled when they saw it...

- It happened so suddenly!

- One day, it was a lovely leafy tree...

- the very next day it was shrivelled up and ruined.

TRANS> This shows you what will happen to every hypocrite when he is judged...

b. A hypocrite has a certain beauty that he enjoys in this world...

1) He has his fig leaves that give him the appearance of being fruitful even though he is not...

- Jesus not only consigns such a one to bear no fruit forever,

- but He does more...

- He also destroys the leaves that at least gave the appearance of fruitfulness.

- 2) That is yet another dreadful thing about our Lord's judgement!
 - Before the judgement comes, the hypocrite prides himself in His leaves...
 - He thinks he has something...
 - But when the Lord's judgement comes,
 - even what he thinks he has will be taken away from him.
 - As long as the hypocrite has his lovely leaves, he may not care that he will never bear fruit again...
 - He is one who is content with appearances.
 - But even this beauty that he thinks he has and seems to have will be destroyed—
 - His nakedness and shame will be exposed...
 - He will appear as he is in truth...
 - A shrivelled up, lifeless, barren tree!
 - All his beauty will be stripped and he will be left with nothing but shame and misery.

c. Does this seem too harsh? too severe?

- 1) It is not. The Lord renders to each according to what he deserves...
 - And this is the penalty for hypocrites who pretend some sort of beauty when there is none of the beauty that our Lord desires.
- 2) Inasmuch as we think this is too severe, it is only because we have not yet seen the glory of God!
 - When we behold Him without the clouds of sin to blind us,
 - we will marvel at His patience and mercy.

TRANS> Indeed it is a dreadful curse that He will pronounce on every barren professor of faith...

- It not only consigns him to fruitlessness forever...
- It also strips him of whatever appearance of beauty he may have.

B. Do not suppose that any fig tree, no matter how leafy it may be now, will escape this curse.

1. The disciples needed this object lesson because in a few days, it might have seemed to them that Jesus would do nothing to apostate Israel.

- a. Throughout His ministry,
 - They had seen no fire descend from heaven to consume his enemies...
 - They had seen no bear come out of the woods to maul mocking youths...
 - All they had seen was mercy and patience toward His enemies.

- b. And now, on this very week, they would see religious hypocrisy in its worst form...
 - They would see the Lord arrested, cruelly treated, and falsely condemned...
 - But from Him there would be no resistance whatsoever...
 - They would see Him taken by wicked hands, scourged and hung on a cross...
 - They would see Him mocked and challenged to save Himself and come down if He was the Son of God...
 - But He would do nothing in retaliation.

- c. And even after His resurrection and ascension,
 - They would see themselves as His servants, sent out to declare the gospel, cruelly treated and persecuted...
 - One by one they would see their brothers killed off by the hypocritical Jewish Church...
 - All in the name of righteousness and truth!
 - And this would not go on for years!

- d. But this cursing of the fig tree would remain an object lesson for them that in time He would surely judge these hypocrites.
 - Though their profession was green and leafy,
 - their foliage was to be stripped away in 70 AD when the Lord would send Rome to destroy Jerusalem so that not one stone of the temple would be left upon another.

TRANS> The disciples must never suppose that the hypocritical Jewish nation would not be judged.

- Already the axe was laid to the root.
 - Soon the tree would be hewn down.
 - It is a great error to suppose that the Lord's judgement will not come because it is delayed.
 - Disciples must never grow discouraged...

- The Lord will avenge His people.
2. And so, likewise, hypocrites should never suppose that delayed judgement means no judgement.
 - a. They utterly deceive themselves with the notion that because they have gone on so long and God has not judged, judgement will never come!
 - Isn't this so?
 - If they did not deceive themselves that judgement was far away, how could they ever go on without repentance?
 - How could they have a moment of happiness, a moment without dread terror, unless they think they will escape this dreadful fate?
 - b. They hide their wickedness behind their leafy profession...
 - not only to the eyes of others, but even to their own eyes...
 - How many there are in the world who suppose that because they say their prayers and go to church and do good works that they will escape the judgement of God...
 - It is painful to see a hypocrite die in peace!
 - What a rude awakening he is in for!
 - c. See that this never happens to any of you!
 - Do no rest in your profession—rest in the Saviour Jesus Christ!
 - Abide in Him by faith and you will bring forth much fruit and so assure yourself that you are truly redeemed!

TRANS> And just as the disciples of Jesus ought not to have thought judgement delayed meant judgement would not come;

- and just as hypocrites themselves ought never to suppose that judgement will never come to them...
3. So also you must never supposed that judgement will never come to apostates today.
 - a. It is true—there are plenty of hypocritical churches that profess the Lord, but in truth oppose the Lord Jesus Christ...
 - And you may wonder how they can go on doing the things they are doing and saying the things they are saying...
 - But just look at how long the LORD bore with Israel before He at last judged them in 70 AD.
 - It was for centuries!

- b. Just because there is a Roman Church full of blasphemy, placing salvation in her ceremonies,
 - and a United Church that holds God's word in contempt and denies any need of salvation...
 - does not mean that our LORD approves of these things.
 - They may have a glorious profession,
 - they may have honour and riches and power in the world today...
 - They may have a show of reverence and piety...
 - But God's judgement will fall on them as it fell on Israel...
 - They will be consigned to barrenness forever and even their outward glory in which they now boast will be withered up forever.
- c. Do not be deceived.
 - Delayed judgement is not an indication of approval.
 - He waits that He may be gracious to His elect and that they may come to repentance...
 - He waits so as not to destroy the 7000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal.
 - But His judgement will surely come...

TRANS> So learn this second lesson from our Lord's cursing of the fig tree—

- That Jesus will surely curse every barren fig tree.
- And now let us move on to the third lesson...

III. Learn that Jesus will use your prayers to bring destruction to barren fig trees.

- A. Jesus tells His disciples that by the prayer of faith, they will be able to do what He has done to the fig tree...
 - 1. Israel was this barren fig tree...
 - a. And, as I have already shown you, in a few short days the disciples would discover that she—Israel—was their greatest adversary of the gospel.
 - We have seen already through the prophetic object lesson of the withered fig tree how they were shown that Jesus would surely judge apostate Israel and cause her to wither...

- b. But now Jesus is telling the disciples that the destruction of apostate Israel will be as a result of **their** believing prayer!
 - This grand leafy tree would be withered up just as the actual fig tree was because of **their** prayers...
 - This great mountain that would seem to stand in the way of the gospel would be cast into the sea because of **their** prayers...
 - In verse 21 He says:
 - “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, and whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”
 - c. In other words, nothing—
 - not even the powerful apostate Israel with all her leaves of profession—
 - would be able to stand in the way of this little band of fisherman and a tax collector.
 - The tree would wither at their believing prayer and the mountain would be moved.
2. These are such marvellous words to be spoken at a time like this!
- a. Jesus was about to be crucified and He knew it—He had told them many times—
 - and yet, at this time of apparent weakness...
 - He tells this weak little company of confused disciples who were nobodies in the eyes of the world that **they** will bring nations down by their prayers!
 - b. These prayers are believing prayers—prayers of faith without doubting...
 - They are the kind of prayers that these men needed if they were to go on preaching the gospel when the Sadducees tried to stop them!
 - They are the kind of prayers that are prayed when everything looks desperate and impossible!
 - They are the kind of prayers that are prayed when you know that God is God and that with Him, nothing is impossible!
- B. Oh that the Church would rise up to pray these prayers again in our day!
- 1. Our Lord loves to put His people in impossible situations so they can pray and see His glory!

- a. He loves to hem them in with mountains on one side, the sea on the other side, and pursuing Egyptians on the other so that He may show His glory by parting the sea!
 - b. He loves to bring a hundred and eighty five thousand Assyrians to surround Jerusalem so that Hezekiah can pray and God can send His angel to say the whole army in one night without a single sword...
 - c. He loves to take twelve insignificant men—one of them apostate—and use them to turn the world upside-down and by their prayers for His kingdom to bring Jerusalem down to the dust...
 - d. He loves to raise up the whole Roman Empire against them and then bring that empire down while they continue to live...
 - e. He raised up Arians and Papists and Rationalists and modernists and feminists with their leafy professions and bring them down through the prayers of His people.
2. But sadly there are places where the church gives way...
- a. There are places where the prayer of faith is not heard and the enemies overcome...
 - 1) Sometimes, it is because of **pride** that there is no prayer of faith—
 - We suppose that we do not need to pray the prayer of faith...
 - We pray our perfunctory prayers, but we do not pray as if our very soul depended on it...
 - This is how the church in North America has drifted...
 - she assumed that she would continue forever and she lost her sons and daughters to apostasy.
 - 2) At other times, it is because of **doubt**—
 - We do not pray because we think it won't do any good...
 - We think the enemies are too strong for us and we start to compromise with them rather than opposing them.
 - In recent years, many churches gave way to the pressures of modernism, denying as it did that the scriptures are infallible and God breathed...
 - The modernist churches had the big leafy profession—all the respect, and instead of praying in faith,
 - some churches began to waver...
 - The result has been capitulation to every wind of doctrine...

- Believing prayer was lost because the word of God was no longer fully trusted.
- b. But Jesus encourages you here that no matter how big the opposition may seem,
- you will be able to move mountains and wither fig trees just like he did when he cursed that fig tree in Jerusalem...
 - and just like those twelve disciples did in the years to come.
- c. Don't get me wrong!
- They did not by any means become a great leafy tree in their generation...
 - They remained a small despised company...
 - But they were not despised by the Lord because they had fruit with their profession.
 - They had fruit despite all the opposition because they held on to the Lord Jesus Christ with persistent believing prayer...
 - That is how you abide in Him and bear fruit...
 - True faith always expresses itself in prayer...
 - It looks to the Lord Jesus for grace and strength and it overcomes the world.
 - But this "overcoming" is not always being on top of things...
 - It is often being at the bottom and yet continuing to honour Christ and to cleave to Him in the face of all manner of opposition.
 - Eventually it leads to our final rest,
 - but for now we must be prepared to continue in believing prayer in spite of what we see.