

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 21:1-22:14

To understand the importance of fruit-bearing faith, and why the Jews came under God's judgement.

Kids Say the Darndest Things

As an adult, there is an unspoken rule about what details of your life you share, and when and where you share it. We live in a mostly manicured culture that doesn't embrace the grittier details of life. In fact, often, the tendency is to paint a much more appealing picture of the lives we live. However, as a parent, there are



moments when kids say things that are embarrassingly truthful about what happens in the home. They don't have any filters. They don't desire any sort of reputation or status. They are kids. And sometimes kids say the darndest things.

Perhaps this is one of the (many) reasons that Jesus had such affection for children. They think and speak with such innocence, and because of that, they recognize simple and yet profound realities that adults sometimes struggle to see. One such

example is found in Matthew 21:14-17. Jesus, after His triumphal entry, comes in and overturns tables in the Temple and runs out the money changers, an action hardly expected of the Messiah. The people believed the Messiah would be a nationalist, anti-Rome figure, and instead He wreaks havoc on the Temple and invites in those with infirmities to heal them. The children watching Jesus began shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David," a call back to Matthew 1:1 and the title of Son of David that Jesus is given (see Session 1 for more details). All of this drew the ire of the chief priests and scribes, and Jesus responds to them by quoting Psalm 8:2: "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?" In other words, Jesus is recognizing the unflinching commitment of children to unvarnished truth: "Kids say the darndest things." The kids have rightly recognized Jesus, and the religious leaders have not, a theme that will be explored throughout all of chapter 21 and some of chapter 22.

The Triumphal Entry

Chapter 21 begins with what has come to be called, “The Triumphal Entry.” This part of the narrative will set the stage for the entire chapter to follow.

PASSWORD OR POWER?

Jesus instructs His disciples to go into the city and find a donkey and a colt and bring them back to Him (Matt. 21:1-2). It would very unlikely for someone to be able to walk up to animals, untie them, and walk off with them without being challenged by someone. Jesus tells them to say, “The Lord has need of them,” and they will relent (Matt. 21:3). Is this a password that Jesus worked out with the owners of the animals or is this the work of His Divine power to somehow supernaturally work things together for His purposes? The text is unclear, and both possibilities have merit.

RIDING THE DONKEY AND THE COLT

There is some significance to Jesus riding into the city on a donkey. For one, there is an Old Testament fulfillment in this action, and Matthew records it with his typical fulfillment language: “This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet” (Matt. 21:4). The verses quoted are Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9. There is also some traditional significance as well. The Mishnah (the exegetical material that embodies the oral tradition of Jewish Law) states that for the Passover, men are to *walk* the last mile or so into the city. For Jesus to ride into the city symbolized His royalty and authority over everyone else.

THE COATS AND PALM BRANCHES

The disciples then lay their coats on the donkey and the colt, and Jesus sits upon them. The people of the city likewise lay their coats on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and put them in the road as well. We aren’t told in Matthew’s Gospel what kind of branches these are, but John’s Gospel tells us they were palm branches (John 12:13). Both of these actions were a practice common in recognizing the authority and royalty of a king. For example, the people performed a similar ritual for King Jehu in 2 Kings 9:13. It is also the practice of God’s people for acknowledging a great victory, as the apocryphal book 1 Maccabees records (1 Macc. 13:51).

They call Him, “Son of David,” indicating His claim to the Davidic throne. They say, “Hosanna,” a term that means something like, “Save us!” They indicate He comes in the Name of the Lord by quoting Psalm 118:26 (Matt. 21:9). But then, at the very end of this narrative in verse 11, Matthew gives us some indication as to who the people thought Jesus was: “This is the *prophet* Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.” Not the King, nor the Messiah, but the prophet. While it is true that Jesus is a prophet, He is much more than that, and while the people came close to getting it right, they didn’t fully understand His identity, and their misunderstanding of His identity will lay the foundation for what will transpire over the next 6 days, leading up to His crucifixion.

A Purposeful Tree

The next morning, Jesus embarked back to the city and became hungry. Perhaps He left with haste and didn’t eat breakfast. Either way, He desired food. There are numerous examples of His Deity in Matthew’s Gospel; this is a great example of His humanity. This transaction in verses 18 and 19 at first seem pedantic and immature. Jesus sees a tree in His hunger, and then realizes that while it has leaves (an indication that it should have fruit as well), it does not have any figs on it, and so He curses it and it withers and dies. It seems like a frustrating moment for the Lord, but in fact, something deeper is happening here. As mentioned above, the context for this chapter is built upon His Triumphal Entry and the juxtaposition between the children and ill people (who get Jesus right) and the religious leaders (who get Jesus wrong). The religious leaders, of course,

represent the spiritual condition of the nation of Israel as a whole. With that context in mind, examining the Fig Tree incident is a bit more clear.

In Old Testament literature, the nation of Israel is often compared to a fig tree (Is. 28:4; Hos. 9:10) and the sin and corruption in the nation is often described as a barren tree (Jer. 8:13; Joel 1:12; Mic. 7:1). Even Amos, one of God's appointed minor prophets was, "pincher of figs" by trade (Amos 7:14). The fig imagery would spark the attention of an Israelite who was familiar the Old Testament prophets. With this in mind, Jesus saw an opportunity to foreshadow what was about to unfold. The nation of Israel was like a fig tree, unyielding to Jesus, not baring fruit because of sin and corruption, and about to come under God's judgment, a theme that Matthew has been very explicit with (3:10; 7:16-20; 12:33; 13:4-7). Jesus then unveils another aspect of this mustard-seed-sized faith that He just taught on a couple chapters ago: faith has the ability to both bring God's blessing and also judgment, as long as it is in line with the heart of Christ (John 14:12-14).

Unfolding the Narrative

This sets up the rest of the chapter. In verses 23 through 27, we once again see the religious leaders trying to corner Jesus, proverbially speaking, and yet they are confounded by Him. This reveals once more their ignorance to who Jesus really is. Then Jesus gives a few parables to further drive home the fig lesson.

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS (VS.28-32)

In this parable, Jesus distinguishes between two sons. The first son does not want to do the work of the father, but eventually relents and does it. The second one says he will but does not. Jesus asks the religious leaders, "Which of the two did the will of his father" (Matt. 21:31). They reply, "the first," and Jesus essentially tells them, "Yes, but you are more like the second one."

THE PARABLE OF THE LANDOWNER (VS.33-41)

The second parable features a landowner who plants a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers. When harvest approached, he sent slaves to take in the harvest but the vine-growers beat and killed the slaves. This happens a few times before finally, the landowner sends his son. The vine-growers seek an opportunity to take his inheritance, and so they kill him too. He asks the leaders, "What will the landowner do?" Their answer is shockingly predictive of their own fate. The landowner will bring a harsh end to the vine-growers and hire new vine-growers who are obedient.

THE INTERPRETATION

Jesus holds back no punches. He tells them that these parables are predictive of what will happen to them since they have rejected Him, and instead the kingdom of God will be given to, "a people producing the fruit of it," a nod back to the fig tree incident. The chief priests and scribes understood that he was speaking of them, but they did not try and arrest Him because they feared what the people might do.

THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST

The final parable regards a wedding feast, where the first guests refuse to come and instead kill their slaves in vile mistreatment. The king is outraged and kills all of them, and instead invites the slaves to come. Even upon the arrival of the slaves, one is found without proper attire. The point here is that, "many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14). Many hear the Gospel, but only those who have been made alive together with Christ will respond (Eph. 2:1-8).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 21:1-13. In your own words, describe what happens in this passage. What OT verses are quoted? What is the significance of Jesus riding into the city? What does Jesus do upon arrival? Why?
2. Read Matthew 21:14-17. Who recognizes Jesus correctly? Who does not recognize Him correctly?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 21:18-22. What was the purpose of the fig tree? What does this demonstrate about faith?
2. Read Matthew 21:23-27. What question is Jesus asked by the chief priests? What question did He ask them? What was the dilemma the chief priests faced in answering Him? What does this say about the wisdom of Jesus against the wisdom of the religious leaders?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 21:28-32. In your own words, write down what this parable means, and who it applies to.
2. Read Matthew 21:33-41. In your own words, write down what this parable means, and who it applies to.

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 21:42-46. Now, read Psalm 118:22. Why did Jesus quote this? How does this apply to the chapter at large? How does the fig tree lesson fit into what Jesus is teaching here?
2. Read Matthew 22:1-14. In your own words, write down what this parable means, and who it applies to.

Week 25 Discussion: Bearing Fruit

In Matthew 21, one of the central themes is that of obedience that leads to bearing fruit. The Jews were like a fig tree that should have been in season, but had no fruit and thus was useless. For Christians, the only kind of faith that is genuine is that which produces action (Ja. 2:14-26). Talk as a group about the importance of bearing fruit, and what it practically looks like.

1. Icebreaker: What is something you have done to bless someone else (or the church) by using your spiritual gifts? What was the outcome of it?
2. Is it important to have faith that bears fruit or leads to action? Why or why not?
3. Should stagnant faith be addressed by other believers or should everyone be accountable for their own faith and action? What are the benefits and/or dangers of each of these mindsets?
4. What's the danger in over-emphasizing the importance of bearing fruit?
5. How does the church bear fruit? In other words, what does a church that bears good fruit look like, practically speaking?
6. Trees do not bear fruit year round, but rather go in and out of season. Is this how Christians should expect healthy faith to work as well? Why or why not?

Takeaways:

1. The Jews faced judgment because of their lack of obedience to the Father.
2. The Jews also faced judgment because they rejected Jesus as the Messiah, unlike the Gentiles, the sick, and the children.

PRAYER REQUESTS: