

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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MATTHEW 21 CLEANSING THE TEMPLE AGAIN; THE FRUITLESS FIG TREE



As we analyze the final week of Christ's life, we should remember the extraordinary background of what was taking place to appreciate the full import of the occasion.

Barclay gives the historical background, "It was the Passover time, and Jerusalem and the whole surrounding neighborhood was crowded with pilgrims. Thirty years later a Roman governor was to take a census of the lambs slain in Jerusalem for the Passover and find that the number was not far off a quarter of a million. It was the Passover regulation that there must be a party of a minimum of ten for each lamb, which means that at that Passover time, more than two and a half million people had crowded their way into Jerusalem. The law was that every adult male who lived within twenty miles of Jerusalem must come to the Passover, but not only the Jews of [Israel] came. [In fact,] Jews from every corner of the world made their way to the greatest of their national festivals. Jesus could not have chosen a more dramatic moment. It was a city surging with people keyed up with religious expectations that He came. Nor was this a sudden decision of Jesus, taken on the moment. It was something He had prepared in advance" (Notes on Mt. 21:9).

Once in Jerusalem, one of the first things He does is head to the magnificent Temple. He had wept when He had seen the city with its beautiful Temple afar off, knowing what was about to happen and the city's ultimate fate (Luke 19:41-44). Yet, once He enters the Temple precinct, He is again enraged by what He sees.

It says in Mt. 21:9-14, "Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!' And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, 'Who is this?' So the multitudes said, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.' Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, 'It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'Den of thieves.' Then the blind and

the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them."

Why was Jesus so infuriated? Because the high priests had established a system where the pilgrims who came to pay the temple tax and buy the sacrifices could not pay directly but had to exchange the money for the "authorized" version, and they often had to pay up to 20% more.

Barclay mentions, "The scene of this incident was the Court of the Gentiles into which anyone might come. It was always crowded and busy; but at Passover, with pilgrims there from all over the world, it was thronged to capacity. There would, even at any time, be many Gentiles there, for the Temple at Jerusalem was famous throughout the world, so that even the Roman writers described it as one of the world's most amazing buildings.

"In this court of the Gentiles, two kinds of trading were going on. There was the business of money-changing. Every Jew had to pay a temple tax of one half-shekel, and that tax had to be paid near to the Passover time. A month before, booths were set up in all the towns and villages, and the money could be paid there. But after a certain date, it could be paid only in the Temple itself, and it would be there that the vast majority of pilgrim Jews from other lands paid it. This tax had to be paid in certain currency...The function of the money-changers was to change unsuitable currency into correct currency. That seems on the face of it to be an entirely necessary function, but the trouble was that these money-changers charged the equivalent of 1 pence for changing the currency at all. And, if the coin was of greater value than half-shekel, they charged another 1 pence for giving back the surplus change. That is to say, many a pilgrim had not only to pay his half-shekel, which was about 7 pence in value, but another 2 pence also in changing dues, and this has to be evaluated against a background where a working man's wage was about 3 pence a day...a pair of doves could cost as little as 4 pence outside the Temple and as much as 75 pence inside the Temple...Further, these stalls where the victims were sold were called the Bazaars of Annas, and were the private property of the family of the High Priest of that name...Sir George Adam Smith can write, 'In those days, every

priest must have been a trader.' There was every danger of shameless exploitation of poor and humble pilgrims—and it was that exploitation which raised the wrath of Jesus" (notes on Mt. 21:12).

It is notable that after this incident, Jesus courageously does miracles in front of all of these angry priests and begins to heal the blind and lame. This was against some of the rules of the Jewish authorities.

Expositor's comments, "Most Jewish authorities forbade any person lame, blind, deaf, or mute from offering a sacrifice, from 'appearing before the Lord in His temple.' But Jesus heals them, thus showing that 'one greater than the temple is here' (Mt. 12:6). He Himself cannot be contaminated, and He heals and makes them clean those who come in contact with Him. These two actions—cleansing the temple and the healing miracles—jointly declare His superiority over the temple and raise the question of the source of His authority (notes in Mt. 21:14).

The Bible says, "But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' they were indignant and said to Him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' And Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants you have perfected praise?' Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there" (Mt. 21:15-17).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary adds, "By receiving their praise, Jesus was declaring He was worthy of praise as their Messiah. The religious leaders, in rejecting Jesus, did not even have the insights of children, who were receiving Him. Consequently Jesus left the leaders and departed from the temple. He returned to the town of Bethany, about a two-mile walk over the Mount of Olives, where He spent the night, probably in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus" (notes on Mt. 12:15).

Now comes the puzzling account of the cursing of the fig tree. We read, "Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. 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. And when the disciples saw it, they

marveled, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither away so soon?' 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. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive'" (Mt. 21:18-22).

The fig tree was unique in that it produces fruit twice a year. The first fruit is a small green fig that grows before the leaves come out and is edible. If none of these figs came out at the time, it meant no other fruit would appear later.

The Preacher's Bible Commentary notes, "Mark adds that 'the time of figs was not yet;' that is, of ripe figs. The green figs ought to have appeared among the leaves in April, though the fruit began ripening in June...Swartley says, 'The point of the fig tree account is not Jesus' vendetta against fig trees, fruit or no fruit, out of season or in, but that the doom and destiny of the fig tree casts its shadow over the temple.' It illustrated the Jewish nation which held out a promise of spiritual fruit before the world, but when Jesus came to their temple He found the very court which was to be open to the Gentile world cluttered with activity but with no spiritual vitality" (notes on Mt. 21:18).

So Christ showed with this example two things: 1) The importance of not only having a pleasing appearance, but of showing genuine fruits of conversion (John 15:1-5, 8), and 2) As the fig tree, the Jewish leaders sought to be admired by men but lacked spiritual fruit. This will be shown by the next scene, with the Parable of the Two Sons and the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers.

Matthew continues, "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?' 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: 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?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.' 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. 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.' He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. 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. 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'" (Mt. 21:23-32).

The point being made here is occasionally, a person might not be in the best attitude, but still repents and obeys God's laws, while others might pay lip service to God, but then not observe His laws. As Christ mentions, even those who were great sinners, when they repented, are ahead of those who have the appearance of being righteous, as those Jewish leaders, but did not see the need to repent and obey God's laws as taught by Christ.

The Believer's Bible Commentary adds, "The Lord interpreted the parable. Tax collectors and harlots were like the first son. They made no immediate pretense of obeying John the Baptist, but eventually many of them did repent and believe in Jesus. The religious leaders were like the second son. They professed to approve the preaching of John, but never confessed their sins or trusted the Savior. Therefore the out-and-out sinners [will enter] the kingdom of God while the self-satisfied religious leaders remained outside" (notes on Mt. 21:23).

To further illustrate this principle, Jesus gives another parable: "Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying,

'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed Him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers? They said to Him, 'He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.' Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.' Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet" (Mt. 21:33-46).

Christ was prophesying what these Jewish leaders would shortly do to Him as "the son of the landowner."

This is why He said the responsibility of preparing for God's kingdom would be taken away from them as the leaders of God's people and will be given to another people--God's Church throughout the ages, what Paul names the mixed races from around the world, Jews and Gentiles, that would be called, "The Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). This new spiritual nation, which would obey Jesus Christ's teachings, be under His leadership, send the Gospel to the world, and prepare a people for His coming kingdom, is the one God would henceforth focus upon.

Of course, the Jewish leaders were incensed about what Christ said, and right then and there, they wanted to arrest Him. But they were afraid to seize Him in public since He was so well respected and the common people considered Him a prophet. After all, He had been doing great miracles—beginning with the raising of Lazarus from the dead and now healing the blind and lame. We'll see what happens in the next study.