

# Matthew 21:18-22 | David Baumgartner

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Date: 23 February 2025

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[0:00] All right, well, good morning, everyone. Good morning. We're going to be continuing our verse-by-verse study of the Gospel of Matthew. So if you'd please turn with me to Matthew chapter 21.

! We'll be looking at verses 18 to 22. I was reminded today that I'm David number three. So that's good to know.

They only gave me five verses, though. And so, as my older brother would say, what's up with that? Well, let me set the table here in Matthew.

In our text, we're in the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry. And otherwise, we call it Passion Week. It's Passover time in Jerusalem.

And the city at this time is overflowing with people. And as we read, there was this great procession that took place. A parade, if you will.

[1:02] And that parade would have begun at the eastern gate, as Ezekiel prophesied. And it would have ended at the temple. And also, as we read, the people hailed Jesus.

They hailed him as their long-awaited king. The one who they thought would deliver them, overthrowing the Romans and liberating Israel from her bondage.

And as we saw last week, out of extreme displeasure with the Jewish religious system, Jesus cleansed the temple. Well, this morning, we're going to be looking at another action that Jesus did. And this one is involving the fig tree. So, let's read here together, starting in verse 18 of chapter 21. Now, in the morning, when he returned to the city, he became hungry.

And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, he came to it and found nothing on it, except leaves only. And he said to it, no longer shall there be any fruit from you.

[2:10] And at once the fig tree withered. And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, how did that fig tree wither at once? And Jesus answered and said to them, truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and cast into the sea, it shall be done.

And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive. Let's go to the Lord in prayer. Heavenly Father, we are so grateful that we can come here today and to be in your word, to be fed, to be encouraged, to be edified, to be reminded, Lord, of just the privilege that we have as your sons and daughters.

And Lord, we know that this was made possible by our Lord Jesus Christ himself. We pray, Father, that these words would have significance to us today, even though they were penned so many years ago, that they're still relevant to us.

And we thank you so much. Bless this time, and may it be to your glory. In Christ's name we pray. And all God's people said, Amen. Good deal.

As you know, there are four gospel accounts about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And each writer has a particular perspective that he wants to emphasize.

[3:44] Matthew's account is distinctively Jewish. He shows how Jesus presented himself as Israel's king. But beginning, even in chapter 12 of Matthew, we begin to see how the people reject Jesus Christ.

There's another distinctive that I would like to point out. And that has to do with the sequence of events. So if you have your Bibles, if you'd please turn with me to Mark's gospel account.

Chapter 11. Mark chapter 11. Matthew compresses three events. I'm talking about Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem.

Secondly, the cleansing of the temple. Then third, this fig tree account. He compresses them into just one narrative. But Mark presents a chronological order of these events.

Mark describes them as occurring over a three-day period. If you'd briefly look with me in Mark chapter 11. Beginning in verse 11. Notice, we'll call this day one.

[4:55] After Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Notice verse 11. He inspects the temple. And then he returns to Bethany. That's the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Verse 12. Early in the morning. Here we have day two now. Notice Jesus leaves Bethany. And verse 13. While on his way to Jerusalem, he sees this fig tree.

Full of leaves. But there's no fruit on it. And then look with me. Verse 14. The disciples are listening on as Jesus curses the tree.

And then notice verse 15. Jesus goes to the temple. And proceeds to drive out the money changers. He then leaves the temple. And goes back to Bethany.

To most likely again spend the night at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And then verse 20. Notice it's the next morning. So this is day three.

[6:00] While on his way back to Jerusalem. It's then that his disciples notice that this fig tree is withered from its roots. And then that initiates this dialogue between the apostles and Jesus.

Why am I pointing this out? Well, I want you to notice this. That the cleansing of the temple, which we studied last week, is sandwiched between these two accounts involving this fig tree.

Do you think there's a connection? There sure is. So let's turn back to Matthew 21, if you would. And I'd like to see just what happened to this fig tree.

And remember, if we consider Mark's gospel account here that focuses on a chronology of things. Verses 18 and 19 in Matthew occur before Jesus cleansed the temple.

Look with me. Verse 18. Now in the morning, when Jesus returned to the city, it says he became hungry. It's just paused right there.

[7:09] Here we see Jesus' humanity. Tells us that he was hungry. We're not told why. You know, maybe he didn't get breakfast that morning. But we do know that Jesus submitted to all of the humanity's infirmities.

Going on here, it says in 19. Seeing this lone fig tree, he came to it. Now, in the Bible, the presence of fig trees is a sign of blessing.

It's a sign of God's goodness on us. If you look, well, in Deuteronomy chapter 8, when God described the promised land to the Jews, it says this.

You don't have to turn there. It says, The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with water, wheat, and fig trees. In Numbers chapter 13, when the 12 spies go into the promised land, they come back with this good report.

And they bring back with them grapes, pomegranates, and figs. It's a sign of prosperity. And so, our Lord is on his way to the temple.

[8:26] In fact, on the path between Bethany and Jerusalem, you'll notice that there's this town of Bethphage. In Aramaic, Bethphage means a place of young figs.

So, in our account, Jesus is hungry. He notices this fig tree on the side of the road. And he comes to it. What do we know about fig trees?

I don't know anyone who has a fig tree in our garden. I did look up a couple things here. Wikipedia tells us that a fig tree is a deciduous tree.

That just means that it sheds its leaves. And it does that every year. Its leaves don't come out until around May or June.

Now, this event is occurring, since it's Passover, it's occurring in April. So, this fig tree was actually unusual. Because we're told it was already full of leaves.

[9:29] Secondly, we see that, it tells us that usually the fruit of the fig tree begins to appear at the same time or even before a fig tree's foliage comes out.

And so, if you see a fig tree with leaves, what do you expect? Figs. You expect fruit. Verse 19 tells us that Jesus found nothing on it except leaves only.

And it tells us, so he said, No longer shall there be any fruit from you. And at once the fig tree withered. Plenty of leaves, but no fruit.

And so, Jesus says, from now on tree, you're dead. And then in Mark 11, we see that the disciples are listening on at this point.

And then from there, according to Mark, Jesus goes to the temple and cleanses it. Why did Jesus curse this fig tree?

[10:35] It seems kind of petty, doesn't it? Like maybe Jesus needs anger management lessons or something. I'm sure some people thought that. The thing is, is in scripture, we see fruit as an indicator of salvation.

Early in Matthew chapter 7, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, By their fruits, you shall know them. He's talking there about wolves and sheep clothing.

Later on in Matthew chapter 13, in the parable of the four soils, The good soil is seen as good because why? It produces fruit.

We're told some hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. In John 15, 5, Jesus said that every branch that abides in me bears what?

Much fruit. Fruit is a manifestation of God's work in a person's life. Consider with me these past three years at our retreats at Pinecrest.

[11:41] What did we study? The fruit of the Spirit. So Jesus, who's this master at capturing illustrations out of nature, he's illustrating an important truth to his disciples.

Through his actions, he's showing his disciples, and I'm just going to paraphrase here. This barren fig tree represents the current generation of Israel who've rejected me.

And now, I'm rejecting them. If you look in Matthew's account, and we've studied this before when we studied dispensations, there are eight phases of Jesus' relationship with Israel shown in the Gospel of Matthew.

From his initial appeal to them, through his teaching and miracles, to them rejecting him. And then in chapter 21, we see now that Jesus is going to reject them.

Consider with me, more than any other nation on earth, the Jews were highly favored by God. He rescued them out of Egypt.

[12:55] He planted them in a fertile area of the world. Jesus comes along, and he shows them his miracles. He teaches them about himself.

And he reveals himself to Israel as, hey, I'm the one who you've been waiting for. They even professed that they themselves were waiting for a promised Messiah.

But they didn't receive him. So Jesus curses this tree, and then goes to the temple, and rejects the religious authorities for their perverted system of worship.

Two symbolic acts, both Jerusalem and Judaism, are spiritually fruitless. They're cursed, and they're ready for judgment.

There's a really interesting parable in the Gospel of Luke. If you want, please turn with me. It's in Luke chapter 13, beginning in verse 6. Some of you may have a heading in your Bible that this is Israel's last opportunity to repent.

[14:08] Luke 13, verse 6. Listen to this parable. Just a pause right there.

It seems to me that this might be a reference to Jesus' three years of public ministry, calling for fruit from Israel.

Verse 7 goes on. The owner now says, Cut it down. Why does it even use up the ground? And then he, the vine dresser, he answers and says to him, Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around and put in fertilizer.

You know, for you gardeners out there, you know what fertilizer does. And if it bears fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.

The main point here is notice, the keeper pleads with the owner for more time. And you know what? That's just what the Lord did.

[15:33] He gave Israel more time. He waited until 70 A.D. And then their time ran out. What happened in 70 A.D.?

The Romans came in. They destroyed the city of Jerusalem. They scattered the Jews. And the temple was burned down to the ground.

Israel did not bear fruit. And you know what? They still haven't. They haven't. Sadly, they're still not interested in the Jesus of the Bible.

They're still looking for a political leader. which is why I believe that Israel is going to be so ripe to make an agreement with this coming leader.

This world leader who will come and make a deal with them. I'm talking about none other than the Antichrist. Could be very soon, friends.

[16:37] Consider with me, today Israel is not at rest. Israel is not at peace. Doesn't it seem like they're always on the brink of war?

What we're seeing today in Israel is a political state. God is preserving His people in an unbled situation.

They've been set aside right now until the church age runs its course. In Romans chapter 11, verse 20, Paul says, speaking of Israel, they were broken off for their unbelief.

But we know this, friends. God will not abandon Israel forever. Someday, they're going to look upon Him in whom they pierced.

They will mourn for Him as an only son. Someday, the people of Israel will be redeemed. And then they'll know what it's like to be at peace.

[17:45] Let's go on. Jesus curses this fig tree. According to Mark, it was on the next day when the disciples were returning to Jerusalem with Jesus.

And verse 20 tells us, and seeing this, the disciples marveled. How did this fig tree wither at once? Notice, they marveled.

They were asking, how did this happen? What power can do this? Let's notice Jesus' answer. Verse 21.

Jesus answered and said to them, truly I said to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to this fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and cast into the sea, it shall happen.

I just want to stop right here and ask this question. Listen, how is faith related to the cursing of the fig tree? Again, with my brother, what's up with that?

[18:54] It's connected to their response to what Jesus did. They were amazed at Jesus' power. The main thing to see here is that Jesus uses this fig tree as an opportunity to teach His disciples an important lesson.

And here's why. They're going to be the ones who will usher in the church age. And perhaps they'll be able to be the ones to fertilize that soil and convince some of their fellow Jews to accept the long-awaited Messiah.

And they will. Many Jews will come to Christ. But let me ask you this. What will the apostles need? What will they need to usher in this golden age that we're in right now?

They're going to need faith. As Jesus said, if you have faith and don't doubt, you'll be able to do the impossible. Moving mountains is a proverbial expression for doing the impossible.

And then Jesus ends here in verse 22. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive. What a great promise from the Lord.

[20:23] He's saying to them, I want you to know you can have this power too. You can have it. Because nothing is impossible with God.

Pray with faith. Praying with faith. You know, people who pray are good to have around. Would you agree with that?

I heard this story about a sea captain when it became evident that his ship was going to go down and not survive this storm. The captain called out to the crew, does anybody here know how to pray?

And this one guy says, yes, captain, I know how to pray. And he says, good. The captain said, you pray while the rest of us put on our life jackets because we're short one.

Let me ask you this. Why did Jesus bring up doubt? Did you notice that? Is doubt a problem with prayer? Here's a quote from a guy named Donald Whitney.

[21:33] Donald Whitney, he's the author of that Sunday school study book we used for spiritual disciplines for a Christian life. He says this, often we do not pray because we doubt that anything will happen.

The Greek word for that is *ouch*. *Ouch*, doubt and discouragement that can lead to a condition called prayerlessness.

Anybody here guilty of that? Yeah. For many, we bring our prayers to God. But when we don't get an answer within 24 hours, it's off our list.

We forget about it. Out of all of the good reasons reasons to pray. Certainly, one of them is the fact that God answers prayer.

Would you agree with that? I hope you do. What might be missing in our lives? Here's a word, persistence. There's no persistence in our prayers.

[22:40] In the Gospel of Matthew, which I've already referred to before, there's at least two places in chapter 11 and in chapter 18 where Jesus tells these stories about persistence.

You don't have to turn there, but this one is in chapter 11. You'll recognize this if you're familiar with it. It's about a guy who asks his neighbor for some bread.

And that's to accommodate a surprise visit by some out-of-town company. So he goes and knocks on the door and he's asking for bread and the neighbor doesn't answer him.

And finally, the neighbor does. He answers this request and gives him bread. Why? Because of his persistence. Or here's the second one. It's in chapter 18.

It's about a widow. This widow sought justice from this rather unhelpful judge. This guy who couldn't care less about her.

[23:40] But she keeps asking. She keeps begging. She keeps knocking. And finally, the judge grants her request. Why? Because of her persistence.

What the Lord is saying, keep praying, my children. Keep praying. Don't doubt. George Mueller, you've heard of him.

He has a diary. And he wrote about five unbelieving friends in his life for whom he was praying. How did it go?

After, within 18 months, that first unbelieving friend came to Christ. Five years later, the second one. Six years later, the third one came.

36 years later, right before George Mueller died, the remaining two came to Christ. I'm sorry, two more came to Christ.

[24:43] And then 52, and he said at that point, I'm still praying for that one. I keep praying on, and I keep looking for that answer. And then 52 years later, he came to Christ.

What a great example of having faith in the Lord. And here's why. When we talk about prayer, and Jesus is the one who brought it up, the object of our faith is the Lord himself.

We don't have faith in faith, nor do we have faith in how we think things ought to be. No, our faith and our confidence is in God and in his goodness and in his promises.

Let me read to you this prayer that Paul wrote. It's in the book of Ephesians, chapter one. Paul says this, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and the incomparably great power for us who believe.

Get that. Uncomparably great power for us who believe. That power, he says, is the same as the mighty strength which he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at the right hand of the Father in heavenly realms.

[26:20] far above all rule, all authority, all power, all dominion, and every name that is invoked not only in this present age but in the age to come.

What power. What a thing to be able to pray for. What a thing to be able to seek the Lord on behalf of God's people.

Do we have that kind of power? We do. We do. Because faith, our faith is in Christ. If I could ask the musicians to come up.

What do we see in this passage here? It's kind of disconnected but I think there's at least two things that we see. The first one is this.

We see Jesus as a judge. I want you to consider with me. Up until now, Jesus' miracles and his teaching, you know, in other words, his healing, his feeding of people and so on, have all been for helping people.

[27:30] but today's passage shows that all judgment has been committed to him. It shows that he's not only able to save, he also has the authority to judge.

And he cursed this fig tree and then he went on and cleansed the temple. And so, what do the people and the religious leaders have in common?

Well, they both rejected the Lord because they both lack faith. They're impressive on the outside but inside, they're spiritually dead.

The second thing we see though is that Jesus is preparing his disciples for the church age. And very soon, in our study of Matthew, Jesus is going to be completing his earthly ministry.

He will be going to the cross as the sacrificial lamb Bearing the punishment for our sins, for my sins, for your sins.

[28:39] He will then ascend back into heaven. And then, the church age will begin. We're in that age right now, friends. And I want to ask this question, how's the church doing?

I heard a statistic recently, I think it had to do with the political environment and so on, but about 80% of North Americans claim to be Christians.

80%. That's pretty optimistic, isn't it? Yeah. Thank you. Yeah. You know, I wonder, I don't think that that's fair, not even fairly accurate.

Among these certainly are people who have placed their faith in the finished work of Christ. And remember, just what was said this morning at our Lord's Supper, it is finished.

The Lord Jesus, He fully satisfied all of the requirements of the law. All of those things He finished. And so, what a great ministry that He fulfilled.

[29:49] But we also know that there's some who deny Jesus. People who profess to be believers, profess to be Christians, they deny Him. They deny His existence, they deny His deity, or they'll deny His humanity, or they'll deny His teachings.

There's thousands of churches, even entire denominations, who are fig trees with lots of leaves on them, but no fruit. Instead of teaching salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, their sermons are aimed at affirming people in whatever lifestyle that pleases them.

They teach that all roads lead to God. All you need to do is just trust more in yourself. Friends, let that never describe us.

May we be people of faith in awe of His authority and His power and seeing that power in each one of our lives that we would be people of prayer.

By the way, this is a good time. I'd like to invite anyone and everyone to join our family prayer time that takes place every Wednesday at 7 p.m.

[31:10] on Zoom. On the back table, there's a little tear-off thing. 7 p.m. every Wednesday and the Zoom access numbers are on that paper here.

I know it competes with youth group and even this Wednesday it's competing with the daycare dinner. but if you're not doing those things, it's a great time to go join several of us and come before the Lord.

Faith is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets. That we would be a people of prayer. Because I want to ask you, where is the power?

Is it in us? No, it's in the Lord. And that we would strive to know Jesus and to make him known.

Amen. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you just for these five verses that Matthew has given us. And we pray, Lord, that we would be able to incorporate what the Lord Jesus said about prayer and about power and about the blessedness that you have purchased for us.

[32:34] May we be those people, Lord. Thank you so much for all that you have done for us. Let us walk in the forgiveness that you have purchased for us.

Let us be those, Lord, who people can look upon and say, boy, there's something different about that guy. There's something different about that woman. She has a joy about her.

Let that be us, Lord. And we give you thanks and praise. I ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.