

## **Matthew 21:18-27: Temple Parables: Authority**

### ***Next Two Sundays:***

Friends! The next Two Sundays we're going to look at some parables that Jesus tells while he's at the Temple.

Before that happens, though, we have today. And really, today is a preamble, a set-up, for these Temple Parables. It's the morning after the Palm Sunday things we talked about last week. We see Jesus on his way to the Temple, and he does and says some things we'll talk about. We see him doing and saying things in the Temple, and getting shaken down by God's holy heavies, the religious elite of Jerusalem.

As we move forward in this passage what I want us to pay attention to, maybe in a way we haven't before, is the example Jesus may or may not be setting for us.

Let's pray.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***On The Way:***

Here's what we won't do. We won't rehash over and

over (lol) what we talked about in Matthew 17, when Jesus said something very similar to what he says here. There, I made the point that Jesus never promises us superpowers, the ability to do just whatever we want, and get whatever we want, too. I made basically the same point we saw last week: If we have things that strike us as really weird, that are outliers compared to the majority of what we see in the New Testament, we should not build theology or practices off of them, but instead, try to figure out an explanation that takes seriously what Jesus says while also taking context into account.

To talk about what Jesus says here well we have to remember that this is the preamble for Jesus' Temple Parables. This is what happens on his way to the Temple after everything that happened the day before. And Jesus interacts with two things in today's scene: A Fig Tree, and A Mountain.

On The Way: Two Things: Fig Tree

***18 Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it,***

***“May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered.***

Here’s how most people read this. Most people read this as pouty Jesus, having a tantrum, and using his superpowers to destroy a tree.

Look, does that sound like Jesus? No, not really, right? Which is why, perversely, we think it must be true! We people have this conspiratorial weirdness, that if certain things are crazy, we think “they are so crazy...they just might be true.”

I don’t think Jesus is throwing a tantrum here. Maybe he is, and maybe on the other side of his return, when I’m giving an account for all I’ve said and done, he’ll be, like, “You were totally wrong.”

I’ll risk it! I think Jesus is purposefully communicating to the disciples, to anyone who’s paying attention, information about the Temple. He’ll go on to tell parables that we’ll look at the next couple of weeks; here, I think he’s acting one out, and I really think we’re meant to see this. Let me say; I’m not alone in this, this isn’t even a minority perspective. But it may be new to us.

## ***On The Way: Two Things: Hangry Jesus or Powerful Symbolic Action?***

A fig tree, of course, is for figs; it's not for anything else. Jesus comes to one hungry, on his way to the Temple. But it's fruitless; it's not living up to what it exists for. It's not meeting the need of one who is hungry. And Jesus curses it. If we wanted to, we could say that he simply extends it's fruitless season forever. Jesus is doing one of two things: making a point, or abusing his power. But he's not abusing his power; he's making a point about the Temple that he's on his way to condemn.

The Temple is meant for those who are metaphorically hungry, hungry for God, but we saw last Sunday the ways it's fruitless for them: for the gentiles, for the lame and blind, for children--for the underclass, the powerless, the excluded.

The Temple was meant as a place of God's presence, access to God's forgiveness, but it's been co-opted by cash, made powerless by blind leadership. It's broken. It's fruitless. And Jesus' words and deeds toward the fig tree are vivid representations of his words and deeds in relation to the Temple. We can say that he

cursed the fig-tree, or we can say that Jesus simply extended forever it's current situation--fruitlessness. What he did at the Temple was the same thing.

And this morning, Jesus wasn't just "hangry," you know? He was communicating to his disciples, to us, to any of the crowd that had hung around overnight, exactly where the Temple stood. The avenue to relationship, forgiveness, and awareness of God no longer bore fruit, even though so many were hungry for it, and so Jesus lets everyone know, not only through what he's going to say and do there the rest of the day, but by how he starts his day, that the Temple is finished.

The Fig Tree's fate is the Temple's fate. He acts out a metaphor, a symbolic act, that we can't ignore. (And, although I don't do this much, but Mark, when he writes about this moment, makes it even clearer that this forever fruitless fig tree is symbolic of the Temple. You can check that out in Mark 11 if you want.)

### ***On The Way: Two Things: Mountain***

***20 When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so***

***quickly?” they asked.***

***21 Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”***

Again, I am convinced Jesus is not giving his disciples freedom to blast to bits whatever they want to if only they trust God enough, but making a point. And Jesus himself specifically ties his point about “this mountain” to “the fig tree.”

Remember, what happens to the fig tree is a symbol of what will happen to the fruitless Temple. And the “this mountain” that Jesus talks about? I’m certain--and again, I’m not alone in this--that Jesus isn’t talking about just any mountain, he really is talking about “this” one, the one everyone can see as they stand around the fig tree: Mount Zion, the Temple Mount, upon which the Temple they’re heading toward stands.

And Jesus doesn’t do what he so often does here, which is command his disciples to pray, encourage

them to have faith; he simply offers them the truth that if they trust God enough they'll be able to participate in what he's doing, which is condemning the Temple.

But, it's not something they may want to do. To condemn the Temple is to put yourself outside the thing that you've been taught your whole life provides for forgiveness, for reconciliation with God, is God's presence with you, His chosen people. It's a big ask.

I don't think Jesus is giving his disciples a free pass to destroy things; I think he's giving them the opportunity to choose to participate in this part of what it means to follow him, which is a condemnation of the Temple. If the first part of Matthew on the way to Jerusalem is about them coming to believe he's the Messiah, this second part is all about them coming to realize that the Temple and its way of providing forgiveness, reconciliation, and the presence of God is on the way out. There aren't two ways to be reconciled to God, there aren't two ways to have God's presence with us. The disciples will have to realize this, accept it, and express it.

This side of Jesus' death and resurrection, and the

sending of the Spirit, it's only by trusting in Jesus' faithfulness, and keeping faith with him, that God's People are God's People. We get this; the Temple system is so far behind us to talk about it feels irrelevant. But for the Twelve, as they stood around that tree, Jesus was letting them know that their entire way of life would be changing, and what was their greatest cultural symbol was, very soon, going to be entirely irrelevant.

This was Jesus' message while he was on the way to the Temple; when he arrived there, and began teaching, something else happened:

***There:***

The "chief priests" and "the elders of the people" came to him. The religious leaders; those with influence, with very real authority of their own. They ask:

***"By what authority are you doing these things?"***  
***"And who gave you this authority?"***

They believe, of course, that they have the authority, the right, to do what he's doing, or even to allow someone to do what Jesus is doing. What they don't



think is that Jesus has the right to do what he's doing. They are asking about issues of legitimacy. They want to discover whether or not it's legitimate for Jesus to be there, teaching as he is. Of course, they believe he has no rights to do what he's doing, that his authority is illegitimate, of course.

Jesus doesn't say "I can do what I want." He doesn't even answer them. He simply offers to answer them, which is brilliant, because it keeps him in control of the moment.

**24 Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.** (He doesn't wait. He's in control of the whole exchange.)

**25 John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?"**

Jesus asked them, we notice, a question about John, his cousin whom Herod had killed. Herod had held off killing John for awhile, because as we read back in Matthew 13, "[Herod] feared the crowd because they thought John was a prophet." "[Herod] feared the crowd because they thought John was a prophet."

As they debate the two answers that they could give, we realize these are the same two answers Jesus could give. His authority is either legitimate, from God, or it's illegitimate, "of human origin."

***They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."***

***27 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."***

Jesus is in control of the entire exchange here.

Notice some things, here: First of all, they don't care about what's true or what's false. They don't deliberate about whether or not John's work was from God or not; they deliberate about what the results will be for them depending on how they answer. We realize that their authority, which they so deeply care about, is something they use to basically ensure they can keep their authority. This is why they ask a double question about Jesus' own; it's a threat to theirs.

Secondly, we're meant to notice that they are just like

Herod. Matthew doesn't accidentally put Herod's exact fears in their mouths. We're meant to see that they are cut from the same cloth, and we won't be surprised in just a few chapters when they send Jesus to Pilate so Pilate can kill Jesus for them. Matthew is beginning to reveal to us that the religious leaders and the political leaders are lining up against Jesus. And just like Herod's authority was ultimately illegitimate and abused, their authority is going to be revealed for the same. And remember, politics, economics, religion, this is all of a piece in Jesus' world; these were people of influence who had chosen to withhold their authority, their influence, when it came to saving Jesus' cousin John. And why not? I mean, he called them the devil's offspring. He set the crowds against them. John was a threat to their authority, just like his cousin Jesus was being.

John's authority was legitimate; his right to do what he did was given to him by God. But they stood against it, and in doing so they de-legitimized themselves. In this moment, Jesus actually gives them a chance to publicly repent, regain some authority in the eyes of the crowd. They don't take it. All they do is reveal that they're cowards.

They are so afraid of what the response to their response might be that they don't respond at all. In the end, their efforts to protect themselves from criticism reveal how empty their authority is, and how irrelevant they are--to God and to God's People. Their non-response is a revelation. It reveals that whatever rights they may claim because of their positions as Chief Priests and Elders, which even Jesus accepts, they really have no legitimate authority at all. They're illegitimate leaders of God's People.

It's a tragic moment, really. And Jesus lets them have what they've claimed for themselves, which is nothing.

***Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."***

In every way--how he asks, what he asks, their response--he reveals that in terms of authority, in terms of legitimate right to act, it's Jesus who has it, and the religious leaders who don't. They're left to stand around, lamely, while Jesus goes on to teach and heal as we'll see him do the next couple of weeks.

***Relevance:***

Let me suggest a way to think about these passages

that bridges that gap between Jesus, the religious leaders, the Temple, and ourselves. I don't know what you'll think of it.

The truth is that, by and large, today's passages simply aren't immediately personally relevant for us. It might be encouraging to us that the image of the invisible God, the Messiah that we follow, was savvy in a crowd, was powerful enough to make his point in ways his disciples couldn't ignore. It could be helpful for us to now and then realize just what a major transition took place between the Temple-centered way of being God's People and this Messiah-centered, Spirit-centered way that we follow.

***Relevance: Seeing:***

But what do we see in today's passage? First, we see Jesus make a powerful symbolic action that points to some of the great truths that lie at the heart of Christianity. Secondly, we see Jesus trick the religious leaders into revealing just how irrelevant and illegitimate their claims to authority were, even as he proves his own legitimate right to do what he's doing.

***Relevance: Mimicking***

And I think that at least one way we can let this

passage be very personally relevant in our lives is to see in Jesus' behavior today an example that we Christians can mimic now and then.

Is it legitimate--do we have the authority, the right--to now and then engage in deeply symbolic actions that reveal great truths about God and what God wants for His people? I think so. Do we have the right to, now and then, expose the illegitimate use of power by those who have good claims to be legitimate authorities--religious, or otherwise?

I think so. And, you know, parts of the Church have always thought so in some way or another. Jesus' death on the cross itself was a symbolic act, which has become a metaphor for us about self-sacrifice, about humility, about love. God has used it, just as Jesus this morning used the fig tree.

Jesus, the Son of God, was the embodiment of legitimate authority, and his murder at the hands of those who had, through tradition and power, become authorities in the world, exposed their illegitimate use of power.

And the Church has done things that symbolically

reveal great truths about God and what God wants for his people, even as it's cleverly revealed the way the "powers that be" in the world exercise authority illegitimately. Some of them are shocking things, some of them are less shocking, remembered every time we wash feet at communion. Some of them are loud things, choirs singing hymns and marching to protest laws that erode civil rights, and some of them are quiet things, letters written to priests and pastors and politicians that contrast their ways of living with Jesus' own.

### ***Relevance: Separate***

What separates the Church's symbolic actions, actions which often reveal the fruitlessness and uselessness of some institution even as it condemns it--just like Jesus' symbolic action against the fig tree revealed the fruitless, useless of the Temple, and embodied its condemnation. What separates the Church's symbolic actions from the world's are the same things that separate all our choices from those of non-Christians. We test them against Scripture. We look to see if our motivations are driven by faith, hope, and love. We invite the Spirit to guide us creatively, to convict us freely, and most importantly, to lead us together, believing that it's when we make decisions as a group

of Spirit-filled people that we make them well. Our symbolic actions embrace self-sacrifice, they are peaceful, and they hurt no one, because these are Christian standards.

And what separates the way the Church exposes illegitimate use of legitimate power from the way the world exposes illegitimate power are the very things Jesus modeled for us. Humility more than anything else, but but also the recognition that there are legitimate powers in the world: these religious leaders were legitimately authorities. They had a right to act, and responsibilities that came with their rights. But Jesus creatively tricked them into revealing the way they had neglected their authority. And we ourselves, called to “speak the truth in love” to each other, and model sacrificial love in all the places we go, we “live such good lives among [the people around us] that, though they accuse us of doing wrong [when we reveal the ways they’ve abused, misused, or neglected their power and rights, that when Christ returns, they’ll remember our deeds as good ones, and glorify God].”

***All I Hope From Today:***

Look, here’s why I’m sharing this. We often deeply



believe, and I deeply respect this belief, that people of faith should not directly engage with the powers that be, ruling authorities, legitimate institutions--religious or not. We just sort of see it as...a dirty thing? A liberal thing or conservative thing, maybe? A youthful, immature thing? Something you don't do, not because you don't have enough time, but because...there are proper channels, you know?

We don't much engage in symbolic action. Oh, St. Peter will put up crosses on its front lawn to represent babies who were aborted; that's symbolic. It's powerful. A pop-up graveyard communicates something. But it's just so--in your face, you know?

The Brethren Church simply doesn't do "in your face" much. I appreciate that, but it is something Jesus did.

What I want us to see is that there is a place in Christianity for symbolic acts that communicate truth about God and what God wants for His People. I want us to see that there is a place in Christianity for exposing the authorities who misuse power as abusers and even cowards--religious authorities especially, but let's remember that in Jesus' world, the religious authorities were the political ones were the economic

ones.

That's all. I'm not going to invite us to take up this thing as a Christian practice. I'm not going to persuade us we have to support actions like Jesus takes here. But I do want to persuade that these things can be, if done rightly, legitimate Christian behaviors. It can be an expression of our own right, as Spirit-filled Christians, to bear witness to the way of God.

So when we hear about Christians doing these things, rather than immediately labeling them, and sorting them into some cabinet of irrelevance because they are young, or idealistic, or fatalistic, or liberal, or conservative, or wrong, or just so pushy and noisy, I hope we can see, simply, that they are first of all Christians trying to live up to Jesus' example as he entered Jerusalem the morning after Palm Sunday.

That's all I hope. That we're open to being gracious instead of dismissive or slanderous. And if we ourselves feel some great calling to do as Jesus did here, let's be careful to do it well, with all the resources and wisdom that the Church has when we come together, not in some aping, grasping way that has little to do with the Messiah who established his

authority while he exposed the fruitless Temple and the cowardly powerlessness of those who had authority over it.