Matthew 21:18-27

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Preacher: Ray Kelly

[0:00] We're in Matthew 21, beginning at verse 18, and my aim is to get through to verse 27, and it remains to be seen whether I succeed.

! So turn to Matthew. And before we start, just some reminders as well as how we got to where we are, which might put things in context.
This morning has got one or two things in it that can be confusing at first reading, and I'm hoping that we can take the confusion away. But remember that we are now in the last week of Jesus's life, probably in the middle of that week.
And if you remember, he visited the temple when he came in in the triumphal entry. He went into the temple, he looked around, and then the next day he comes back and he cleanses the temple. So whatever he looked around and saw, he clearly wasn't happy with. And so he cleanses it from misuse by traders and extortionists and so on.
[1:17] And in this we saw his passion for his father's house. And the passion for his father's house comes from the fact, if you remember, we looked at scriptures in 1 Chronicles, where his passion for his father's house was based upon the fact that it was the place where he would meet his people.

And we also took account of the fact that the largest area of the temple was the court of the Gentiles. So although there was a massive Jewish presence, it was actually built to bring the Gentiles close to God.
So God is no respecter of persons. And the Jews, of course, are supposed to have, over the centuries, drawn the Gentiles into the kingdom of God, where in fact they've done the reverse. They actually hated the Gentiles, while still holding the oracles of God and being largely the only source of the word of God for many centuries.
And what we now need to take into account is that his first visit, which we read about in John chapter 2, was about three years earlier than this. Well, it was exactly three years earlier because it was the first Passover.
[2:31] And this is approaching his last Passover. So the three years have gone by and there has been no change. And pertinent to what we're about to read is that they, after all this time, not only the generations and generations of being the holders of the oracles of God, not only that, but in the last three years when they had Messiah in their midst, there is no fruit.

Lots of show, posturing meant to impress, but real sincerity of heart, true faith, and an uncorrupted approach to God's word, completely absent.
And he had just demonstrated his power and authority by driving people and animals out, hundreds, possibly thousands of them, on his own, by command.
And then he further confirmed who he was by healing the blind and the lame, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 35, verses 5 and 6, which was written some 700 years previously.
And having done all that, their response was, they saw the wonderful things that he did, and they were indignant. Completely inappropriate response, demonstrating their fruitlessness.
[4:01] Right. So, with that, 21, verse 18. And we'll read through to the end of verse 27. Now in the morning, so this is the next day, right?

Now in the morning, he was returning to the city, he became hungry. 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 ever be any fruit from you. And at once the fig tree withered.
Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, How did the fig tree wither at all at once?
And Jesus answered and said to them, Truly 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 even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and

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cast into the sea, it will happen.
And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive. When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him while he was teaching and said, By what authority are you doing these things?
[5:11] And who gave you this authority? And Jesus said to them, I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

The baptism of John was from what source? Heaven or from men? And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say to us, Then why did you not believe him?
But if we say from men, we fear the people, for they all regard John as a prophet. And answering Jesus, they said, We do not know. And he said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.
Now, I don't know about you, but when I first read that through, I thought, This is a sticky one. But it's God's word, and therefore it has to unpack.
And so I'm hoping that we have unpacked it, but I guess we're about to find out. So he'd been unimpressed with what he'd seen in the temple. And Matthew's gospel records the matter of the cursed fig tree, as well as, Sorry, did I say Matthew's?
[6:23] Mark's gospel records it, as well as Matthew's. And there is a small apparent confusion, because Mark's gospel says he did this on the way to the temple, and the other one says he did it on the way away from the temple.

It's not a contradiction in the scriptures. Firstly, Mark said he was writing a chronological account, so he wrote things in order. Matthew simply wrote the events that happened in seemingly more random order.
And the other thing was, he cursed it one day and came back the next day, and it was dead. So it happened over a two-day period. I push that to one side, just as there's usually someone who goes, Aha!
Contradiction! It's not a contradiction. And if you're still in trouble, speak to me afterward. Mark's account fits with Jesus' mindset at the time.
He visited the temple the previous day, was unhappy with the way his father's house was being used, saw that they'd learned nothing over three years, and he's on his way back to the temple to clear it, and he cursed the fig tree as a way of drawing an analogy between the fig tree and the nation of Israel.
[7:33] So, fig tree means Israel. We'll talk about why that's the case, because on the surface of it, in Mark's account, it says he cursed the fig tree when it was not the season for figs, which seems very unreasonable, right?

It's not the season for figs. Why have I found no figs on you? Well, it's not the season for figs. And that seems unreasonable until we understand a little more about fig trees and about his perception of Israel.
Now, I'm renowned for being an appallingly bad gardener, but the one thing I did find out is that fig trees are a particular...
In particular, they're an unusual plant, and some gardening books say they are unique. And the unique thing about them is that they normally produce fruit before they have leaves.
And there is normally this process they go through where they will produce... They'll have fruit on them, and it will normally be an infantile fruit, a sort of edible, but not as nice as the ripe, succulent fruit, but it'll be there, and there will be no leaves.
[8:58] And then the fruit develops and becomes succulent and ripe, and then the leaves come. And so when you see leaves on a fig tree, the promise of seeing the leaves is there's some good fruit there.

So if you look past the fact that it wasn't the season for figs, what Jesus saw was a fig tree full of leaves, and when he got there, there was no fruit.
So if you then draw this analogy with the nation of Israel, what you have is a fig tree that was promising fruit and never delivering it. It was a pretender.
It was pretense. Now I found that very, very helpful because when Jesus looks upon this fig tree and drawing the analogy with the nation of Israel, it was promising something it was failing to deliver.

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Now these... Israel for a long time had willfully led people astray, denying Jesus' messiahship, despite him doing all the things the prophets had said he would do.
[10:07] They had, as we read about in Romans 1, verse 18 to 20, they had suppressed the truth in unrighteousness, deliberately to lead people astray.

But they're wearing all their regalia, and they're being very religious, and they're appealing to the people, and they seem to be offering a way of righteousness that isn't actually there.
In fact, they're using the pretense to corrupt the people. So the fig tree was used as an analogy with Israel because this fig tree was promising figs.
But when they got there, it was just leaves, and the leaves really don't taste good. How do we know the fig tree was symbolic of Israel?
Oh, and by the way, it says Jesus was on his way to the temple and he became hungry. One small point I'd make. It does tell you that Jesus was human. You know, he was fully God and fully human.
[11:11] He got hungry. It's a small point, but let's not overlook it. So what you find when you chase down the fig tree through scripture is that it often symbolizes not just Israel, but the health of the fig harvest was directly associated with the health of Israel.

So if figs were plentiful, Israel was in a good place. If figs were not there, Israel was in a bad place, and that happens a lot.
There's a theologian called Clarence Larkin, and if you get the notes afterwards, you can have his... You can follow up the link to Clarence Larkin.
But he points out that there are three trees that represent Israel. They are the grapevine, the olive tree, and the fig tree. And according to him, and lots of theologians agree on this, the vine is always a symbol of Israel's spiritual privileges.
The fig tree is a symbol of Israel's national privileges. And the olive tree is always a symbol of Israel's religious privileges. You know, the people of God carrying the oracles of God, the olive tree.
[12:31] Well, Israel's national privileges are that they have this special place in the heart of God. And so they have been privileged above all other nations, and despite vast numbers of enemies, they've been preserved to this day.

I mean, on the map, it's smaller than a postage stamp now, but it's still preserved. They're still God's people. They still have national privileges. So, when we go to Hosea 9, verse 10, there is just...
I can read these to you. There's probably limited value in you turning there, but feel free to if you want to. The prophet Hosea says, or the Lord says through Hosea, when I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert.
When I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruits on the fig tree. So there's this sort of association with when Israel's good, oh, when I saw them, it was like seeing succulent fruits on the fig tree.
And in 1 Kings 4, verse 25, Judah and Israel lived in safety, every man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan, even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.
[13:49] So this time of well-being in Israel was highlighted by the fact that they were all sitting under their fig trees. So it's to do with the health of Israel.

And of course, we know that at this time when Jesus is ministering, Israel's health is not great. I'll leave you to chase them down, but in the books of Joel, Habakkuk and Haggai, we see as a sign of Israel's poor condition a description of the fig trees being stripped bare.
So you can chase those at your leisure. So if we then go to Matthew 24, and we will turn to this one, verses 32 to 35, it says this, now learn the parable from the fig tree.
When its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So you too, when you see all these things, recognise that he is near, right at the door.
Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. So, the flourishing of the fig tree is seen as a sign of the end, a sign of the Lord's second coming.
[15:12] So once again, we've got this association between fig trees and the health of Israel. And so, in cursing the fig tree, metaphorically, God was saying that he should have found fruit on the tree of Israel and finding none Israel was accursed and nobody should any longer eat fruit from Israel.

Now this is, this is one of the sources of the false doctrine of replacement theology. Because when you think about it, this is what happened in that Israel, after Matthew 12, if you think back to

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Matthew 12 where they committed the unforgivable sin, and then we come to this point when they are no longer of any use.
They are a cursed fig tree. You can't get fruit from them. And so it's fairly soon after this that the church rises up and Israel recedes. And people are not getting the oracles of God directly from Israel anymore.
They're getting them from the church. And I know that takes a while to develop, but Israel is on the decline. The church is then on the rise. And so you're going through this period of history where there's a change of ownership for want of another way of putting it.
But this does not confirm the doctrine of replacement theology which says, oh, the church has replaced Israel and God's finished with Israel. No, he hasn't.
[16:51] Just read Romans 9, 10, and 11 and you'll realise he has not finished with Israel. But there is a change of dispensation. We've come to the end of the dispensation of Israel and we're in now the dispensation of the church.

And there are lots of people who will immediately, when this goes online, say, he's a dispensationalist. Yes, I am. Absolutely, I am. But turn to Luke 13.
Luke 13 and verse 6. And Jesus is using parables. And so the scripture says this, and he began telling this parable.
A man had a fig tree which he had planted in his vineyard and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard keeper, behold, for three years I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any.
Cut it down. Why does it even use up the ground? And he answered, he being the vineyard keeper, he answered and said to him, let it alone, sir, for this year too I will dig around it and put in fertilizer.
[18:04] And if it bears fruit next year, fine, but if not, cut it down. Now Jesus had worked on this fig tree for three years and he was about to do the final digging and the final, what can I say, the final feeding of the fig tree when he paid with his life and shed his blood.

So it was going to be dug and watered and fed with his own blood. And so there is a link between the thinking of this parable and the cursing of the fig tree where Jesus is looking at the fig tree and saying, it's not looking good.
The fig tree has become cursed. So, because this was spoken in the last week of Jesus' life, we can deduce that Israel was about to wither.
They were about to put him to the cross. And they will no longer be a source of the oracles of God to the world. Now they are in a sense because it's the Jewish prophets that wrote the word that we still use.
But Israel itself is not actively propagating the gospel at all. The majority of them are not even saved yet. So, the fig tree was cursed and stopped bearing fruit.
[19:39] Israel was cursed and stopped bearing fruit. There are direct parallels here. And the church is soon to take over this role. And as I've said, don't get replacement theology ideas in your mind.

Romans 11, 11 says we are supposed to make the Jews jealous. So, all that's happened is instead of them bringing the gospel to us, we're now supposed to be taking it to them.
A lot of ministries don't do that. They do all sorts of things to get the Jews back into the land and they don't give them the gospel. In fact, one or two of them forbid you, if you work for them, they forbid you to preach the gospel to the Jews.
This is crazy. We're supposed to be giving the Jews the gospel. And God will still save all Israel even though, if you remember back to Matthew 12, they have rejected their Messiah and placed themselves under a curse.
So, back to Matthew 21. The response of the disciples gives us another issue and I suspect it's only an issue because we are British and of the time we live in.
[20:46] But, if you read verse 20, seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, how did the victory wither all at once? And Jesus answered and said to them, truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the victory, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and cast into the sea, it will happen.

And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive. And immediately I can hear the word faith people shouting, you know, you've just got to believe it, brother. And then when it all goes wrong, you obviously didn't believe, leave it hard enough, brother.

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So that's what this, that's what this scripture does not mean. It does not mean that God has given us a kind of magic bullet or a magic incantation that as soon as I say in the name of Jesus, every problem is solved.
It speaks, if you think about the context, and this is what I got from it, and you're free to disagree with me or discuss it with me later, but the context was that Jesus was saying, right, they said to the Lord, how did that happen?
How did you do that? And his answer, if you distill it down to one word, is faith. I did it because I have faith.
[22:09] Hmm. So, it makes sense then to see, well, what was it in Jesus' faith that the others didn't have? And I think the answer to that is that he was at one with the Father.

There's no space between them. Yes, they're separate persons, separate members of the Godhead, but Jesus said, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. He said, me and my Father are one.
And so, what he was effectively saying is, if you want to kill fig trees or move mountains, you need the faith that I've got. and that wasn't a magic formula, it was an exhortation to keep pressing into God to get the faith that Jesus had in his Father.
In other words, if you think to the, this is not part of my notes, so you won't get this when you go online, but in John 17, the high priestly prayer of Jesus, he says, his prayer was that we would become one just as he and the Father are one.
And so, I actually think this is not anything like a magical incantation that solves every problem, where if you, if I believe it hard enough, it'll happen.
[23:33] No, it won't. It'll happen if it's God's will and if you're close enough to God to understand what God's will is.

And on those occasions, prayer never fails. And I can think, you know, I've been a Christian somewhere getting close to 50 years now, and I can think of two, maybe three occasions in my life when I have seen something in my spirit and I've ministered to somebody knowing that it could not fail.
Now, if you believe the word faith, people, it happens every week. And if you believe their prophecies, they've had more, God's spoken to them more than he's spoken to Isaiah or Jeremiah. They have conversations with God and they adopt this high ground, which is a bit like this fig tree. There's no fruit in it really. In fact, there's the opposite of fruit because firstly, you all, many of you know this, but my sister effectively died because of this ridiculous doctrine.
So it bears the opposite of fruit. It kills people or discourages them because when they suddenly realise they've been barking up the wrong tree, they disappear and they're lost to the church for at least a while.
[25:01] So it's an important thing to get right. There isn't this expectation that actually next week you'll be shifting fig trees, killing them or moving mountains. No. You might be doing those things if you get as close to God as Jesus was and that's my take on it and feel free to discuss it and I find that to be liberating because there is a there is a pressure put on sometimes you know to get answers.

well relax you don't have any answers unless Jesus gives them to you and then he gets the glory for the answers and not you.
It's wonderful isn't it? So for such effective prayer we need to be as close to God as Jesus was. That's my understanding.
So then we get from verses 23 to 27 what we have here in some ways is a ridiculous challenge because they said to Jesus now remember he's driven everybody out of the temple he's healed the lame and the blind he's cursed the fig tree and he's died and then they say to him on whose authority are you doing this and who gave you the authority?
the reason it's a ridiculous challenge is does it matter where he got the authority from? The fact is he's done it and he's doing it and no one can stop him. There's nothing they can do about it because he's demonstrated his power.
[26:43] He's walked through the crowd when they set out to stone him. He's got rid of hundreds if not thousands of animals and people from the temple with a command. He's got rid of blindness and lameness and deafness and so on.

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He's fed thousands of people with a few loaves and a few fish. Twice. He is incredibly powerful. By what authority are you doing this?
I'd have been scared to ask in case he used that authority against me. Let's read it and then talk about it a little. So when he entered the temple verse 23 the chief priests and the elders of the people and the scribes were also included in Mark's account so they're there as well came to him while he was teaching and said by what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?
Now we need to remember back here to the fact that a couple of chapters ago they were seeking how they could destroy him and so they've asked him this question whose authority are you working by?
And when you think about it there was no right answer to that. They were putting Jesus in a trap because if he said well I was doing it by God's authority blasphemy!
[28:09] Blasphemy! Kill him! Crucify him! Etc. If he just said well by my own authority now both of those things are true if you're fully God and fully man then he had the authority but if he said well I'm just doing it on my own authority then he would have been accused of all sorts of disruptive behaviour and he's just a man and you didn't pay any attention to him and he could still have been strung up for acting like God when he wasn't God which would have been blasphemy again.

So if he had answered the question they deliberately asked him a question to which the answer whichever way he answered would get them in trouble or get him in trouble probably would have got them in trouble actually but it would have got him in trouble.
So he does the same in return and this is the point people sometimes think well why didn't he answer them but he asks this question in return.
He says I will also ask you one thing which if you tell me I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.
The baptism of John was from what source from heaven or from men and in the next few in the next verse or so what you find is he's put them in the same trap that they tried to put him in.
[29:41] The text explains it if we say from heaven he'll say then why did you not believe him because John came preaching Jesus and by rejecting Jesus they were disobeying John and if John was from heaven then why are they disobeying him?

You follow the thread there. So we're going to look idiots if we say he was from heaven but if we say he was from men the people are going to stone us because they say he was a prophet of God and Jesus himself had said he was the greatest prophet that ever lived.
So he's put them in the same corner that they've put him and they kind of said oh wasn't that they couldn't answer it they couldn't answer it and stay honest.
What they should have said was ah we're all wrong he was from God and so obviously you are from God so we all need to repent. but that's not what they did they kind of went we're a bit stuck here we can't be honest so what we'll do instead is pretend we don't know the answer.
They couldn't answer it without revealing their corruption and ignorance. Similarly Jesus was sent by God so the authority under which he was operating was from God but he was also acting under his own authority but he declined to answer because either answer would have got him into trouble.
[31:20] So that takes us to the end of the passage that we were talking about but I want to just pick out a few points of application. Firstly there's no way to skirt around this or put it in anything other than a really challenging way but the only way to conduct our faith is with brutal but kind honesty.

It's the key to godliness. Within the church in the UK there's an awful lot of disingenuous manipulation of people to get money from them, to get them to do what you want, manipulated to comply with the wishes of the elders, whatever, and it goes on a lot.
And within that lots of things get promised that are empty promises. The fig tree with no fruit on it but with lots of leaves is very much alive in the church.
So for ourselves we need to make up our minds that we will not stray into manipulation. and it's a very easy thing to do if you want something and you know that someone can impart it to you, to stay clean and to just say, I need this but it's up to you.
It's quite a hard thing to do and the more you're in need the harder it is to do. But it's essential if you're going to walk with God who is truth. He doesn't just suggest truth.
[33:01] he himself is the embodiment of truth. So we have to face up to our wrong motives and we have to face up to circumstances where we've been manipulative or if we've just been plain

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wrong to be prepared to go actually I was wrong.

And it's one of the foundations of what Joe and I do here is that we will admit when we're wrong and we have on occasions corrected ourselves from the front said this last week it was wrong.
I'd rather be wrong and stay on the right side of God than try to persuade you that I'm right when in my heart I know I'm not.
We need to be brutally honest. Which leads on to another scripture in Matthew 6 verse 33 which says seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you. when we start pulling in a different direction from God we finish up moving out of righteousness and so somehow our focus whatever we're doing whether we're at work whether we're in fellowship like this whether we're just being in the family at home whatever seek first not seek after a van my coffee in the morning or seek at some random time but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and it's that craving for righteousness that needs to be in our hearts where we develop this sense of I do not want to be an unrighteous person so Lord what would you have me do putting him first we talked earlier on about having the God kind of faith and you'll find that in James 4 verse 8 where it says well
[34:58] Mark 11 22 in most translations is rendered as have faith in God but it could equally be translated as have the faith of God or have the God kind of faith and I believe that's a better translation because what the verse that we've read today says really is you want to move mountains you need the God kind of faith and you only get the God kind of faith by getting closer and closer and closer to God it can't just be brought out of nowhere I'm going to lay my hands on you and I'm going to speak in the name of Jesus and you're going to be healed sometimes God graciously does that because the person being prayed for is crying out in their heart to be closer to God and when you ask him for bread he doesn't give you a stone but for the most part that is the laying of empty hands on empty heads and it seeks to glorify men

I'm the anointed one I'm going to do it no you're not he doesn't share his glory with another so we cry out to him for mercy and we develop a deep relationship with God this fellowship at the moment has a lot of poorly people around it and we continually pray for them and I believe with all my heart that God wants to heal them what I don't know is what the pathway is because the pathways we've tried so far don't seem to have made a lot of progress now that doesn't mean we stop it doesn't mean we condemn ourselves either it means we keep trying to get closer to God so we understand it and they eventually get a touch from the Lord or it could mean that they stay as they are because God's doing something entirely different with them that's a very real possibility oh father we thank you for this word I hope I succeeded in unpacking it without causing conflict
I found it difficult Lord I do pray that as we study your word together and do these things together that your truth will come through we are after all fellow seekers after the truth please Lord impart to us your truth on these issues which largely because of English translations and vested interests become difficult Lord give us the simple pathway to you through your word and open the eyes of our understanding I ask in Jesus name Amen chewing
Thank you.
Thank you.
[39:39] Thank you.

Thank you.
Thank you.
Thank you.
Thank you.
[42:09] Thank you.

Thank you.
Thank you.
Thank you.
Thank you.
[44:39] Thank you.

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