

Figs & Vines

Matthew 21:18-46

Now that Jesus has tossed tables in the temple, the chief priests and elders want to know why. Who does He think He is, and what is going on? They try to trap and end Him, but He confounds them with riddles and parables. Fig trees and vineyards are symbols of blessing and prosperity in Israel. Micah prophesies when Yahweh's house is established on the top of the mountains and nations study war no more, "everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid" (Mic. 4:4). But in these parables of judgment the fig tree withers, and the vinedressers are destroyed. Having wept over Jerusalem, Jesus predicts what will happen, and as shocking as it seems, it's good news for God's people and kingdom.

The All Hat, No Cattle Problem

In the morning, Jesus returns to Jerusalem and gets hungry (v. 18). He finds a fruitless fig tree with only leaves and curses it to be fruitless forever, astonishing the disciples by how quickly it withers (vv. 19-20). He tells them that if they have faith and do not doubt, they'll be able to cast this mountain into the sea (v. 21): "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (v. 22). Remember, just the day before, after His royal, triumphal entry, Christ cleansed the temple, condemning it as a den of thieves (21:13). The temple was brimming with buying, selling, and exchanging all to support the sacrificial worship of Yahweh, except that it didn't. It only appeared to do that. What actually went on prevented the Gentiles from praying there, all the while the high priest's family got rich. The fig tree has leaves but no fruit. Like the temple, it appears like a healthy tree but something is drastically wrong. This is the all hat and no cattle, all foam no beer, all talk no action, all leaves and no fruit problem. As with all His signs and miracles, Jesus doesn't do wonders for the sake of wonders, as if to say "See what happens when you trust God? You can toss large amounts of earth into water." He's talking about *this* mountain. The disciples are on the Mount of Olives, looking across the Kidron Valley at Herod's grand temple mount. It was a massive area the size of 29 football fields, crowned by the temple at over 150 feet high. Jesus looks at this juggernaut and tells the disciples that if they pray with faith, they can throw this thing into the sea. What good would this do? The sea is probably the sea of Gentiles, which works both positively and negatively. Gentiles will destroy the temple, but also the disciples will take the gospel to all the nations (Matt. 28:19-20).

By What Authority

Jesus comes back to the temple, and now the chief priests and elders have thought of more questions since yesterday's thrashing: "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" (v. 23). Everyone already witnessed Him teaching with authority *and not as the scribes* (Matt. 7:29). But now they want to catch Him. Where are Jesus' papers, degrees, stamps of approval? If He claims divinity, they'll get Him on blasphemy. If just humanity, He'll be undermined. Notice that they ask these questions while they are undermining their own authority by not believing in Him. Authority flows to those who take responsibility, and flees from those who won't. Their one job is to faithfully shepherd God's people, chiefly by recognizing the Messiah when He is standing in front of them. Jesus won't play but instead asks them a question that reveals their faithlessness: "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,

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‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.’” (vv.25-27). They want to pretend like John didn’t come (out of the desert also without papers and stamps of approval), say and do good things, and be recognized as a prophet. But John could not be effectively ignored or slandered because everyone saw the fruit of his ministry. If you just listened to gossip blogs, compromised news outlets, and envious clergy you might be unsure about John. But Jesus exposes the fact that the leaders are not interested in the truth because if they were, they would receive Him as the one blessed by His Father and empowered by the Spirit when John baptized Him. John gave his life out of love for the truth, and these guys can’t even say what they think about him. Jesus won’t tell them by what authority He does these things, He just simply keeps speaking and working with authority. He gets permission from no one. There’s a place for debates and apologetics, but not when dealing with liars (cf. 1 Pet. 4:11). The parable of the two sons paints them further into a corner. The first says he won’t go work in the vineyard, but then does (vv. 28-29). The second says he will go, and then doesn’t (v. 30). So who is obedient to the his father? They confess that the first one did the will of his father. Amen, Jesus says, and this is why tax collectors and prostitutes enter God’s kingdom before they do (v. 31)! John called the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers and warned them to bear fruit worthy of repentance, but they didn’t listen or change (Matt. 3:7-9). But the prostitutes and tax collectors both heard and followed. The distinction is not Jews and Gentiles or faith and works, but faith and unbelief.

New Vinedressers

The parable of the wicked vinedressers is a loaded one. Similar to Nathan’s famous parable that drew David in before exposing him (2 Sam. 12:1-12), they follow the story until finally realizing which characters they are at the end. Isaiah describes Israel as “a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up,, cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes” (Is. 5:1-2). The Lord rhetorically asks Israel what else He could have done? And therefore what will He do now? He’ll take away its hedge, burn it, break down its wall, and trample on it; it will bear briars and thorns, and no rain will fall on it (vv. 4-6). Jesus riffs on this. The landowner plants a vineyard, sets a hedge, digs a winepress, builds a tower, and leases it to vinedressers so he can receive some of the crop (vv. 33-34). But when he sends servants, they are beaten, killed, and stoned, and more servants are treated the same (vv. 35-36). He finally sends his son, thinking they’ll respect him, but in hopes of stealing his inheritance (the vineyard and more), they murder him (vv. 37-39). Jesus says the owner will come and destroy those vinedressers, but unlike Isaiah’s parable, the owner will lease it to others who will render him fruit in season (vv. 40-41). Changing the metaphor to building stones, He quotes Psalm 118:22-23 and says the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it (vv. 42-43). After the resurrection, Peter faces a similar line of questioning by the Sanhedrin and quotes the same passage to declare their rejection and Christ’s installment as the cornerstone of the new building (Acts 4:11). You either fall on Christ the rock to be broken—your sin, guilt, and shame cracked and taken away—or you resist Him and be ground to powder (v. 44). The authorities realize this is all about them and would like to seize Him, but they fear the multitudes who believe and won’t allow it (v. 45). Jesus is in the vineyard as He proclaims this, ready to die in a few days. Do you hear Him as the authoritative savior? Have you fallen on Him? And do you see any mountains that need to be moved? Like the tax collectors and prostitutes, believe and then pray believing.

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