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Matthew 21:15 - 21:19



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In Matthew chapter 21, Jesus uses the phrase "You perfected praise" instead of "You ordained strength against enemies" from Psalm, indicating that praise is a weapon against God's enemies. Jesus also refers to a fig tree, which he finds without fruit. This parable is in line with previous teachings that Israel was supposed to produce fruit but failed to do so. The speaker, Steve Gregg, notes that Jesus often visited Jerusalem but would stay in Bethany with his friends.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 21, we have in earlier sessions encountered two striking stories of what Jesus did on the first day of the last week of his earthly career. That last week we usually call the Passion Week. And that first day of that week was Palm Sunday.

There are two striking things we've read about that he did on that day. First of all, in the early part of Matthew 21, we find Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, as people wave palm branches before him and lay their garments before him. And he is declared to be the Messiah by a multitude of people who have come out to meet him.

And then, we find him going into the temple, the Jewish temple, and disrupting everything. Turning over the money tables of the money changers. Turning over the seats of those who were selling doves.

Denouncing them, driving them out. Saying that they've turned the temple into a den of thieves. Apparently, when Jesus did this, it was an action that resonated with many of the people.

I'm sure that many people were very angry at him for this, especially the money changers, and probably the chief priests and the others who made a profit off all of this. But the common people, very possibly, had objected to these practices all along, but had been helpless victims, or felt themselves helpless victims, and felt they had to pay the going rate, the rate exchange, and so forth, because what else could they do? They were victimized by the system. And they probably saw Jesus as a great hero, coming in, taking these people to task, and actually physically throwing them out of the temple.

And we have, as we pick up Matthew 21, 15, we have a record that the people were just amazed and excited when Jesus was doing these things. Even the children were crying out in the temple, singing his praises. It says in verse 15, 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.

Now that is, the chief priests and scribes, these were the people who made their living in the temple. And when they saw Jesus doing these things, and when they saw that this was very popular with the common people, even the children were saying, Hosanna to the Son of David, this made the chief priests very indignant. For one thing, they were proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah.

Secondly, it was children who were doing it. Jesus was seen as even corrupting the little children, and leading them into a rebellion against the system. And so they said to Jesus, 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. Now when Jesus said, Have you never read, he then quotes from the Psalms, which was of course part of the Jews Bible, and they should well have read it. And no doubt they had really read it, but he was saying, You're acting as if you haven't.

It's Psalm 8 in verse 2. Now this reads a little differently in the Psalms than the way Jesus quotes it. Because in Psalm 8-2 in the Hebrew Bible it says, Out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants you have ordained strength because of the enemy. And Jesus paraphrases it, Out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants you have perfected praise.

Now that means that Jesus equated perfecting praise with ordaining strength because of the enemy. That's what the Psalm in its original form says, You have ordained strength because of your enemies. And Jesus replaces that phrase with, You have perfected praise.

As if praise serves as a weapon against God's enemies. That there is a strength released, a power released against the enemies of God in praise. Now we know there is a spiritual warfare.

There's many things said about it these days because it's a very popular topic of discussion. There are seminars and conferences on it. There's whole books, many books written on spiritual warfare.

And many of the things that are said about spiritual warfare, of course, they go beyond what the Bible says. And therefore they become very difficult to assess as to whether they have any validity to them at all. There are many theories about demons and about

how demons are to be dealt with and so forth.

That are taught in Christian circles but which go beyond anything the Bible tells us. However, one thing the Bible does tell us is that we are wrestling against principalities and powers. And the rulers of the darkness of this age and spiritual wickedness in heavenly places.

We are actually involved in a struggle against spiritual powers of wickedness. And there are a number of weapons that the Bible identifies that we have at our disposal to overcome these powers of darkness. It's amazing how Christians often neglect the weapons that God has given us.

And take up weapons of another sort, worldly weapons. But the Bible says in 2 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 4 and 5, The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Jesus. Now, we have mighty weapons but they are not carnal weapons.

We don't fight with the same kind of weapons as the world. And therefore, whenever people take up the worldly ways of trying to promote the kingdom of God, whether it's through the sword as the church has often done throughout history, or maybe through some other means, political processes or whatever, trying to overcome evil in the world through these carnal means, it doesn't work. It doesn't work and it's not what we're called to.

That's not our weapons. It's a shame that Christians haven't learned better how to use the weapons that God has given them. And the Bible does identify our weapons.

The Bible says in Ephesians 6, 17, Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Okay, so that's a weapon, the sword of the Spirit. And there are other weapons identified in Scripture that Christians use in defeating the spiritual powers with which we contend.

And one of them, apparently, is praise. As I pointed out, because Psalm 82 says, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have ordained strength because of your enemies. And Jesus rendered it, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have perfected praise.

The perfection of praise in our lives is that strength that God has ordained against the enemy in many situations. The walls of Jericho are a very good example of that. How that the enemies of God were not defeated through carnal means, but through shouting and praising and making music unto the Lord.

When Saul, the king, was demonized and tormented by evil spirits, it was David's worship music that brought about the victory and drove the demon away. There was a

time in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, when Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, was surrounded by immense armies more powerful than his. And he was commanded by God to not go out and fight in that war, but to rather send the singers and the musicians out to sing and praise God.

And when they did this, the praises of God from the people of Israel actually caused the enemy to become confused and to slaughter each other. And so the battle was won by the praises of God. When the children of Israel had first come out of Egypt, they were attacked by the Amalekites.

And therefore there was a war that resulted. And Moses and two of his companions, Aaron and Hur, went up on top of a mountain and Moses raised his hands in a posture of worship of God. And when Moses' hands were in the air, God's power intervened to allow Israel to prevail against their enemies.

But whenever Moses' hands came down, God's power was withdrawn and the enemy seemed to prevail against Israel. And so as Moses was in a posture of prayer and of worship, there was power ordained against the enemy. And so praise, as Jesus identifies it here, seems to be a great and potent weapon in our spiritual arsenal.

Now Jesus said, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have perfected praise. Now, to perfect praise, how is that done? In our day, it's very common for churches to have musicians that lead the praise and worship. Sometimes a whole band of musicians.

And some musicians are better than others, aren't they? I mean, some are talented, some are not so talented. And most get better with practice. But when the Bible talks about perfecting praise, it's not talking about getting better at playing the musical instruments or better at leading the song service or having more practice on your instruments so that you can play with more agility.

That is not what's referred to because babies are not agile musicians, generally speaking. And it is babes and sucklings that have the perfected praise. Obviously, the perfection of praise is not in the mechanics of it or in the adeptness of the musicianship or the vocal acuity of those who offer it.

It has to do with the perfection of its motives, its pureness. God is seeking those who worship him in spirit and in truth. And there are too many who will praise God and be hypocritical about it.

In fact, praise the Lord is an expression that Christians often use quite glibly, just like, how do you do, in a way. I mean, you ask people, how are you, but you don't really seek an answer. Most of the time you don't even realize that that's what you asked.

It's just a greeting. And many times Christians say praise the Lord so frequently that they don't even realize what they're saying and it's not really a praise to God from their heart

at all. It is very important to us that our praises be sincere because Isaiah complained, or God complained through Isaiah.

He said, these people draw near to me with their mouths, but in their hearts they are far from me. So, to speak praises to God, but in your heart not to be praising him, is offensive to God. It is hypocrisy.

It is shallowness. It is externalism. And that is not what God desires.

God desires truth in the inward parts, David said. And it is children who lack all sense of pretension, who don't have the desire to impress their peers with their eloquence and so forth, whose praise is the most genuine and the most pure. It's perfected because of its purity of motive, not because of its eloquence of expression.

And Jesus said that. Essentially, he was defending these children who were praising him. Essentially, it seems the scribes and the chief priests were offended that they were praising Jesus in this language because they were proclaiming him the Messiah.

And they thought that was perhaps approaching blasphemy. And Jesus said, no, these children are the ones that God has given the ability to spiritually praise God correctly and to have their praise perfect before God and accepted before God. And essentially, Jesus is saying what they are saying is acceptable to God, and I am certainly not going to take offense to it, and you shouldn't either.

It says in verse 17, Then he left them and went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. Now, Bethany was a couple miles outside of Jerusalem. It was the town where Mary and Martha and Lazarus lived and Simon the leper.

This is the place where Jesus spent a lot of his time whenever he was in the environs of Jerusalem. Throughout his ministry, he made frequent trips to Jerusalem, and when he did, he typically would spend the night in Bethany in the home of his friends. And this final week of Jesus' ministry that we read of in this section of Matthew was spent in this manner.

Jesus would go each day to Jerusalem and each night to Bethany where he apparently would have his meal and sleep and so forth, and then he would get up in the morning and go back to Jerusalem again. It was less than an hour's walk for them, and so that was how he worked it out. He didn't have to pay for lodging in Jerusalem for that reason.

But he stayed with his friends in Bethany. So we find Jesus making this kind of itinerary each day in this final week. It says, 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. And immediately the fig tree withered

away. Now 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 all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive. Now, this fig tree story has bothered a number of people. On the one hand, it doesn't seem very nice of Jesus to curse this fig tree.

That's one of the objections. Another objection is that the story is told a little differently in Mark's gospel, and some have sought to find a contradiction between the two. Let's talk about the first concern.

Was it very nice for Jesus to curse the fig tree? Well, maybe not, but being nice is not what Jesus was about. Jesus was here on a mission, and everything Jesus did was directed by his Father. He walked in the Holy Spirit, and all that he did was what the Holy Spirit directed him to do.

Therefore, this cursing of the fig tree plays a part, as does everything Jesus did and said, in the whole revelation of what Jesus came to tell us and to reveal to us. Now, we are told in another gospel, in Mark 11, 13, that it was not really the season for figs. And that makes it even seem, to some people, more unreasonable that Jesus would curse the fig tree for not having figs.

It was not the season for figs. How could the fig tree be expected to have figs? Well, first of all, remember that the fig tree is not an animate object. It did nothing good or bad.

The fig tree did not do something displeasing to Jesus. He did not hold it responsible any more than you'd hold a flower responsible for withering in the sun. It is not its own fault, and Jesus did not think for a moment that it was.

His action, I believe, was symbolic. Now, it was cast in an actual, real-life situation where Jesus was hungry and was hoping to find figs on the tree. And when he looked more closely, there were no figs because it wasn't the season of figs.

Now, just because it wasn't the season for figs doesn't mean that there might not have been some figs on the tree, had things been otherwise. Because we're told that the tree had leaves. And in Israel, certain fig trees do get their figs earlier than the season than the other fig trees do.

And when they do, they usually demonstrate it by having their leaves early also. So when they have leaves, normally they would have figs. Now, here was a fig tree.

It was not yet the season of figs, and it didn't have figs. But it did have leaves. And because of that, it was as if it was advertising that it had figs.

If they had leaves, they usually would have figs. And Jesus came hoping that that might be the case, but finding no figs to solve the problem of his hunger, he declared that this tree would never bear fruit again, or no one would ever eat fruit from this tree again. Now, the action, I believe, again, was symbolic.

I believe that the fig tree, in this case, represents Israel. It cannot be proven that it does because Jesus does not say that it does. However, there was a parable Jesus taught earlier in his ministry, found only in the Gospel of Luke, about a man who had a fig tree in his garden or his vineyard, and it was not producing fruit.

And so he said to the guy who took care of his vineyard, he says, Well, let's tear out this fig tree. It's not producing any fruit. It's just burning the ground.

But the man who tended the vineyard said, Well, why don't we give it one more year? Let me put some more fertilizer on it, and we'll dig it up and hopefully get it going here. And if it doesn't produce any fruit in the next season, then we'll tear it out. Well, there seems no doubt that this was a parable that reflected Israel.

Israel is the fruitless tree, or as the Old Testament often referred to it, as a fruitless vine. And therefore, Jesus had once previously referred to Israel in a parable as a fig tree. And now he comes to a fig tree that is very much like Israel.

How is it so? Well, God was looking for fruit from his people. He was looking for the fruit of justice and righteousness, according to Isaiah 5, 7. And Israel was supposed to be producing that fruit, like a fig tree is supposed to produce figs. Now, Israel never really did produce that fruit.

But they did sometimes act as if they did. Like a fig tree that had leaves advertising that it had figs, but didn't have any. Israel had the outward show of religiosity, as if it was a people who were just and righteous.

But really, when you look below the surface, look between the leaves, you'd find there's no real justice and no real righteousness there. And therefore, the hunger for righteousness that God was seeking to alleviate in Israel, he did not find fruit there to alleviate his hunger. And just as Jesus found no fruit on the tree for his hunger, he then gave a pronouncement which applied to this tree as a symbol of Israel.

And that was that it would never bear fruit again, and it withered up and it died. Now, this was really essentially a prophecy about Israel. Because Israel had failed to produce fruit over the many centuries that God had worked with her and sent the prophets, and now had even sent the Messiah, and Israel still wouldn't bear the fruit.

That Israel was now going to cease to be a fruit bearer at all. It was going to die. It was going to wither up, and no one would ever eat fruit from that tree again.

And so the fig tree actually did wither up and die. It actually happened the next day, according to Mark's Gospel, though in this account it just speaks of it immediately withering up. It did immediately wither.

Apparently it began immediately to wither, but the next day they found it completely withered. And so we find that Jesus here pronounces a curse, as it were, on the nation of Israel. Just as we find in the Old Testament in Isaiah chapter 5, when Israel is considered as a vine that didn't produce fruit that God wanted.

He was going to destroy it. And yet Jesus made it more pronounced than just saying, you will wither up. He said, no one will ever eat fruit from you again.

The nation of Israel has had its chance. It did not produce the fruit. And in another place in Matthew 22, Jesus said to them, the kingdom of God is taken from you and will be given to a nation that will bring forth the fruit of it.

And that nation, of course, is the church itself. That God has taken the privilege of being the fruit bearer for God from the nation of Israel and permanently given it to the church. Permanently, I say, because Jesus said, no one will ever eat fruit from you again.

Now, what is that fruit? For the believer, Paul refers to it as the fruit of the Spirit. It's love and joy and peace and gentleness and meekness and self-control. This is the fruit that is the fruit of the kingdom that God desires for the church to produce, for Christians to produce.

He desired Israel to produce it, but they did not. And like this fig tree, they were declared dead and fruitless. And the fig tree withered up and died, and so has Israel, sadly.

But that is what happened because they did not produce the fruit that God planted that nation to produce. I need to comment next time on some of these other statements Jesus made, but we've just run out of time for today's talk.