

The Final Week

In the previous lecture, we saw that Jesus had cursed a fig tree. We do not fully understand what that meant, and neither did the disciples. Specifically, after Jesus curses the fig tree, the disciples ask a question that might not be the best question they could ask: “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” (Matthew 21:20). They should have asked, “Why did You make the fig tree die?” When they asked how it withered so quickly, what really seems to be on their mind is: “Can we do that too?”

Jesus’ answer illustrates an important theme about the way He treats different types of people. When His adversaries ask Him a bad question, He often refuses to answer, such as when they ask Him for a sign and He refuses. But when Jesus is working with His own people, or seekers, or doubters, He answers their questions even if they are bad or inadequate questions. He is still merciful in simply telling them how it happens, but He does not leave them there. He answers their bad question but also tries to move them back to the question they should have been asking. This is how He answers the disciples’ question about the fig tree: “I tell you the truth; if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but you can also say to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

We have a Christian saying about this: “Prayer can move mountains.” But, what does Jesus say? Jesus says “this mountain.” If you believe that every word counts in the Bible, and I do, then you need to pay attention to what Jesus actually said. He said, “This mountain,” not “mountains.” “This mountain” can be thrown into the sea. He is clearly teaching that faith can accomplish great things and that prayer and faith can be a mighty instrument. How do you wither the fig tree? You do so by prayer and faith.

He moves from fig trees to mountains to “this mountain.” Earlier I said that Jerusalem is a city built on a hill or mountain. It is called Mt. Zion. If you look at it from the northeast side of a replica of the temple, it is pretty flat. But from three sides, it is really quite steep leading up to the temple, and was even steeper then. There is a significant movement down and then up as you enter Jerusalem from Bethany, off to the east. That is where Jesus spent the night. It is not a high mountain, approximately 2300 feet in elevation. But as you go to the top you can see from there a beautiful view of the city of Jerusalem. Then you go down into a very sharp valley and back up again, if you approached Jerusalem from that direction.

So when Jesus says, “You can move this mountain,” what mountain may He have in mind? I think He had the temple mountain in mind. One reason is because He seems to be interested in the temple mountain. He has just cleansed the temple, which is on the mountain. The layout of the temple was such that part of a wall was right on the steepest part of that slope. So one would be standing on that wall and looking slightly down but mostly across to see that mountain that Jesus had just symbolically judged. Furthermore, Jesus only used the phrase “this mountain” three times in the Gospels. He says it in Matthew 17:20, referring to the mountain of His transfiguration. Then when He is speaking to the woman at the well in John 4 he talks of “this mountain,” referring to Mt. Gerizim, which is the highest mountain in that part of the country. Both of these instances when He says “this mountain,” He means a particular mountain at His present location. Thus it is likely that in Matthew 21 Jesus is not talking about mountains in general, but about the temple mountain, saying, “If you want to remove this mountain, if this mountain is to be judged and restored again, it takes faith.” That is the teaching that He is giving us in this part of His Word.

We can also say something more broadly. It is possible to view Jesus’ entire last week as an issue of

moving mountains, because in the Bible mountains are not just the place where particular things happen, but are often symbols of that which lifts or exalts itself against God. Many cities in the ancient world were built on mountains as citadels, fortresses. The idea was: “We are going to build our city on a mountain. We are going to defend it and pray to our god. And we will stand.” Read the Old Testament prophets; “I will not be destroyed,” is the boast of the pagans.

The symbol of mountains is so strong in the prophets, so strongly alive with the idea of rebellion against God and the advancement of human pride, that in Jeremiah 51:25, Jeremiah calls Babylon a “destroying mountain.” Now Babylon is built on the flattest part of the plain, an old ancient sea bed. If you saw pictures from the Gulf War a number of years ago, the area is just flat, slightly rolling sand dunes for miles. But Jeremiah calls it a destroying mountain. And Rome, in Revelation 17:9, is called a city built on seven mountains to suggest that it is lifting itself against God.

Do you want to move mountains? Do you want to move the mountain of Israel’s sin? Prayer is the way. You cannot destroy it; you must pray for it. Do you want to move the mountain of Rome, that power that exalts itself against God? The way to move that mountain is not through a messiah-deliverer coming on a war horse. Rather, the way to defeat them is by prayer. The spiritual route is the correct route. The Israelites would not take it, but Jesus told His disciples that that is the path to ultimate victory. And it was. Think about the spread of the church. It was not done by warfare. If it was done by human means, it was done by the blood of the martyrs. And after suffering and not resisting for three hundred years, the church began to have a secure hold on peace in the Roman Empire. That accords with Jesus’ teaching on how things are done. They are accomplished spiritually. And this gives insight into His view of the Jewish nation.

Referring back to the fig tree, could Jesus’ hunger, when He approached the fig tree, have been representative or symbolic as well? I am going to say that His humanity was hungry. But He used what was at hand to make a spiritual point. He was using this barren fig tree and His quest for figs as a symbol for God’s hunger for righteousness.

Another question that might arise: Would the people who were there, especially the high priests, have picked up the allusion to Jeremiah 7, from that simple phrase “this mountain”? Would that have been enough? We simply do not know how many of them got it. Probably some did; perhaps most of them did not. But remember when Jesus speaks, He is speaking to believers and unbelievers, so some people were not listening. Other people, like the disciples, would have remembered, pondered, and asked what He meant. I believe that Matthew knew what it meant. It might have taken him years. Jesus intended for Matthew to write it down, and He certainly intended for us to pick up the allusion. It is the pattern throughout the Gospels to give particular quotations that allude to larger sections of the Bible, and the more you know of the Old Testament, the better you understand the New Testament.

Let us take a look at the next episode, which is in the temple courts. Jesus is kind of like a repair man coming to fix a wide variety of problems in Israel. He has a lot of tools in His kit. One of His tools is words. He does not conquer with a sword, but the sword of the mouth. He uses all kinds of words: symbols, debates, laments, parables. All of them are for the purpose of bringing some people, at least, to repentance, and also to show His disciples where things need to be heading. Let us take a look at the debates.

The first debate is in Matthew 21:23-46, when Jesus enters the temple courts for the first time to teach. He is asked the question, “By what authority do you do these things and who gave it to you?” Jesus

answers, “Let us play a game. You ask a question, and I will ask you a question. Here is one I have for you: John the Baptist—where did John’s baptism come from? Did it come from heaven or men?” This is a clever question because if they say, “From men,” what will happen? The people regard John as a prophet and so the questioners will lose their credibility with the masses. And if they say, “From heaven,” Jesus will ask why they did not believe John, because John testified to Him. And John’s message is remarkably similar to Jesus’ message, except John said that someone greater than he is coming and here He is. In the end, either answer is unacceptable so they have to say, “We do not know.” This is an embarrassment. If someone came to me and asked me if Billy Graham was a man of God or not, and I said, “I don’t know, I have no opinion,” you would say that I have to have an opinion. I would look like a fool, and so did they. Jesus silenced them.

Then they asked Jesus another question to try to put Him on the defensive. They were not really questioning Him about His right to cleanse the temple, but rather were trying to embarrass Him as He had embarrassed them. Matthew 22:15, “The Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Him in His words, and sent disciples to Him along with Herodians.” At this verse, red flags should go up. What is wrong with this—the Pharisees with Herodians? These are the last people in the world that should be together. It is like hearing the most liberal and most conservative congressmen are sneaking around and having lunch together. They do not belong together. Then they start flattering Him. They say, “Teacher, we know you a man of integrity. And we know that you teach the way of God, truly. You are not swayed by men because you know who you are. So give us your opinion: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Jesus answers with a counter question: “Can you please show me the coin used for paying the tax?” This would be a head tax; it would amount for the average working person to three percent of their year’s wages. Just for being alive, you had to pay three percent. And they produced a coin.

The very fact that Jesus asked for money and they produced it is already the beginning of an answer, because if you are using Roman coins with inscriptions, you are taking advantage of that which Rome provides for you. If you are taking advantage of their services—roads, water, etc.—if they are receiving the benefits from Roman rule, then it is fair to pay some taxes. That is phase one of the answer.

When you look at an American quarter, what do you see? Whose head is on it? It is George Washington. What else is there? You see the motto “in God we trust”, an eagle, a date, United States of America, the amount, the year, and “*e pluribus unum*” (which is, “out of many, one”). Coins convey a variety of messages. Coins also had inscriptions in antiquity. A cluster of grapes would be a symbol of abundance for the people, signifying that the government provides abundance. A coin might have a war scene or an inscription of the emperor. It was also the case in antiquity that words were written on the coins. Some of the words had to do with deity, such as a coin that said, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.” When you have the image of Caesar and the claim of deity this implies a demand for emperor worship. Jesus answers the question by saying, “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but render to God what is God’s.” Do not render to Caesar the worship he requires or asks of you. Jesus says that is the answer.

The dilemma is that, indirectly, Jesus said to pay the taxes. If He simply had said it, then the Jews would have become less enamored with Him. If He said not to pay it, He could have been charged with sedition. So He avoids the errors while managing to teach His disciples to give the state its due. But when the state claims to be our god, we do not give it that status, because God is the one we worship.

After the debates, Jesus tells some parables. We have already studied the two parables in Matthew 21. In

the first, the parable of two sons (Matthew 21:28-32), Jesus suggests to the Jewish leadership that they are like the son who said he would go work in the vineyard but didn't, whereas the 'sinners' are like the son who initially refused to go, then repented and went.

Next, in Matthew 21:33-46, is the parable of tenants in the vineyard. An owner plants a vineyard and then leases it out to tenants. The tenants, however, refuse to give him his fruit (the rent). When the owner sends messengers, the tenants beat and kill them. "I will send my son," the owner finally says, "Surely they will respect him." But the tenants say, "This is the heir; let us kill him and then we can have the land." They kill him, just as the Jews will do with Jesus. But Jesus said the tenants made one mistake: the owner was a powerful man, and he will eventually come to the vineyard. Jesus asks what the owner will do to the tenants and the listeners say, "He will treat those wretches wretchedly. And he will rent the land to others." Then Jesus speaks to them directly: "Have you never read the Scriptures?" And He quotes the passage from Psalm 118 about how the stone the builders reject becomes the capstone. This term "rejected" is a special word in the original language, from a family of words that means "to test meaning." The leaders of the Jews put Jesus to the test. They wanted to see if He was the real deal. They watched Him, listened, and pondered. And they rejected Him because He did not meet their standards. This was predicted by Psalm 118, that the stone the builders refuse becomes the chief cornerstone. Jesus is warning the people about what they have done.

Jesus continues, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce Him fruit." He could not be more plain. He may fall onto stone and be broken into pieces, but those on whom He falls will be crushed. Then the chief priests and Pharisees knew He was talking about them, and they rightly condemned themselves. When Jesus says the kingdom will be given to "a people who will produce fruit," the word for "people" is actually "nation." To what nation is the kingdom given? To the Gentiles, who were commonly referred to as "the nations." Because Israel failed, slaughtered the prophets, and killed the Son, God will create a new nation from the Gentiles and that new nation will believe and bear fruit.

Throughout the New Testament, notably in books like 1 Peter and Romans, we read that the promises initially given to Israel are now given to the church. For example, in 1 Peter 2:5-10, the church is called a "holy priesthood, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation of people belonging to God, coming to praise God." Those who were not His people are now His people. Peter is quoting a passage from Exodus 19, when God first constituted Israel as a nation. Peter also quotes passages from Isaiah, Malachi, and Hosea. The list of the believer's privileges, in Roman 4-8, was originally offered to the Israelites. Paul explains that all the promises first given to Israel have now been given to the church: justification by faith, forgiveness of sins, peace with God, hope, the Holy Spirit, abounding grace. Abraham was the first person to be justified by faith, and now this privilege belongs to the church. Through Christ, all the Old Testament blessings are given to us. We are the nation that is the heir of those blessings. This should guide our reading of the Old Testament. I am in no way degrading the nation of Israel, but am saying that as a nation they are no more the people of God than Korea, or Germany, or any other nation is. It is the church that is the people of God.

Some claim that the church is the *spiritual* Israel. While the Bible does teach this, it is not a prominent theme. More prominent is that the church is the *true* Israel. Romans and Galatians make this point. We are chosen by God, whoever we may be, whatever nation we come from. We, as the church of Christ, are the true Israel.

In Matthew 23, Jesus delivers a shocking address to the scribes and Pharisees, in the form of seven

“woes.” Notice His severe language: “Woe to you Pharisees, you hypocrites, blind fools” (verses 16, 17, and 24); “You whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but inside full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (verse 27). This is like the Jesus of our Christmas carols, the gentle, kind, sweet baby Jesus. What is going on here? How could Jesus say things like this? This is God’s justice. This has been spoken before, and it is a call to repentance.

The word “woe” is one we almost never use. The closest word in English, which we also almost never use is “alas.” It means, “Judgment is coming and I am sorrowful over it.” It is not “hooray” or “hallelujah.” It is sorrow. Jesus speaks it “to this generation” (verse 36). While He is speaking about the Jewish leaders, the scribes, Pharisees, and high priests, He is speaking to the crowds and to His disciples (verse 1). If the Jewish leaders were there they probably would have left after a little while. This reminds me of a demonstration I once attended, regarding a mercury plant that was burning toxic waste two blocks away from a major residential district, but only at night when the inspectors were not there. When the community gathered to protest this, the leaders of the demonstration said the plant was poisoning our blood and atmosphere, and its day of reckoning was going to come. The speech was addressed not to the leaders of the company, but to the other demonstrators, to persuade them to see things the way the leaders did and to entice them to come to the next demonstration, the next town hearing.

This is analogous to what Jesus was doing. He was speaking to people who were not there, in order to educate the people who were there. The Pharisees and scribes were revered by the masses and Jesus had to break their attachment to false teachers. Remember, some of these people were here for the Passover and had never heard Jesus before; they needed to hear this. “Do not do as they do,” He tells them. “Do not call them ‘father.’ Some of their teaching is good, but do not do what they do; they are hypocrites. Do not look to them as ones to revere, because they will not lead you to the way of truth. They tithed their weeds—mint, dill, and cumin—and they say everyone else should as well. But in taking care of mint, dill, and cumin, they are forgetting about justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Those are definitely more important than weeds. Go ahead and practice the latter, but do not neglect the former” (Matthew 23:23-24).

Jesus is warning the people. His instruction is an act of His grace, of kindness. “Do not follow false teachers. Do not heed those who major on minors.” There are two kinds of hypocrites in the world: one is deliberate, and the other is somebody who has been playing it so long that he does not know he is playing anymore. He has deceived himself so long that he does not even know what he is doing, and he might deceive others without knowing it. The Jews are unintentional, extremely sincere hypocrites: they traveled land and sea to make one convert; they fasted twice a week and tithed scrupulously. They played the game so long they did not know they were playing.

So Jesus’ words of judgment do two things. First, they are His last effort while on earth to break through to these people, to challenge them to actually see themselves. He had tried gentler medicine before, and now He uses the full strength to see if they respond. But second, His words are for the sake of His disciples. It is with sorrow that Jesus says in Matthew 23:37-39, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks in her wings. But you were not willing. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.’” In other words, “If you say I am blessed, and I come in the name of the Lord, then you will see Me, and I want that. My words of judgment are meant to elicit conviction and repentance, not anger.” Jesus has to warn His disciples against these people because judgment is coming on them. They are not going to escape condemnation

unless they repent.

Jesus warns of the severity of the coming judgment: “Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth” (Matthew 23:35). How can Jerusalem be accountable for all the blood being shed on earth? We find an answer in a certain passage from Revelation which speaks in similar language. Revelation 11:3 introduces two witnesses who testify to God, and we read that when they finish their testimony, “their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (11:8). How does this help? Sodom is the city of sensuality, Egypt is the land of oppression, Jerusalem (where Jesus was crucified) is the city of hypocrisy. Jesus is saying that those who indulge in sensuality and oppression, and those who use religion as a cloak are one in the same—they are all His adversaries. He will even say that the most dangerous one is the one who comes in the cloak of religion. That is why Jesus says Jerusalem is where the judgment of them all lies.

It is a sad, vital part of God’s Word, and one upon which we must not dwell too much. As teachers and preachers, it can be tedious teaching the seven woes. There are times when you need to hurry forward to the cross. I do not think there is anyone sinning today quite like the Pharisees were sinning, for their sin had to do with their position, so it is not good to make people believe they are sinners like the Pharisees were. Nonetheless, in this part of God’s Word, there is much to understand about the contours of the life of Christ, the judge of all the world, and the One who said what had to be said, even when it would cost Him His life.