

# Masterwork of the Messiah

## Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

*Twin Truths For Tough Times*

Written By

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April 6, 2014



**M**y grandma Lilly, my father's mother, as I have told you, had eleven children. Ten were daughters, meaning my father was the only son. Honestly, I don't know how he survived.

My grandma was a one of the godliest women I've ever met. I can't say how many times I got up in the morning while on vacation in South Carolina and wandered toward the kitchen for some food, only to see her sitting in her well-worn rocking chair reading her Bible. When she'd see me a big smile would form across her face, and I'd typically give her a kiss on the cheek and tell her good morning. Boy, those were sweet times.

When it started looking like she wouldn't be with us too much longer and that getting us all together possibly wouldn't happen again, she gathered all the grandchildren into the living room of my Aunt Snooky's country home and told us to sit down around her. Over the next few minutes she told us everything she wanted us to know about how to live life to the fullest. Of course, she focused on the importance of respecting our parents, but she waxed eloquent on the importance of putting our relationship with Jesus Christ first above all things. Believe me, all of us cousins ... and there were many of us ... weren't quiet often, but we were that afternoon. We all picked up on the gravity and greatness of the moment and knew this was one of those times your world stopped and you listened because this type of moment would never come again.

The disciples must have felt this way during the last week of Christ's earthly life. Each day something else either occurred or was taught which held their strict attention. Who could forget the triumphal, humble entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as prophesied by Zechariah on his

last Sunday on earth? Who could forget how He boldly cleared the Temple of the greedy money-changers and healed the blind and the lame on Monday? Who could forget His weeping over Jerusalem for their unbelief and opposition to His role as the Messiah? Who could forget what you, as disciples, talked about with Him as you walked each evening down the dusty, rocky road to Bethany? Don't you know those were sweet times? Don't you know those disciples reflected on those final actions and words countless times after His resurrection, gaining hope, strength, and courage from them?

Matthew's record of what happened next during Christ's final Passion Week gave the disciples even more spiritual truths to ponder and put into practice. His historical analysis is presented in Matthew 21:18-22, and it concerns Christ's cursing of the fig tree followed by His teaching about how to have a powerful prayer life. Once again, I must say: Don't you know they hung on this teaching as they watched the hatred and opposition to Jesus moving from simmering to seething status?

From this passage the Bible student can't help but see the following thematic emphasis from Jesus.

### Jesus Doesn't Want Play-ers But Pray-ers (Matthew 21:18-22)

To set the stage for understanding this interesting pericope, we must first make some cursory observations: One, two divergent spiritual truths are articulated here with the latter logically flowing from the former. Two, both of these truths, also, must be interpreted with the immediate context in mind in order to assure the interpreter makes the appropriate interpretive and pragmatic conclusions. In other words, these aren't distinct interpretive events but are carefully woven together to teach timely truths based on what had occurred thus far in Christ's final week. With this in mind, I know invite you to take a hard, honest look at the first concept from Jesus.

### Timely Truths For Players (Matthew 21:18-19)

*The Snapshot Of A Play-er (vv. 18-19a).* We get a real clear high definition picture of a play-er in the opening verses of this pertinent passage:

<sup>18</sup> Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry.

<sup>19</sup> Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; ...

Hold it right there. Before we sink our interpretive spades into the rich soil of this historical story, we must first come to terms with which morning is in view.

Matthew typically takes the events of Christ's life and condenses them in a topical format. We've encountered this throughout his book. From what Matthew says here this event occurred on Tuesday morning, the day after Christ's cleansing of the Temple. Mark's more chronological and parallel account in chapter 11 offers this chronological marker:

<sup>20</sup> As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up.

Since this occurred after the cleansing of the Temple, according to Mark, we must assume that the actual cursing of the fig tree occurred on Monday morning as Jesus and the disciples walked to Jerusalem for the eventual Temple cleansing. With this in mind we can better reconstruct what occurred as Christ headed to the Temple and how the cursing of the lone fruitless fig tree relates to that impassioned event.

Jesus left Bethany early Monday morning before the sun rose. The Greek word for “in the morning” (with the preposition and the article supplied to make it understandable in English) is frequently used in the Gospels to denote the time between 3-6 a.m. (Mark 1:35; 15:1).<sup>1</sup> This probably explains why He was hungry for breakfast as He walked toward Jerusalem. As He typically did, He arose to get on with spiritual business and perhaps He neglected to eat at the home of Lazarus. This would explain His hunger as He approached Jerusalem to cleanse the Temple. As a side note, you have to ask yourself: Do you make the most of your day for God by getting up early to realize spiritual disciplines? Further, if you get up only to work out the physical body but don’t carve out time for your pursuit of Christ, what are we to say of the kind of spiritual shape you are in? Let Christ’s model be one we adhere to in ways which work well with our spiritual lives before Him.

Back to the text.

Seeing the fig tree with leaves in the distance encouraged the hungry Christ because He anticipated a quick pick-me-up meal of figs (I happened to love to eat figs, especially while in Israel. They are like candy. You can purchase small bags of figs from Turkey at Trader Joes if you like). What He found, however, was a tree with leaves and no figs. This false advertising, this appearance with no substance moved Jesus to quickly pronounce an immediate judgment on said tree, resulting in its miraculous demise. Is this just an illustration of Jesus’ anger being out of control? Was His angry outburst justified? If so, why? Mark tells us in Peter’s recollection of the event (Mark was Peter’s scribe), that it wasn’t the time for figs to be ripe and ready for consumption; therefore, it appears Christ really over-reacted. Is that true?

To answer these important questions we must first understand something about the fig tree in question. A fig tree with leaves in Israel meant figs were present. They would probably be green, hard figs, but to a hungry person they would be at least something to eat. Yet this particular tree had leaves with no figs, no fruit whatsoever. Even though it wasn’t time for fig harvesting, as Mark suggests, doesn’t mean Christ’s displeasure was unfounded because there were, according to John Lightfoot, two types of fig trees: Those which produced figs in the early summer annually, and those which had fruit and leaves on them for two years before the figs became ripe and edible. Christ’s anger was directed at this latter or uncommon fig tree, one

<sup>1</sup> Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of The New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature: **πρωῖ** adv. of time (cp. **πρό**; Hom. +; in Attic writers as **πρώ**) in the early part of the daylight period, *early, early in the morning* Mt 16:3; 21:18; Mk 1:35; 11:20; 16:9; Hs 9, 11, 2 (opp. **ὄψέ**). As the fourth watch of the night (after **ὄψέ** ἢ μεσονύκτιον ἢ ἀλεκτοροφωνίας) it is the time fr. three to six o’clock Mk 13:35. **εὐθὺς πρ.** as soon as morning came 15:1. **ἄμα πρ.** (ἄμα 2, end) Mt 20:1; **λίαν πρ.** w. dat., of the day very early Mk 16:2. **ἀπὸ πρ.** ἕως ἑσπέρας from morning till evening Ac 28:23 (cp. Jos., Ant. 13, 97). **πρωῖ σκοτίας ἔτι οὐσης** J 20:1. **ἦν πρ.** it was early in the morning (B-D-F §129; 434, 1) 18:28. **τὸ πρωῖ** is likew. an adv. (PSI 402, 10 [III B.C.] **τὸ πρωῖ εὐθέως**; LXX; TestAbr B 2 p. 106, 7 [Stone p. 60] **τῷ πρωῖ**; TestNapht 1:3; JosAs 9:4; ApcEsdr 4:29; B-D-F §160; 161, 3) Ac 5:21 D. **ἐπὶ τὸ πρωῖ** toward morning Mk 15:1 v.l.; for this another v.l. has **ἐπὶ τῷ πρ.**—Billerb. I 688–91; TMartin, BR 38, ’93, 55–69. B. 960. DELG s.v. **πρώην**. M-M.

which should have had fruit to eat on its branches.<sup>2</sup> Ostensibly, this means that Christ's temper flare-up wasn't unjustified in the sense it was directed toward an innocent tree which wasn't near a fruit bearing stage. This kind of tree should have fruit but it didn't. All it had was the deceptive appearance of being a truly fruitful tree.

From Christ's response to this fruitless, misleading fig tree, it is readily apparent it had parabolic and pedagogical value, especially in light of His journey to cleanse the Temple. If we keep the context in mind and what Jesus was about to do to judge the religious leaders, the fruitless fig tree becomes, not so much a spiritual description of the nation, which it is in many respects, but it is a crystal clear picture of the phoniness, the false religious piety, the outright spiritual and religious hypocrisy of the entire religious system comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Scribes.

- Collectively, they had the form of religion, as Paul says elsewhere, but denied its power.
- Collectively, they had the outer appearance of being very devout, disciplined followers of God, while in reality their hearts were far from Him.
- Collectively, they did gross violence to teachings of God by adding their teachings to His teachings.
- Collectively, they presented themselves as caring religious leaders when in reality they diabolically opposed God and His Messiah and cared only for their power, pomp, and pleasure.
- Collectively, they substituted viable and vibrant spiritual fruit with lesser leaves called public acts of piety, endless Sabbath regulations, perpetual religious washings and baths for purification, dietary restrictions and so forth.
- Collectively, they disguised their spiritual deadness with leaves of self-righteousness and religious zeal.
- Collectively, they wore their religious clothing as a badge of spiritual honor, while, spiritually speaking, their inner men had no clothing.
- Collectively, they would see the spectacular miracles of the Messiah, even on the Temple mount later on that day, and work that much harder to terminate Him ... despite all the evidence He was who the prophets foretold.

These were the play-ers. They loved their religious law and the control it gave them over others, along with the wealth which flowed from the system they constructed, and they'd even kill the Messiah Himself to keep it all going. They, of all people, advertised their religious piety with the best of them while failing to have a faith relationship with the God whom they claimed to serve.

Unfortunately, these religious fruit trees are still alive and well today. They are the people who love religious law and not the Lord of the Law, who say the same prayers over and over again as if there is power in the repetition, who strictly follow holy books which have nothing to do with God's inspired Word, who will cling to their religious traditions despite all

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<sup>2</sup> John Lightfoot, *A Commentary On The New Testament From The Talmud And Hebraica*, Vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979): 280-282.

the teaching of Jesus as to how ones is saved by faith and not works, who are careful what they eat lest they become defiled, who superstitiously follow endless spiritual rules and regulations for fear they will not see God if they don't, who out of fear or tradition believe they have to wear certain types of clothing to garner God's favor, who think they have to pray in a certain direction or in a certain posture to tap into God's power or to have your prayers heard, who live to observe religious traditions but whose lives know nothing of a faith relationship with the only God and our Savior, Jesus, the Christ.

If you claim to be a follower of God, you will, by definition, produce, to varying degrees, spiritual fruit of His liking and it all starts with faith in Jesus as the Messiah and then naturally flows to other fruit. As Paul, the completed Jew, states in his letter to the Galatians:

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Galatians 5).

True spiritual fruit is first internal, then external. False fruit is always just external while claiming it is internal.

Take a look at your life. You are either a fruit tree producing fruit which demonstrates you know and walk with the Messiah, or you are guilty of false spiritual advertising because your faith is all outer leaves with no spiritual life. Such were the religious leaders of Christ's day, and I'm sure some of you probably stand with them in your own prideful piety. How does God respond to you if you are all show with no substance? We get our answer in Christ's response to the fruitless fig tree.

*The Sentence Of A Play-er (v. 19b).* With the power of the divine judge, Jesus pronounces a quick and eternal judgment:

... and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.

The same God who had created the fig tree uncreated it with one, short, concise sentence. Wake up. Jesus has warned us all through our study of His teachings in Matthew that swift, eternal judgment will come upon those who reject Him, especially to those who are spiritual phonies set on rejecting Him and coming to God on their inferior religious terms. Remember His words in Matthew 7?

<sup>15</sup> Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes* nor figs from thistles, are they? <sup>17</sup> "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> So then, you will <sup>1</sup>know them by their fruits.

God will judge those whose spiritual fruit is really no fruit, who are, in all reality, nothing more than a fig tree with a false appearance of spirituality and holiness, and who, for all intents and purposes, will never have anything to do with Jesus, the one and only Savior and Messiah.

Contextually, the religious leaders who skimmed vast amounts of money from the money-changers all for the sake of worship would be nothing more than a withered fig tree when Jesus was through with them. He traveled to the Temple that day to actively engage them on their turf, to point out their hypocrisy, to pull back the thin veneer of their self-made righteousness to show their spiritual darkness, while, at the same time, clearly and definitively demonstrating His deity and Messiahship through timely teaching and mighty miracles. Wake up! The battle between good and evil, between right and wrong, between spiritual truth and error, between false messiahs and the true Messiah was coming to a head and Jesus made sure He would win this battle hands down in just four short days.

If you happen to be the religious hypocrite today, my prayer is for God to open your eyes to the inferiority of your religious observances and the superiority of His Son's redemptive work on your behalf through His selfless sacrifice and glorious resurrection.

If you happen to be a Christ follower today, I pray God would motivate you to passionately and lovingly engage the religious hypocrisy and deception around you. Deception must be denounced because eternity is at stake, and you just might have to step onto the stones of the "Temple" and speak up and out against people entrenched in religious systems which will not save. Friday's a comin' when God just might take you home. Will you, on that day, be one known to God as an ardent purveyor of His life-giving gospel in a world deceived by false systems of belief?

Jesus does not stand with spiritual play-ers. He never will. He will always stand against them because they lead folks to eternal destruction along with themselves. This represents as a timely truth for our tough geo-political, lets-embrace-all-religions, let's believe whatever we want to believe times. There is a second and equally powerful message from Christ's next discussion with the disciples who witnessed the supernatural withering of the fig tree. With verses 20 through 22, we move from a negative to a positive truth.

## Timely Truths For Pray-ers (Matthew 21:20-22)

*The Portrait Of Pray-ers (v. 20).* According to Mark's parallel account, the disciples spoke the following words on Tuesday morning as they walked back to Jerusalem from Bethany:

<sup>20</sup> Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?"

Coming upon the same fig tree on the same path the next day the Lord's men couldn't help but see the twenty-something foot tree completely dead and dried up, as if it had been this way for quite some time. Seeing this they asked one of those questions which, in my mind, shouldn't have been asked. Why do I say this? I marvel at their question because of all they had seen Jesus' miraculous power up close and personal on countless occasions. Need we go over what they had witnessed with their own eyes? From the changing of gallons and gallons of pure water into the best-tasting wine you have ever had in a glass (John 2), to seeing Him walk on water in the middle of a storm, to watching Him feed thousands of people with a limited amount of fish

and bread, to His raising of Lazarus from the tomb, they had seen His divine, messianic power displayed repeatedly. How, then, I ask, could they even articulate this particular question? Really?

And before we get into this, I must make another observation. From the teaching of Christ in this passage to His exchange with the inquisitive disciples, it is quite apparent the spiritual and symbolical value of His cursing of the fig tree completely slipped by them. Not one word comes out of their mouths about the correlation between the deceptive, misleading tree and how it relates primarily to the religious leaders and secondarily to the nation. Not one of them heard Christ's teaching and saw how it completely correlated with God's castigation of the fruitless nation some eight hundred years prior (Isaiah 5). Ever had spiritual truth slip by you? Ever wrapped your mind around God's clear message after the fact? Been there. Done that. Aren't you glad the Lord is gracious to us? There is not a word from Jesus here about the fact they missed some important teaching. He just used the symbolic/parabolic event to bob and weave and use it to teach the disciples about powerful prayer. What a masterful, humble teacher this Messiah, Jesus.

Now back to the perplexing question from the disciples.

I think the answer to their query is quite simple. They, for that particular moment, as we are prone to do, drifted back to their default conclusion called unbelief. I'm sure you can relate. Despite the greatest actions of God in your life, despite of the mountains He has moved to display His sovereignty in your life, despite clear evidences of His hand in and upon your life, at the next big God juncture you default to unbelief. Will He be there for me? Will He help me? Will He do something off-the-charts? Can He? Unbelief is one of those sins which doesn't die easily. Like green moss on your sidewalk it seems to readily and quickly just come out of nowhere ... just when you thought it had been eradicated.

Please take note of this. Unbelief will limit the power of your prayers every time. So, too, will a host of other things we don't have time to get into, things like:

- Secret sin (Psalm 66:18)
- Indifference (Proverbs 1:28)
- Neglect of the needy (Proverbs 21:13)
- Rejection of God's teachings (Proverbs 28:9)
- Spiritual stubbornness (Zechariah 7:13)
- Impure motives (James 4:3)

All of these are like putting a regulator on a very powerful engine. As long as that regulator is there, be what it may, the power is limited. Please stop and ask yourself, if you are a disciple of Jesus: Is doubt limiting the power of my prayer life? It most certainly will if left unchecked (James 1:6-7). Are any of these other items present in my life? May God give you the will and the humility to bring them out of the darkness and into His light so victory can become yours and so your prayer life can grow and flourish.

And while we are speaking about power in prayer, we can do no better than the words of Jesus in these closing verses:

*The Power For Prayers (vv. 21-22).*

<sup>21</sup> 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 cast into the sea,' it will happen. <sup>22</sup> And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

These are amazing words which many are prone to mis-interpret. Let's work our way through the questions these words from our Lord engender so we can realize the full potential of our prayer lives. Remember: Jesus was about to go to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. He was also about to be raised from the grave, and in not too many more days He would ascend into heaven, leaving the disciples to carry on the work of the gospel as the Church would come into full view. He had to make sure they knew, like He did, how to pray with power as they walked in Satan's dark domain. With these words He achieved that purpose, but His teaching does cause us to pose some perplexing questions.

For those who overly stress the sovereignty of God, they will say Christ's teaching cannot be truly realized because it doesn't matter what you pray for His will be realized. For the sovereignty crowd, the prayer of faith changes you, not God. The truth is, Jesus has called us to pray with great faith and personal specificity. There is just no way around this from the verses in question. What this tells me is there is great mystery surrounding God's sovereignty and our free will. One the one hand He controls and knows everything from His dimension, and from our terrestrial dimension we are called to approach His holy throne with very specific requests bathed in belief. Are you praying with belief about something specific?

Further, we must ask, "If Jesus telling me I can get whatever I ask for in prayer as long as my prayer is grounded in faith in His ability to provide?" "Is He telling me I can literally move a mountain, which in this context was probably the Mount of Olives ... or at least the Temple mount ..., from one place to another?" I think the answers to both questions is a definitive and resounding, "No." Jesus never stooped to using prayer to perform wonders for people. When asked to do something showy like this by the Pharisees, Christ flatly refused (Matthew 12:38). In order for the prayer of faith to be realized it has to be in line with God's will and bringing glory to God (John 14:13-14). Praying in the showroom of a Ferrari dealership, or praying over your stocks is not what Jesus had in mind. Praying without doubting that God's will and glory would be realized in a given situation is another thing altogether.

Corporately, we have many mountains in front of us, don't we? How will we get fifteen million dollars to build-out our land parcel so we can accommodate our growth? By means of the prayer of faith. And if this is in line with His will and His glory it shall happen.

Individually, I'm sure you have your own mountains in front of you. Fractured friendships, broken marriages, difficult children, decisions about where to retire and if you can afford to retire, a physical malady which limits you, a depression you can't seem to shake, a, well, I'll let you fill in the proverbial blank. The question is, "Are you praying with great faith for God to move said mountain for you?" Should your request dovetail with His will and glory His power will bring a transformation which will take your breath away.

Here's a story to illustrate the truth of this premise.

Hubert, or Hubie as we called him, played first base on our Varsity baseball team in High School. I shared my faith with him many times, but he wasn't interested in making a decision to

follow Christ. In 1976 we graduated and he joined the Navy, and after boot camp he wound up in San Diego, and I went to college in Los Angeles. After that we lost touch with each other.

One weekend in the fall of 1976, I drove the four hours home to attend a game at my former high school. As usual, throngs of people came to the game, and as I shuffled through the crowd I happened to see Hubie. He had come home on a weekend furlough, and like me, he came to the game to see old friends.

After the game I gave him a lift home in my father's "speedy" and "sleek" Datsun B210. Sitting in front of his parent's apartment, we talked about old times and then before he stepped out he said, "Marty, can you talk to me about Jesus Christ?" A few minutes later Hubie entered the kingdom of God by placing his faith in the Savior.

I had prayed for him to be saved, on and off, for four years, and God heard that prayer of faith, but on His perfect timing He, the good Shepherd, found the lost sheep named Hubie. Redeeming him was His perfect will and I know He received all the glory for another lost sheep who entered God's eternal throne.

The prayer of faith, coupled with the will and glory of God, does, in fact, release the power of God. Believe it. Better yet ... get to being a pray-er.

Additional thoughts for small group discussion and analysis

Why are some prayers of "faith" not answered?

- Not in line with God's will (Exodus 33:20).
- If answered they would circumvent God's plan for your life (2 Corinthians 12:8).
- The request is really unwise from God's perspective (Numbers 11:14; 1 Kings 19:5).

What makes prayer powerful?

- Confession (2 Chronicles 7:14)
- Obedience (1 John 3:22)
- Persistence (Deuteronomy 9:18; Acts 12:5)

What are some illustrations of powerful prayer?

- Samuel (1 Samuel 7:9-10)
- Moses (Exodus 33:18)
- Elijah (2 Kings 6:17; James 5:17-18)
- Daniel (Daniel 9:4ff)