
Day 315 - November 11

Jesus the Christ (5 BCE-30 CE)
Final Week – Tuesday Morning

Readings: *Matthew 21:20-46; 22:1-46; 23:1-44; Mark 11:20-33:12:1-44; Luke 20:1-47; 21:1-4*

Reflections:

- Similar to the Sermon on the Mount, these final teachings of Jesus centered on his dialogue with the religious leaders of Israel, both Pharisees and Sadducees, capturing many of the core themes of Jesus' message.
- Lesson from Fig Tree: On return to the fig tree, the disciples find it withered from the roots, dead at the source. Jesus now makes a powerful statement about faith: If you have faith and don't doubt, you can not only do miracles like this but you can also say to this mountain, the temple mount – the center and symbol of religion for Israel – be thrown into the sea (image for complete destruction) and it will be done. Jesus goes on to qualify this by saying that when doing this they need to remember to forgive their brother or sister so that God can forgive you. Jesus said this because they went to the temple to be forgiven and so in a life without the temple they could pray directly to God to be forgiven, they just needed to remember to offer forgiveness even as they were asking for it. Having said this, this overarching image of the mountain and fruit tree that is withered at the roots is directly linked to Ezekiel's vision of the river flowing from the Temple. Again, Jesus is saying this miraculously life-giving water (the Spirit) is never going to flow from the temple and cause life-giving fruit trees to grow by the banks. See the fruit trees by the temple? They are fruitless and dying at the roots. Religion bears no fruit. This sets the stage for the church to realize that they are the new temple, not made of bricks but of interconnected relationships, filled with the Spirit and offering life-giving power and healing to a broken world (see Ephesians 2:19-22).
- Jesus' authority questioned: Jesus shows great wisdom by linking his ministry with John the Baptist's and not answering the religious leaders question about his authority. Whenever someone steps out from the control of religion, religious leaders always want to know what authority gives that person the right to step away from the religious system. For them, their authority, power, and identity flow from their strict adherence to the religious system. To step free shows that the religious system has no real authority to control people. Jesus' answer reminds us that sometime the best answer is simply another question.

- Parable of two sons: Jesus then tells a story that explains exactly what is happening within the story of Israel. The religious leaders say they want to do the will of God but then turn around and do the opposite. The people they label as sinners actually are the ones hearing the truth and starting to live the truth. Even after the leaders saw this happening, they didn't turn their lives around and get on board with God's obvious working. They were, and remain, all talk and no action. People raised in religious settings often find it easy to talk about the truth and grace but seem to struggle to really experience it, live it, and offer it to others.
- Parable of murderous tenants: This story portrays the religious leaders as tenants of a cocooned little vineyard (image of the Promised Land) that doesn't bear any fruit. Rather than cultivating good fruit, the tenants kill the fruit inspectors (the prophets). Finally they kill the owner's son and come under judgment. Pretty simple explanation of what happened.
- The rejected stone: Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22,23 to explain what God was doing through Jesus. The stone the builders thought was worthless becomes the capstone, or pinnacle finishing stone. This is God's basic way of doing things. He takes the rejects and outcasts and makes them the centerpiece of his story. God does this to shame Satan and all those who would think that the story is all about pride, position, prestige or power. God loves to demonstrate his grace to the weakest, most broken, and humble. This reveals the true humility and mercy of God.
- Jesus then makes a key statement: "He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces but he on whom it falls will be crushed." In other words, if you abandon your life to Jesus (fall on him) you will be broken and humbled to your own salvation, but if you stand there proudly and reject Jesus, judgment will fall on you to your own spiritual death and destruction.
- Religious leaders angered: No big surprise here. The tension continues to mount.
- Parable of the wedding banquet: Jesus again tells a story that explains in shocking terms the complete failure and rejection of the religious leaders to enter into God's best party ever (compared to a wedding feast), their abuse of God's servants and God's plan to destroy that city with his army. This would ultimately be the Roman army that would come in and destroy Jerusalem and the temple. Anyways, God was now welcoming in the religious rejects (sinners and Gentiles) into his ultimate party. Here we see Jesus again associate his movement with great parties and God's inclusive grace. Now the story ends with a twist. A guy shows up who doesn't have the wedding clothes provided by the king. The image of clothing is one from Zechariah that speaks of God taking off the filthy garments of the priest and putting on new clean garments (see Zechariah 3:4). This man portrays someone who is rejecting the power of God to transform a life and wants to parade around in sin rather than humbly receive the grace of God to change and be clothed in a new life. God's grace doesn't mean you are free to sin but that you are welcomed into his party and he will clothe you in a whole new way of living. The man is speechless because he had no reason for why he had

not humbly received the clothing the master had offered. He was judged by the master for this. This is a warning to those who want to hang out in community at God's party but not actually receive and embrace the grace for a new life. Jesus' story ends with this comment, "For many are called, but few are chosen." This would again be offensive to a religious leadership that felt that they were the chosen people. Now Jesus was saying that they were called but not chosen. Ouch! Who is chosen by God? Those that respond to his grace humbly and actually embrace and live out his truth and grace. Those who live the truth through God's grace discover that they are the chosen ones.

- Leaders question about taxes: The spies in this story are the ultimate slimy characters in how they sneak into Jesus' midst and try to trick him. Again Jesus' reply makes it clear that he will not be trapped in his words. He answers a question with a question. The insight? When it comes to things of this world, give to government or people in authority what is rightfully theirs and give to God what is rightfully his. The government can ask for money because they made the money. But God made you and so your life should be fully surrendered to God. This question about submission to Rome was a key question as again they were looking for a military Messiah who would overthrow their Roman oppressors.
- Resurrection questioned: The Sadducees were the more liberal of the religious groups in Israel and didn't believe in the future resurrection of the dead. They try to trick him with a question about marriage after death and Jesus basically states that marriage is only for this life. Also, that after death, all those in right relationship with God are alive in his presence. He is clear and to the point.
- The greatest commandment: This issue appears again and so we see that this was a key teaching of Jesus often repeated in his ministry. This religious leader, a teacher of Law gets it and understands that the love ethic of Jesus is more important than the sacrificial system of the Torah. Jesus affirms that he is not far from the kingdom. If you get this, you are heading in the right direction towards understanding the essence of Jesus' message and what it means to live within the kingdom of God.
- Jesus asks about ancestry: Jesus now goes on the offensive and asks a question. Jesus uses Psalm 110:1 to suggest that David as he looked ahead to the Messiah viewed the Messiah, his own descendent as his Lord. This view of this passage would suggest that the Messiah was pre-existent and Lord of David, on par with the Lord God. None of the religious leaders know how to answer Jesus and so he again shows his superior wisdom and understanding.
- Self-righteousness condemned: Jesus now gives very specific directions to what it means to be servant leaders. He begins by saying you should not disrespect or dishonor religious leaders but must live by a higher standard. Religious leaders talk the walk but don't walk the talk. They place high expectations on people but don't help them live up to those high expectations. They are interested in getting public attention and praise. They take the seats of honor. They use titles of honor and seek to be known by their title. Christ-following leaders are not to do these things. We are not to call each other by titles but rather take the

posture of humility and serving others. Again, those first in line will be last and those who go to the back will be first to get in.

- **False religion condemned:** Jesus now pronounces grave warnings to all religious leaders. First, you are a barrier to people entering into true relationship with God. You are door closers not door openers. Second, you put all your effort into winning people's loyalty to religion and in the process make them twice as bound to their own path to self-destruction. Religion is like throwing a drowning man a rock.
- **Legalism condemned:** The religious leaders are called blind guides, the perfect analogy! In this next grave warning ("woe") Jesus points out how legalism consistently places the wrong value markers on things. We confuse what is most important and as a result cause people to focus on the wrong things.
- **Injustice condemned:** Again we see this principle illustrated as the religious leaders stress about tithing on the smallest most insignificant things and yet completely neglect the most important matters of the Law. They strain out the smallest fly but then swallow down sin the size of a camel. Legalism allows us to be our own little gods where we can obsess about the things we feel we can control but then rationalize away the big issues that we don't want to face.
- **Hypocrisy condemned:** Jesus uses powerful images to underscore the fact that religious leaders do all they can to keep their appearance spotless when in fact in their hearts they are dirty, dead and rotting. The issue isn't how you look or how your life looks, but what is in your heart. If your heart is right, your life will go in the right direction.
- **Persecution condemned:** The list of grave warnings continue as Jesus calls to account the history of the religious leaders always persecuting and killing the true righteous leaders God had sent. Religious leaders are always threatened by God's leaders because they are afraid of losing control and their comforts. Jesus indicates that their sin in this regard is soon going to be full which implies judgment will fall. They will kill Jesus and then start to kill the first Christ-followers until judgment does fall in 70 CE, as Jesus indicates in that generation. Jesus calls them a brood of vipers. This is an image that John the Baptizer used as well to describe the religious leaders. It was thought that baby snakes ate their mother and so it was one of the worst images a person could use to describe a group of people: Satanic children who murder the one who is trying to care for them. Frightening to say the least!
- **Lament over Jerusalem:** One would think that Jesus is boiling with anger. Yet we see in this next passage that actually he is heart-broken as a mother would be for her own children. They are like snake children trying to kill him while he is like a mother hen trying to protect and nurture them. The contrast could not be more severe. Jesus concludes by saying that indeed he will be gone for a time but will come back. For the religious leaders, his return will be in judgment.
- **Widow example:** Jesus now turns his attention from religious leaders who think they are the highest example of spirituality to an impoverished widow. Her gift of two small pennies is

praised by Jesus as the greatest sacrifice. It is not the amount that is given but the degree of sacrifice. In this way often the poorest and the most humble of all people far surpass the wealthy and the capable. Again we Jesus pointing out that God looks at the heart not at what people look at!