

12And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. 13And He said to them, "It is written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER'; but you are making it a ROBBERS' DEN."

14And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. 15But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant 16and said to Him, "Do You hear what these children are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF'?" 17And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

18Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. 19Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.

20Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?" 21And 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. 22"And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

23When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"

About a hundred years ago, when I was young . . . actually, more like 45 years ago in 1971, I had the privilege to visit Jerusalem.

I don't remember every detail, but I do remember, even as shy as I was,

and still am, I made a point of going onto the campus at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and speaking with a few of the students who were out on the quad. English speaking students.

When I asked them why they could not believe that Jesus was their messiah, the answer was universal; Why would we, 20 centuries after the fact, reject the findings of our fathers who were face to face?

The most respected leaders and rulers in Israel at that time, who witnessed Him one on one, rejected Him. We have to believe they knew more about it with first hand information than we could know now from a few books.

Now, Ravi Zacharias could probably have taken that and run with it and proved to them that they were mistaken. Jim, at 19, not so much.

But the point is taken. Israel's movers and shakers, Israel's leading sharpest and brightest minds, Israel's rock star's of that day, looked at the evidence, rather poorly, I might add, and concluded; He's a fake. And a dangerous threatening one at that!

Willful ignorance is a powerful powerful thing. You make up your mind, and you take a solid position of; Don't confuse me with the facts! My eyes are closed. My ears are stopped. My mind is made up.

It takes me about 45 years to put together a good argument. That's a little inconvenient. That's why God has Ravi. And you have me :~'))

Here's the correct answer to those students. Your nations brightest minds, at that time, were blinded by hatred, jealousy, and unbelief. Their ignorance was willful. And here's why;

The argument is two-fold. God has given you 3 sources. Your eyes, and your ears and reason.

Eyes see truth. Ears hear truth. Your brain must weigh in the balance what your eyes see and your ears hear with revealed truth. The word of God. Oh, and by the way, The Word of God trumps what you thought

your eyes saw and your ears heard. They are secondary, but important sources.

Those leaders had prophecy, and they had sight and hearing.

In our passage this morning, within hours of His death, Jesus is still doing miracles. There is still worship of Him by the children. Their chant is a reminder that the book prophesied of a Son of David. The miracles are the evidence the book foresaw.

The scene plays almost as if it was a scene in a bizarre movie. We would watch the movie and say, the real miracle is that these folks though seeing are blind, and hearing are deaf. Their reason has left them. What is apparent to children, escapes them.

We are recalled to a previous discussion. Remember the disciples asked Jesus, why do you speak to them in parables.

Mt. 13:11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12"For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13"Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

*14"In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,
'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT
UNDERSTAND;
YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;*

*15FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'*

Our passage this morning is a living illustration of these words. These folks are like an airplane that's lost a wing and is in an uncontrollable downward spiral.

Willful unbelief has brought on blindness and deafness that has resulted in increasing, even bizarre further, deeper, willful dis-belief.

The miracles are the final proof. If they haven't convinced you, you are hopeless. Trapped in your unbelief.

When John and his disciples struggled, and John sent two of his disciples to Jesus for some clarification; remember, John couldn't come, Herod had already locked him up in prison, so he sent 2 disciples, and what was Jesus answer to John? It's in Luke 7

Lk. 7: 18 The disciples of John reported to him about all these things. 19Summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?" 20When the men came to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?'" 21At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind. 22And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 23"Blessed is he who does not stumble over Me."

John, I may not look exactly like the picture you had in your mind of what messiah would be like and do, but, hang your hat on the miracles.

The very lines Jesus gives to John's disciples contain bits of a familiar tune. Pieces of a recognizable song they've heard and sung before. He quotes the prophet Isaiah chapter 61.

John, miracles that were foretold are happening just as Isaiah said. Do not stumble over what your pre-conception was versus what I'm doing.

Hang onto the miracles.

14And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. 15But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant 16and said to Him, "Do You hear what these children are saying?"

Scholars believe this is tuesday of passion week. He'll teach in the temple 2 more times, two more days and thursday night He'll spend His final hours eating with His disciples, teaching them, praying in the garden of gethsemene, and then the arrest and mock trials begin. That's how close we are in this scene before us.

Matthew is very precise in his record. His story is going somewhere, and he always chooses and arranges these events around the point he is making.

He has combined the actions of the rulers and the story of the fig tree purposefully. It is a picture of religious Isreal.

Look again at the sensory information in vss. 14 - 17. The religious rulers of Israel come upon their messiah and their eyes see him healing people. Miracles only God can accomplish.

Their ears hear the children chanting the messianic hosanna. A reminder of the full gamut of written prophecy.

Jesus tells them to engage their brains with a formula He has used over and over with them. It's a shame and a challenge. *Have you not read??* You need to engage your thinking machines and go have another look. Think this through again.

All of the sensory possibilities are present. Sight. Hearing. Thinking. And all of them harken back to revealed truth. He isn't telling them to jettison what God has previously revealed, He's telling them what you're seeing and hearing is what was written down by the ancients. David and the prophets were speaking about Me!

The real miracle here isn't the lame who walked again that day or the blind who perhaps saw for the first time ever that day. The real miracle is the mountain of evidence that the scribes and pharisees and rulers of Israel had to ignore to remain in their disbelief.

The world has done this, consistently, from that day until today. Refuse to believe the obvious.

In Romans 1 Paul tells unbeliever that they are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.

The truth is so obvious that getting to the necessary untruth, is hard work. That word suppress is like holding down a spring. It's not easy to get to the wrong answer when God has made the right one obvious, but men will work hard to remove God from the equation.

That's what these first century unbelievers were doing, and that is what men are still doing.

Listen, the study of DNA has forever proven that Darwin's theory of evolution is impossible. It has likewise proven the Genesis record in detail we didn't understand before.

And yet I can't listen to KNPR or watch TV for an hour without hearing Darwin's theory presented as scientific fact. That's how hard men are willing to toil in order to NOT have God. It's hard work.

They Do Not want this man to rule over them, and they'll believe fairy tales in order to not have to be in subjection to the God of this book.

So, how does the fig tree enter into this? Let's look at it.

18Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. 19Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.

Israel had two familiar metaphors that produce fruit. Vines produce grapes. Fig trees produce figs. Jesus uses both. If we compare what he taught about the fig tree in Luke with the story about God's vineyard in Isaiah 5, I believe we will have our answers.

So look with me a moment in Luke 13: vss 6 - 9.

6 And He began telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. 7" And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' 8" And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; 9 and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

Now compare this to the song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5. Jesus even gives us the common notes in the song. He mentions vineyard in His story about this fig tree to give us this jog to Isaiah's similar song. Listen to Isaiah now.

- 1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.*
- 2 He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.*
- 3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.*
- 4 "What more was there to do for My vineyard
that I have not done in it?*

*Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes
did it produce worthless ones?*

5 *“So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.*

6 *“I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.”*

7*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.*

Jesus was hungry for figs. There is a sense in which God who needs nothing, is never-the-less desirous of the fruits of His creation.

He created men to shine glory back on Himself. Men fell into sin. God in turn has done everything needful to reverse that fall. He has an expectation of fruitfulness because of His mercy to us.

He has given us revelation about Him. He has provided every thing needful. He has an expectation of fruit.

This fig tree, like the vineyard, represents Israel. The key line is in vs. 4 of Isaiah 5. 4 *“What more was there to do for My vineyard
that I have not done in it?*

That brings us to this moment in Jesus final week. Israel has the miracles. They have the prophets. They have the sounds of children worshipping. They have reached the end of God's provision and mercy. In spite of everything, they have come up with the wrong answer. Time's up.

Israel is the perfect picture of the beautiful leafy fig tree . . . that will

never produce fruit. Nothing more can be done. Their year has come and gone. They are just a big leafy tree that's never going to bear fruit. And fruit is what must come, or the tree is useless. It's just taking up space and drinking up water.

Much has been made of this cursing of the fig tree. Mark tells us, it was not the time for figs. This is April. Figs come in June.

This is a weird fig tree. In the east, in April, it would be normal for fig trees to just be budding. Their branches tender with buds. Peasants of the land would eat those buds. They were edible. Later the leaves and fruit come. The small fruit forms just at the same time as the leaves and they grow together. Sometimes there are first fruits.

I remember as a child in Southern California, a climate nearly identical to Israel's, at my great grandmother's apartment building, there was a fig tree, and she would take us kids and we would try to find a ripe fig or two before the other many figs would be ripe.

This tree is out of sync. It produces no fruit, and the leaves are full at the wrong time. There are no buds. No figs. Nor will there be. It's like the suckers that grow and produce nothing but steal all the juices. The whole tree is thus. No fruit is possible

And Jesus uses it as a picture story of what will happen to Israel. Fruitless Israel.

Israel is nothing but a big leafy sucker tree that takes up space and uses up water and produces nothing. It's a blight on the earth. And like this tree, the time of cursing is upon it.

One more connection. The connection of miracles, and John the Baptist. The quote comes from Isaiah 61. Remember it. Jesus stands up at the beginning of His ministry, in Nazareth, and the prophet Isaiah is handed to Him, and He reads these words.

*Is. 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me*

*To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And freedom to prisoners;*

2To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD

You'll recall that at that exact place, He closes the book, or the scroll as it were, and hands it back to the synagogue official.

The favorable year of the Lord . . . as noted in Luke's teaching about the fig tree, is over. Time is up for Israel. What then? The very next words in that passage in Isaiah, that Jesus did not read that day, are these;

And the day of vengeance of our God;

The day of favor for Israel has passed. The day of vengeance has come. The cursed fig tree is the picture . . . of Israel.

They will crucify their messiah. They become a withered plant. No prophet will come again. No revelation of God. Nothing.

Within 40 years their nation will be trampled under foot by gentiles. Their temple and fruitless worship will be obliterated by the Romans. They will be scattered asunder. Time is up for Israel. They had all of the evidence, and produced nothing but (be-oo-sheem') sour grapes. wild grapes. worthless useless grapes.

Break down the hedges. Let the trampling begin.

What about us? Next week if the Lord is gracious to us we will study these words from Matthew 21:43 *Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.*

He was talking about us. Talking about the church. We are those people He spoke of.

Is the church producing fruit. Kingdom fruit. Fruit that is satisfying to God? How are we doing?

What happens if the church becomes a giant leafy tree sucking up water and using up space and producing nothing pleasing to God? Will He treat us any different than He did Israel?

I think not. How are we doing then?

Let's talk about the church as a whole first. We follow it through all of it's stages that are roughly mapped out for us in the seven letters to the churches.

We see the apostolic church, the persecuted church, the compromised with sin church, the completely pagan church, the dead church, the church of the open door, and the luke warm church. Seven stages of the church.

By the way, a little aside; Next year marks 500 years since Luther posted his 95 thesis on the Papal church, and the reformation began. You wonder in that lifeline how we get from the consecutive worsening that ends up being Sardis, the dead church, to Philadelphia, the missionary church.

That is how that happened. The reformers brought life again to the church. Protestant missionaries covered the globe.

In my short life time, I've witnessed, the dying embers of the open door church. We are, speaking universally of all that calls itself the church, full blown luke warm.

The luke warm church is a giant leafy tree . . producing nothing. A tree that calls itself christendom, but it isn't. It's made up of people who have stopped short of a real life changing relationship with the Saviour.

I believe that at the rapture, that "so-called" church is left behind. Spewed out of His mouth like vomit. It will become the religious component of a one world government, one world ecumenical religion.

You say, We don't want to be that!! How do we know for certain that we are not that church??

The answer is fruit. Fruit. You say, in view of the dire consequences, please, sir, define for us; fruit!

We don't have to look any further than the next verses in our passage this morning. The amazement of the disciples.

20Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?" 21And 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. 22"And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

Jesus doesn't really answer their question does He. He doesn't say, well, you see, I'm God and I could have done any number of things to that fig tree, including commanding lightning to consume it, turning it into serpents, vaporizing it, all kinds of things.

What He does tell them is how to avoid the same fate as the fig tree. That's what's really important. That's our question too.

The answer defines fruitfulness for us. Fruitfulness consists of prayer and faith, believing that God can do what is impossible for us to do in our flesh.

The fruit that God desires is for each of us here, to be used by God, to produce spiritual results, that would otherwise be impossible to achieve.

The luke warm church doesn't need God. It can accomplish everything it wants to accomplish, through pragmatism. No Holy Spirit needed. No God needed. It can all be done in human flesh. Who needs the Holy Spirit when you've got a Hollywood stage lighting system and a fog machine.

That's why you hear me pray, hopefully without fail, every time I begin to preach, for God to come and do something in your hearts, by His Spirit, by His word, that I could never do.

I don't care about numbers. I don't care about modern methods. I don't care about worldly measured success. What I care about is the impossible to happen. In our midst. I'm after miracles. Changed hearts that I could never change.

Rock solid saints that can see the phony stuff a mile away and want no part of it. People who can weather violent storms and still be standing when the storm has passed. People whom God is using to accomplish the impossible, for His glory.

Jesus says, don't be impressed with the fig tree. Get hooked up to the power source, and you can surpass the miracle of the withered fig tree.

Pray with me that God will build a church in Tonopah, that will see mountains cast into the sea.

We'll begin next week with the question about authority that Matthew has answered by everything Jesus says and does leading up to it.

Matthew's book is about authority. God's authority in Satan's realm. This world. It's the question that defines the entire Bible.