

Title: What do I really believe?
Text: Matthew 21.18-22
Theme: Judgment reveals the faithful.
Series: Matthew #101
Prop Stmt Judgment reveals what you really believe about God.

For the next 10 months, we are going to primarily be studying the final week of the life of Christ. Each text is weighty. Every conversation and encounter takes us closer to the garden, to the cross and to the tomb. The darkness grows. I feel it as I read it. It is not easy to preach this, but it is necessary as you will see.

Read Text:

When the northern kingdom of Israel, split from the southern kingdom of Judah, the northern kingdom started its own religion that was designed to replace the worship of God, with the worship of God in a different way. The problem was that worshipping God in a different ended up being worshipping a different god. The northern kingdom said they were worshipping God, but they weren't. This created some obvious problems. For example, when Ahab was king of the northern kingdom, he wanted to recover the city of Ramoth-Gilead that had been captured by the Syrians. So, he asked Jehoshaphat (king of the southern kingdom of Judah) if he would join forces for this battle. Jehoshaphat agrees and there is this big to-do when the two kings come together in order to fight against a common enemy. But, before they go into battle, Jehoshaphat wants to know if there is a prophet of the Lord with whom they could inquire about the wisdom of this battle. Ahab calls the prophets to gather and there are about 400 of them. They are consulted about the battle and they all agree that the kings will be victorious and they declare for the kings to "Go up for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." Jehoshaphat is not convinced that they are right. So, he asks, "Is there not here another prophet of the Lord of whom we may inquire?" Ahab is obviously frustrated. He says that there is but he doesn't like the guy because the guy is always prophesying bad stuff. In fact Ahab says (1 Kings 22) "I hate him for he never prophecies good concerning me." Well, there's a reason for that. Ahab is a wicked man and there isn't much good to say about him. So, this prophet is called and sure enough he prophesies evil. He has some bad news for Ahab. He tells Ahab that if he goes into battle, he is going to be killed. So, Ahab says to Jehoshaphat, "See, didn't I tell you that he would say bad stuff?" So, they decide to go into battle anyway. On the day of the battle Ahab tells Jehoshaphat to go ahead and wear his royal robes, but that he has declared it casual Friday and that he isn't dressing up as the king. In fact, he is going to wear a disguise. Of course it doesn't matter. The Word of the Lord was true. Ahab was killed that day in battle. The prophet who dared to go against 400 other prophets, who dared to tell 2 kings that their plan was doomed, dared to stand up to the wishes of two countries and in a statement that sounded very unpatriotic and in their case, ungodly was actually godly. Daring to speak the Word of the Lord, particularly when the word of the Lord is a word of judgment is not easy. But, a true prophet will not

say what people want to hear, but will say what God has said because what God has said is what people need to hear, even if they do not want to hear it. Telling people what they need to hear will often get you in trouble. It is what got Jesus killed. Keep this in mind the next time you hear someone say that the Jesus they know does not judge anyone.

So, let's reset the stage. It is Monday morning. Jesus and the disciples apparently left Bethany very early in the morning so that they could get to the Temple for the festivities of the day. Either Jesus did not bother to eat anything before he left or by this point in the walk, he was already hungry. Bethany is not that far from Jerusalem. It is about two miles away. Not necessarily long enough of a walk to work off breakfast but the path would have some elevation elements to it. For whatever reason, Jesus is hungry and goes to a fig tree apparently expecting figs, but finding none, he curses the fig tree and it withers up and dies. Now, typical of Matthew, he compresses the event in order to display the issue. Mark fills in a few of the details that Matthew does not include. For example, the tree did not wither right before their eyes. Verses 18-19 took place on Monday morning and on Tuesday morning when Jesus and the disciples were going back to Jerusalem they noticed then that the tree had withered and died. So, verses 18-19 took place on Monday morning and verses 20-22 took place on Tuesday morning. Matthew puts those together because he is seeking to make a particular theme very evident, as we will see.

When the disciples see that the tree has withered and died, they want to know how he did that. Jesus tells them that they could not only do the same thing but something apparently even greater if they would believe and not doubt. At face value, Jesus appears to answer their immediate question, but in a way that tries to make them think more expansive than just about a tree. In other words, there is more going on here than a tree getting punished because it did not provide what Jesus wanted in the moment. So, what is going on here and how are we to understand this?

Matthew arranged these events in order to highlight and emphasize a particular message. Let's step back for a minute and see what that is. The Triumphal Entry of Christ emphasized the fact that Jesus was the actual fulfillment of the prophecy that promised that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem. He was their King, but they refused to be his people. They were not what they said they were.

Then Matthew writes about Jesus cleansing the Temple. Once again the message is very clear. In spite of the enormity of the Temple itself and the massive festivity that was taking place, the event itself was more of a curse than a blessing. The leaders were using this God-planned event as a means to enrich themselves. The message again is clear. They were not what they said they were.

In verses 23-27 the chief priests and scribes are exposed by Jesus to be frauds. They are not interested in the truth because they were not what they said they were. This idea is explicitly made by Christ in the parable that he gave in verses 28-32. His point is clear. What you say ultimately does not matter if your life does not back it up. Your words are cheap. In fact, your words will become a means of condemnation if your life does not

reflect what you say. And the consequences of not heeding the warnings of Christ and truly embracing him are enormous and eternal as Christ points out in verses 33-46. So, here is the big idea and it is a very heavy one. If you are not what you claim to be, judgment is coming.

I. Every fraudulent “believer” will be exposed. (18-19a)

Jesus is hungry. He sees a fig tree by the side of the path and because it has leaves on it, one would expect that there would be figs on it as well. After all, it is a fig tree. Now, even though it was not the season for figs (as Mark tells us), meaning, the figs on the tree would not be fully mature and ready to be harvested, there should still be immature figs. Keep in mind that this is April. A fig tree, like many of our trees would have a small fruit bud that would appear in the spring of the year. This fruit bud would then be followed by the appearance of the leaves. By the time that the leaves would appear that small fruit bud was large enough to be edible and even today is preferred by some. But, if there are leaves, there is supposed to be fruit, even if the fruit is not fully mature, there is supposed to be fruit. Jesus sees the leaves. The message of the fig tree is deceiving. It is showing leaves, but when you examine it up close there is no fruit. The leaves were a cover-up for the lack of fruit. The leaves gave the appearance of one thing but upon close examination it was something completely different.

Do not miss this! Jesus is the one who goes up to the tree. Jesus is the one who looks for the fruit. Jesus is the one who exposes the actual condition of the tree. What is Jesus doing here in this text? He is going to Jerusalem. He is going to the Temple. He is actually going in to clean out the Temple on this day and to confront the chief priests and leaders. He is exposing them as frauds. He is pulling back the leaves and saying, “Look, there is no fruit. You are a fraud! You are not really children of God.”

So, how do they respond to that? They get angry! They argue. They are defensive. They are embarrassed. They fear what others will think and they plot to kill Jesus. They would rather kill Jesus than admit the truth about themselves. How do you get to the point, where you are driven to kill someone who heals the sick and raises the dead? That is how far people will go who are hell-bent on not being exposed. But, every fraudulent “believer” will be exposed.

If you are a fraudulent believer, if you are claiming to be something that you are not, listen, the day is coming when you will be exposed. Some of you are terrified that other people will find out about the secret life you live. It is not people that you should fear; it is God. He will not be mocked. Neither will he be denied. You can build a fence around your tree, even a wall. He will reveal whether or not you are the real deal, or simply leaves.

Isaiah 28 and Hosea 9, speak of Israel as a fig tree. Jesus is exposing the reality of their condition. They claim one thing. They claim to love God and follow him, but in reality, they do not believe. The authenticity of their words would be revealed in the fruit of their

love, acceptance, trust, worship and obedience to Jesus. Genuine believers follow the commands of Jesus. They do more than say they agree. They obey.

If you are a fraudulent believer, your sin will be exposed. You will either expose it in honesty and humility where it can be confessed, repented of and forgiven, or God will expose it in spite of your protesting and defiance where it will condemn you.

II. Every fraudulent “believer” will be judged. (19b-20)

Then Jesus said, “May no fruit ever come from you again.” The consequences of hypocrisy are seen in the severity of the judgment. This is no game. There will be a day when it is too late to repent. The response on the part of Christ is quick and severe and the consequence and the evidence of that is quick and severe. The shriveling of the tree is so fast that the disciples are amazed and want to know how Jesus did that. They are more focused on the authority of Jesus to cause this to happen than they are on the meaning of it. Now, hold on to that for a second, because we will come back to it. I want to give this point proper attention. One of the biggest lies that people believe, if not the biggest lie is that I can sin and get away with it. Related to that lie is the idea that since I have been able to get away with it thus far, I can get away with it forever. Or since God does not punish every sin immediately, then either he will not punish sin ever, or there is no God. Or, maybe I am the exception to the rule. Do you realize that you and I have hearts that want to find or manufacture every excuse they can in order keep on sinning and to keep on believing that it is ok?

Let’s say that you are a doctor and that you have a patient who smokes and has smoked for 20 years. You like this person and you plead with him to stop and he says what? “I know of a man in Kentucky who started smoking when he was 16 and he lived to 104.” But, you know hundreds of people who started smoking when they were 16 and they died when they were between 55 and 63. But, if I want to smoke, or if I want to do something that is risky in defiance of common sense, I will find an uncommon example as my justification. Now, the truth is, you may be able to smoke and live to 104. But, you cannot be a hypocrite and get away with it! The wages of sin is death. Every fraudulent “believer” will be judged. And the judgment will be shocking. I think that is the point of this action on the part of Christ. The disciples were amazed at what happened. The result of Christ pronouncing judgment on that tree was shocking. All hypocrisy will be exposed and it is shocking. It is shocking because the person that you thought was one thing is revealed to be something completely different. It is shocking because God is serious about addressing sin and the consequences of God’s judgment are real and severe.

The disciples, in the moment miss that. So, they ask Jesus how he did it. The answer of Jesus is absolutely profound! Here it is. The disciples what to know how Jesus did this and Jesus says that if you have faith and do not doubt that you will not only do what has been done to this tree but you can move a mountain. Is Jesus giving them a formula for getting what you want out of life? No! What did Jesus just do? He just pronounced judgment upon a nation that had rejected him. The cursing of the fig tree was not about a fig tree but was about a nation. Jesus is telling his disciples that when they declared, by

faith, the word of God's judgment to a rebellious people, that it would happen, because that is what God says will happen. In other words...

III. Every genuine believer will believe. (21-22)

Every genuine believer will believe not just the promises of Jesus, but will believe the warnings of Jesus as well. How do you know if you are a genuine believer? Do you accept the warnings of Jesus and are you willing to tell others?

Go back with me to Matthew 16. Based upon Peter's confession of Christ, Jesus tells Peter that he is giving him (and the disciples) the key to the kingdom. They are given the authority to declare forgiven those who also believe in Christ and they are given the authority to declare condemned those who do not. Then in Matthew 18, Jesus tells the disciples that their authority is to be shared with the entire church. The entire church has the opportunity and responsibility to declare forgiven those who repent of their sin and trust Christ and they have the responsibility to warn those who do not repent of their sin.

The language that Jesus uses in Matthew 16 is the same that he uses in Matthew 18. And it makes sense. A key not only opens, it locks. People who are given a key have a privilege and a responsibility. The privilege is to be able to say to those who repent that you are forgiven. The responsibility (and it is a weighty one) is to say to those who do not, that you are condemned. Jesus is condemning the fig tree. He is condemning hypocrisy. And he tells his disciples that they can do the same thing, that is, they can share in his authority by saying what he says. That means that they must believe it.

When the disciples asked, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" they were asking a question about how did Jesus do that. Jesus answered their question by telling them more than what they asked. Later they would understand it. How did he cause the tree to wither? He caused it to wither because he pronounced judgment on its hypocrisy. And if you have faith and do not doubt, that is, if you believe me and my message and you say the same thing, that is, you also preach a message of condemnation upon hypocrisy, you will not only do this to a fig tree, but you will destroy this mountain. And while this phrase is a metaphor for accomplishing great things, I believe that this mountain was referring to the mountain upon Jerusalem stood. And these disciples did exactly that. They preached a message of hope to all who trusted Christ because they were genuine followers of God, but to those who did not, they preached a message of condemnation and the result was, Jerusalem was destroyed.

Now, do you see how it all fits together? How do I know if I am a genuine believer? One of the evidences is your willingness to say everything that Jesus says, which includes a message of judgment to those who reject Christ. Do you know why? I will not risk the rejection of others unless I am absolutely convinced of the truthfulness of my position (I Kings 22)

Let me give you an example.

I have shared Christ with a friend of mine on a number of occasions who thus far has not professed faith in Christ. He understands the gospel, but he has a brother who died without trusting Christ. And if this friend of mine accepts the gospel then he would be saying that his brother has no hope. He is correct. Following Christ means believing his message, without doubt.

If I really believe that message of the gospel that Jesus is the only way to God, then I must be willing to say that there is no other way and there is no hope for those who do not trust Christ.

For 2,000 years the church has had leaders and preachers who refused to preach difficult truths, difficult texts or sermons that deal with sin, hell judgment and condemnation. These preachers have usually been successful in attracting crowds. Today, these speakers who give many motivational talks ironically on having faith and not doubting are themselves not full of faith and instead are full of doubt. They doubt what Jesus says about our need to give words of hope to the believers and words warning of condemnation to the hypocrites.

This responsibility is yours as well. What are you going to do when asked about your position on same-sex marriage? What is our church going to do? Are we going to be silent and secretly hope that we can escape the pushback of our culture? Or, are we, you going to speak the truth? What we say, and what you say will reveal what we really believe. But, here is the benefit of that. If what you claim to believe, is never really tested, then how do you know if you really believe it? If what you believe is severely tested and you do not waver, do you realize the joy there is and the comfort that come from that? Some of you have faced death and found amazing peace and you are at rest.

There are times when, as a congregation, we are called to participate in removing a member because even though he or she has professed faith in Christ, this member's life does not look like a believer and this person refuses to repent. When that happens, the elders bring that person before you and you, the membership of the church, are called upon to remove that person as a member. Do you want to do that? No. Would it be easy to find a way to be silent and to say away from it? Sure. Just as it would be very easy for the elders to make excuses for it, sweep it under the rug and pretend that everything is fine and just hope that it goes away. But, if we are going to be the body of Christ, then we must be the entire body of Christ and that includes being his mouth and speaking not only what he says but speaking all that he says.

In order to be identified with Christ, I have to embrace the entire package. I have to believe and not doubt both his message of salvation and hope, but also his message of condemnation to the unrepentant.