

Matthew 21C

- Here's a good test to know if you truly understand the Gospel
 - Answer the question, "How could Jesus' death on the cross be a payment for your sin?"
 - And the answer is because Jesus was sinless
 - The Bible says that we die because we are sinful, yet Jesus being without sin was not deserving of death
 - So His death became a payment available to cover our sin
 - So the key to Jesus' saving power was His sinlessness, but how do we know Jesus was sinless?
 - The New Testament writers testifies to that truth

[1John 3:5](#) You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin

[2Cor. 5:21](#) He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

[1Pet. 2:21](#) For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,

[1Pet. 2:22](#) WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH;

[Heb. 4:15](#) For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

- These authors knew Jesus personally, and they testified under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus never sinned
- But there is still another way we see Jesus' sinlessness demonstrated: it's proven by the intense scrutiny He received in the days before He died
 - During the week Jesus died, He spends four days – Sunday through Wednesday – in the temple teaching and healing crowds

- And each day as Jesus entered the temple grounds, He was met by religious leaders who test Him in front of the crowds
- Their tests are constructed as no-win scenarios where no matter how Jesus responded, He will upset someone
- Either Jesus offends His followers or the Romans authorities, and either way it will discredit Jesus and undermine His authority
- That period of testing was necessary for Jesus so that He may demonstrate His righteousness publicly
 - It validated that Jesus was the perfect sinless sacrifice, our Passover Lamb
 - So just as the Passover Lamb is inspected for four days prior to Passover according to the Law, so was Jesus
 - And today we begin our study of the four-day examination process Jesus experienced in the temple grounds
 - The temple structure of Jesus' day had been expanded well beyond the original design provided in scripture
 - The original design for the tabernacle involved three principle sections
 - An outdoor courtyard, where sacrifices were made and burned
 - The Holy Place inside the tent where only priests could go
 - And the Holy of Holies where the mercy seat, the ark and God's presence were located and only the high priest could go
 - The move from a tabernacle to a temple resulted in a new courtyard being built around the first, called the court of the women
 - And by Jesus' day, Herod had enlarged the temple and added still another courtyard called the court of the Gentiles
 - This outer area was called the court of the Gentiles, because it was not technically part of the Temple
 - This is the area where Jesus turned over the tables
 - So the outer courtyard, not being part of the Temple structure, was open to all people, so long as they observed proper decorum

- This is also the area where Jesus spent His time teaching in the four days prior to Passover
- And on Sunday, His first day in the temple, Jesus spends only a short time there according to Mark because the day was ending
- And immediately, Jesus is met by the needy seeking healing

[Matt. 21:14](#) And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.

[Matt. 21:15](#) But 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

[Matt. 21:16](#) and 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'?"

[Matt. 21:17](#) And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

- The first day Jesus entered into Jerusalem was Sunday, the 10th of Nisan, and as He entered Jesus upset the tables of the money changers
 - And of course, this in turn upset the priests and religious authorities, which then led them to make accusations against Jesus
 - That scrutiny began immediately, for after the commotion dies down, the sick who frequented the temple come to Jesus
 - And as they come, Jesus acting in compassion in the Temple grounds begins to heal them
 - The temple was a natural place for the needy to congregate for two reasons
 - First, for those seeking miraculous healing or simply God's favor, the temple was the obvious destination
 - But secondly, the temple was the best place for the destitute to beg for help from visitors flocking into the city
 - Those who were blind or lame were usually poor as a result, so begging was their only way of subsistence
 - Because temple crowds were consistently plentiful and more inclined to be generous to the needy, it was the place to beg

- Even today, the only place in Israel where public begging is allowed by Israeli law is in the Old City of Jerusalem
- In v.15 Matthew says that as Jesus performs healings, children in the crowd respond in spontaneous shouts of Hosanna to the Son of David
 - That statement was an undeniable declaration that Jesus was Messiah
 - So naturally it upsets the religious leaders again who hate it anytime people say Jesus is Messiah
 - They ask Jesus a rhetorical question, saying don't you hear what the children are saying?
 - They expect Jesus to intervene to prevent the children from blaspheming by calling Jesus the Messiah
 - Obviously, it has never occurred to them that Jesus might actually be the Messiah
 - Which is odd, since Jesus was healing people miraculously in their midst
 - Yet at the same time, mere children understand what these miracles mean
 - So Jesus responds in v.16 saying that these children should not be silenced because they were fulfilling Scripture
 - Jesus quotes from Psalm 8:

Psa. 8:1 O LORD, our Lord,

How majestic is Your name in all the earth,
Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!

Psa. 8:2 From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength
Because of Your adversaries,
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.

- David says God establishes His strength through the mouths of children
 - David is saying that God chooses to vindicate Himself against His enemies by mocking self-righteousness and self-importance
 - Wise and learned adults who deny the obvious will be brought to shame by children who gladly confess the truth

- Though a child can barely comprehend the theology or doctrine nevertheless the Lord will bring them spiritual truth
- So in that way the Lord establishes His strength through weak things of the world to shame the so-called wise
- Jesus quotes that psalm in response to His accusers to show them that the word of God foretold that moment
 - A time when learned adults would scoff at the work of Messiah so it falls to children to gladly declare the Messiah's arrival
 - I think this explains why children may readily accept truths that adults won't...it's a sign of God at work
 - And the Bible says it's a shameful thing when children possess greater knowledge or power than adults
- When the Lord was preparing to judge the Northern Kingdom of Israel, He told them they would be mocked by their own children

[Is. 3:4](#) And I will make mere lads their princes,

And capricious children will rule over them,

[Is. 3:5](#) And the people will be oppressed,

Each one by another, and each one by his neighbor;

The youth will storm against the elder

And the inferior against the honorable.

- When God judged the northern tribes, He did away with their kings leaving the people leaderless in exile
 - And children took their place, leading them capriciously, the youth overtaking the elder, the inferior over the honorable
 - And that's what's happening here...the Lord is chastising and mocking Israel through the mouths of their children
- Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus thanked the Father for operating in this way because it brought the Lord greater glory

[Matt. 11:25](#) At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

- When an “infant” understands something that scholars miss, it draws our attention
- It forces us to acknowledge that such an upside-down result can only mean one thing: the Lord has made this happen
- So the first test Jesus faced in the temple grounds... was the leaders challenging Him to defend His identity
 - And when challenged in that way, Jesus didn’t defend Himself...He pointed to Scripture as His defense
 - And in effect, Jesus let children defend Him which mocked the religious leaders for their ignorance
 - Not only were they ignorant of Who Jesus was, they were also ignorant of what Scripture said, which was a strong rebuke
 - These religious leaders prided themselves on their deep understanding of Scripture
 - But in this moment, they remained silent because they had no answer for Jesus, and so Jesus passed the first day of testing
 - Now Matthew says Jesus left the temple and went to Bethany for the night
 - Bethany was the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, so Jesus had friends there to give Him a place to sleep
 - And since Jerusalem and the surrounding area was full of nearly 2 million visitors for Passover, He had no hope for a room there
 - This will be Jesus’ pattern for the four days He spends in the temple before His crucifixion
 - He comes into the city each day by way of the east gate and leaves at night to sleep in the nearby town of Bethany
 - And the next morning Jesus rises to re-enter the city
 - But before Jesus reaches the temple for a second day of testing, Matthew records an interesting moment along the way to Jerusalem

Matt. 21:18 Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry.

Matt. 21:19 Seeing 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.

- Jesus becomes hungry on the walk into the city, and looking for breakfast, He spies a fig tree alone on the road
 - As He approached the tree, He sees that the tree had no fruit on it
 - And in response, Jesus curses the tree declaring it will never again produce fruit and as a result the tree withers away
 - This was not the normal time for ripe figs in Israel
 - Passover happens in March/April timeframe, and figs are a summer fruit
 - So why curse the tree?
 - Because the tree was advertising something it didn't actually possess
 - When fig trees in Israel produce leaves, they also produce small buds that later ripen into figs
 - These "pre-figs" called *paggim* in Hebrew are green but still very edible
 - The Song of Solomon mentions the ripening of these pre-figs

Song 2:13 'The fig tree has ripened its figs [*paggim*],
And the vines in blossom have given forth their fragrance.
Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,
And come along!'"

- So Jesus came upon a tree with full leaves, which should have meant that it also had *paggim* fruit available, but in this case it didn't
 - The tree was advertising something that it couldn't deliver, and Jesus chose to make this tree an example to teach a lesson
 - Jesus cursed the fig for failing to bear fruit in the expected time, and in the process the Lord established a metaphor of Israel
- In the Bible, the people of Israel are commonly pictured by three different plants: grape vines, olive trees and fig trees

- In this situation, Jesus uses the tree to picture Israel's lack of spiritual fruit in the expected time of the Messiah's arrival
 - That week was the expected time for Israel to bear fruit...the time God appointed for the Messiah to arrive
 - The prophet Daniel told Israel exactly what year their Messiah would come to them
 - And days earlier the crowds had declared Jesus' arrival as He rode into town
- Meanwhile, Israel was acting as if it wanted to know its Messiah
 - It was keeping the Law, it was observing the feasts like Passover every year
 - It had religious leaders teaching about the Messiah and anticipating the Messiah
 - Like leaves on the fig tree, Israel appeared to be ready to produce spiritual fruit
- But all that ritual observance was empty of true spiritual fruit because it was not accompanied by faith nor was it guided by the Spirit
 - The nation was in the grip of Pharisaic Judaism and the self-righteousness it produced
 - So like the fig tree, when Jesus came to Israel expecting it to produce spiritual fruit, it was found barren
- So like the tree, the nation will now be cursed for a time and unable to produce any fruit at all
 - The nation would be removed from her land and lose the physical temple causing the nation to cease observing the Law
 - This is the desolation the Lord pronounced back in Chapter 12 when He told Israel He was leaving her house desolate
 - So this moment was an object lesson for the disciples so they might appreciate the meaning of what was coming
- Now we can understand the historical metaphor easily especially with hindsight, but there's also a spiritual lesson here for us

- And to appreciate our lessons we first need to study the next part of the teaching
 - Now Matthew's account makes it sound as if the tree withered immediately as the disciples looked on
 - But Mark clarifies that the scene actually took place in two parts
- First, Jesus cursed the tree in the morning on one day and the disciples found the tree withered on the next morning
 - Matthew just combines the moments into a single scene for the sake of simplicity, and we see their reaction next

[Matt. 21:20](#) Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?"

[Matt. 21:21](#) 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.

[Matt. 21:22](#) "And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

- The disciples apparently didn't find much interest in the lesson Jesus was teaching about Israel, at least not in that moment
 - Instead, they took interest in the power of Jesus' word to make a tree wither on command
 - They ask how He could wither a tree with just a command, and Jesus responds that they shouldn't be amazed by that
 - In fact, they could make the same happen if they had faith without doubt
 - If they have faith, they could command a mountain to be cast into the sea
 - Just ask something in prayer and believing it, you will receive it
 - From Jesus' response often comes false teaching in one form or another that tell us Jesus is promising believers we get anything we want
 - We just have to believe we will get it and it's ours
 - Sometimes it's expressed as "believing on God for X" (like one TV preacher said he "believed on God" for a new jet aircraft)

- But that is an abuse of the text built upon an improper use of the word faith
 - The false teachers have defined believing as a confidence in our desire or expectation that something will happen
 - In other words, our faith is in the outcome...but that's not what Jesus means when He says we must be believing
- Remember, faith always has an object...we have faith in something and it's that "something" that is worthy of our belief
 - It's not the power of our faith or the strength of our desire that makes anything come true
 - If you want proof of what I'm saying there is an easy way to find out...go command a mountain to move and see what happens
 - No matter how much you might want it to happen, it won't happen
 - Try commanding a chair to move or a pencil or even a grain of sand
 - Has anyone ever reached the point where they move a mountain into the ocean? Has no Christian ever had faith then???
 - Obviously, there's more to what Jesus is saying than merely our desire to make something happen
 - Jesus is saying that the power to do anything resides with God Himself, so when we have faith in God's plan of action, we can be a part of it
 - The disciples wondered how it might be possible to cause trees to wither with just a word
 - To which Jesus says they could have done this same miracle if they had believed God was prepared to do it
- Here's a couple of examples: pretend you told a mountain to go into the sea, and it did what you asked...how did that happen?
 - What power caused it to happen? Did you do it with your power? Did your belief make it happen?
 - No, God is the only One with power to make it happen, so clearly God did it

- So did God respond to you like a genie in a bottle? No, you responded to Him
- You commanded the mountain to move because you believed God desired to make that happen
- That's what Jesus means when He says that in prayer we ask God and then believing in what He reveals to us, we may command it
- Here's a second example...you believe your seatbelt will save you in an accident
 - But it's not your faith in that seatbelt that makes the seatbelt strong enough to save you
 - You didn't imagine the seatbelt was strong and then the seatbelt became strong
- The seatbelt was made strong by engineers who had the power to make it strong...you put your trust in those engineers to do their job
 - And moreover, those engineers followed government safety standards that specify how strong it must be
 - So your faith in your seat belt isn't in the strength of your desire that it will be strong
 - Your faith is based on your trust in the government (not feeling so safe now, huh?)
- Likewise, your faith to make anything happen isn't based on your ability to imagine it or desire it be true
 - Jesus is saying that your faith in what God is prepared to do will allow you to declare it in advance and be part of that work
 - So unless and until God reveals something to you, you have nothing to believe it
 - But if the Lord reveals to us that He intends to move a mountain, we can say to that mountain "move" and it will as God does it
- That's how we produce spiritual fruit...we know God's plan in advance because He reveals it, and then we join in that work
 - We must abide in Jesus, we must listen to Him, know His word, respond to His lead, and as we do we can take part in miracles as He does them

- We can't name our own miracles nor does God give us what we want merely because our desire is great enough
- But we can produce spiritual fruit by abiding in the Lord
- That was the lesson of the fig tree for Israel...they should have abided in the Lord so they could receive the Messiah in His day and produce spiritual fruit
 - And that's the lesson for these disciples and for us today
 - The ability to produce spiritual fruit belongs to God alone, so we must abide in Him if we hope to produce fruit ourselves
- Jesus has high expectations for our witness, but our witness must be more than just "leaves"...it must include fruit
 - In Israel's case, they had many leaves that suggested they were prepared to produce fruit
 - They possessed the Law and observed the feasts like Passover, and by these things they advertised they knew the way to God
- But when Jesus came looking for fruit, there was nothing there
 - And in its place, they practiced self-righteousness through empty rituals
 - It was so empty that when their Lord came to them to fulfill the very rituals they practiced, they didn't recognize Him
- And we too have been given "leaves" that are intended to advertise spiritual fruit to the world
 - We don't keep the Law, and so our leaves look very different than Israel's but they are still there
 - What are our leaves? The Bible says our leaves are the good works we do in faith to please Christ

[Matt. 5:14](#) "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden;

[Matt. 5:15](#) nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

[Matt. 5:16](#) "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

- If we bear the fruit Jesus has asked us to bear (i.e., the good works), then we are fulfilling our purpose
 - But if we fail in that mission, either by doing nothing or by giving a false testimony, then we are liable to turn out like that fig tree
 - Jesus describes this problem in John 15

[John 15:3](#) “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

[John 15:4](#) “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.

[John 15:5](#) “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

[John 15:6](#) “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

- Jesus told His disciples they were clean already because of Jesus’ word, so the passage begins with a clear declaration that they are all saved
 - Then what follows is a teaching for the Christian to understand Jesus’ expectations for our service to Him in faith
 - It depends entirely on abiding in Jesus and abiding means remaining connected to Him
 - We can’t act independently from His power, authority and direction and expect to do anything
 - In the same way that a branch can’t operate without a connection to the vine
 - So we can’t bear fruit unless we are following Jesus’ lead, doing as He says and serving with His power working through us by His Spirit
 - If we substitute our own plan or if we serve our own interests or in our own power, we stop abiding in Him
 - And as a result, we stop bearing fruit, meaning we don’t produce works that bring glory to Jesus or serve His eternal purpose
 - We may have leaves like going to church, reading our Bible, etc. but we’re not fulfilling our purpose
 - The one who does not bear fruit, like the fig tree, will dry up and be tossed aside, Jesus says

- Remember, the branches were already “clean” so this isn’t a conversation about salvation but of bearing fruit
- So Jesus is speaking in metaphor
- A dried up branch is pruned and tossed aside, which pictures believers losing opportunity to bear fruit in the future
- So just as Israel lost its opportunity to bear fruit in Jesus’ day, so will we lose that opportunity if we don’t abide in Jesus
- In my experience Christians spend far too much time worrying about their own salvation and other peoples’ works when it should be the other way around
 - We should be worried about helping others come to faith and focus on our good works done in faith
 - I like to say that only true Christians worry about whether they are saved
 - Unbelievers don’t worry about whether they are truly saved, because they don’t know the difference
 - They think going to church is enough or being “born” a Christian is enough...they never question it
 - So if you worry about not being saved, your worry is actually evidence that you understand the importance of knowing Jesus
 - Like Jesus said, your faith has made you clean, so let’s move on to the real work...abiding in Jesus for the purpose of spiritual fruit
 - Don’t be like Israel and that fig tree...don’t show leaves without fruit
 - Don’t call yourself Christian and do the Christian rituals without actually producing the spiritual fruit that Jesus expects
 - So instead of worrying about your salvation and unbelievers’ works, worry about their salvation and your own works
- Look what Jesus has placed in front of us...He saved us by the power of His death as our sacrificial lamb
 - We did nothing to bring ourselves into Heaven
 - As Jesus told His disciples, He made us clean by His word

- But then He's asked us to produce fruit in keeping with our witness for Him
- We can't just do the rituals that Pharisaic Judaism did, brewing leaves without fruit so to speak
- We are called to bear true spiritual fruit by our good works
- But now we're learning that even our good works aren't done on our own...we just abide in Jesus
 - Go where He says to go, do what He says to do, and He will accomplish the end result in His power
 - Bearing fruit is the easiest job in the world, which is why Jesus says His burden is light
 - And when it's all said and done, He will reward us for that work
 - His grace never ends...