Believe and Bear Fruit

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Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0:00] It's an honor for me to be counted among you, saints of God. And my great privilege and honor to preach God's word to you this morning.

! After taking a brief break from our series in Matthew, we are today coming back to our series. We're in chapter 21, verses 18 to 32. Let me pray before the reading and preaching of God's word. Heavenly Father, it is a privilege beyond our deserts to be adopted as your sons and daughters. To be able to call upon you, the almighty creator of the universe, as our Father. And we do that boldly because of our Savior, Jesus Christ, this morning.
[1:46] Won't you speak to us today in your word so that we live more in light of that wondrous reality? Won't you, in the preaching, in the reading of your word, exalt your son, Jesus Christ?

And help us to submit to him, to his will, more and more in every aspect of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen. If you are able to honor God, please stand with me as I read from Matthew, chapter 21, verses 18 to 32.
Amen. Amen. In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry.
And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, may no fruit ever come from you again.
[2:50] and the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How did the fig tree wither at once?

And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.
And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith. And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching and said, By what authority are you doing these things?
And who gave you this authority? Jesus answered them, I also will ask you one question. And if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things.
The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man? And they discussed it among themselves, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say to us, Why then did you not believe him?
[4:07] But if we say from man, we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We do not know. And he said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

What do you think? A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answered, I will not.
But afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir, but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?
They said, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, The tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.
And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him. This is God's holy and authoritative word.
[5:15] You may be seated. John Kenneth Galbraith, an economist who taught at Harvard for half a century or so, once observed that, quote, faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone opts for the latter.

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Leo Tolstoy, the influential author of War and Peace fame, concurred. He said, The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already.
But the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him.
Change is scary. Especially when people's egos, their identities, are closely tied with their pre-existing beliefs, it's very hard for them to change those pre-existing beliefs.
But when we are confronted with the reality of Jesus, as we talked about last week, with his death and with his resurrection, when we are confronted by the unchanging, infallible, inerrant word of God, going about life, business as usual, is not an option.
[6:44] Change we must. C.S. Lewis famously wrote that when he converted to Christianity, he was perhaps the most dejected, reluctant convert in all of England.

But convert he did and became one of the most able and ardent defenders of Christianity that history has seen. Some of you here are not yet Christians and you face that same decision.
The rest of us are already Christians, but we also face various choices every single day and every single week when the word of God and the spirit of God challenge the way we think and the way we act.
And then we have to decide, will we change and will we conform our ways to fit, to be aligned with the ways of God or will we insist on our own way?
And our passage this morning teaches us that we must change. And the main point of the passage can be summarized this way, change your mind and believe in the Son of Heaven. And first, we're going to see the fruitless fig tree and then secondly, we're going to see the faithless Israel which parallel each other and they explain each other.
[8:04] It says in verse 18, in the morning, as Jesus was returning to the city, he became hungry. Having spent the night in Bethany, as we were told in verse 17, Jesus now returns in the morning to the city of Jerusalem and he says that he became hungry.

This is the same word that was used to describe how Jesus felt after a 40-day fast in Matthew chapter 4. It's the same word that was used to describe the disciples of Jesus in Matthew 12 when they were so hungry that they couldn't wait that they start plucking heads of grain and then eating them on the Sabbath, getting themselves into trouble with the Pharisees who thought that that was an illegal act because it constituted work in their mind on the Sabbath day of rest.
And so, this means he was really hungry. It's not a, it's kind of a hankering for dessert or ice cream. I just had a full meal but man, I could really use some ice cream.
No, he's hungry because that's his lifestyle. He's living with his disciples hand to mouth as an itinerant preacher. But, that reality does highlight the humiliation of the Son of God in his incarnation.
I'm sorry, I think it might be a motion detector thing sometimes. You guys are too attentive and calm and listening to me. It's a, it, Jesus is the Son of God who has taken on human flesh.
[9:34] how can the Lord of creation, the word of God by whom the entire cosmos came to exist, how can he go hungry?

So, in verse 19, it says, seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves.
And he said to it, may no fruit ever come from you again. And the fig tree withered at once. Fig trees usually put out their full leaves first and then they start to produce fruit.
But this one has only leaves and no fruit yet. And we know that this is during the week of Passover which falls between March and April and we know that in this region historically as the fig trees would only bear fruit mid-May or later on.
So, it's not quite fruit-bearing season. In fact, in the parallel account of this exact incident in Mark 11, 13, Mark explicitly notes that Jesus found nothing but leaves for it was not the season for figs.
[10:55] Well, then isn't it quite unreasonable for Jesus to expect to find figs when it's not the season for figs? What did the fig tree do wrong? This might seem to you like an unwarranted drastic reaction.

for something so small but I think not for two reasons. One is because of who Jesus is. Jesus is the Son of God.

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As I said, He is the Lord of all creation. He is the Word by whom all creation came to be. He silences tempests and calms the raging sea by the Word of His mouth.
When the owner of all creation is visiting, creation should bend and bow its knee before Him. Every valley shall be lifted up, it said in Isaiah 40 verse 4.
Every mountain hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. The very stones underneath Jesus' feet should sing His praise.
[11:59] As He walks by, flowers should bloom for Him. And when He is hungry and He reaches for a fig tree, a fig tree should bear fruit for Him. that's what the King deserves.

But He doesn't get it because He comes in His humiliation of the incarnation to save sinners like you and me. He experiences the same earth that we experience, the same ups and downs of life because, and He couldn't get a fig because it wasn't in season.
That's one reason. Two, Jesus cursing the fig tree and making it wither is an active parable. It's a symbol.
People conversing with the Old Testament would have recognized that a fig tree is a familiar metaphor for the people of God. In Jeremiah 24, God describes the people as figs.
He says there are good figs and there are bad figs. In Hosea 9, in its first, in Hosea 9, God says, like grapes in the wilderness I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season I saw your fathers.
[13:13] But, they came to Baal Peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame and became detestable like the thing they loved. Ephraim is stricken.

Their root is dried up. They shall bear no fruit. God delighted in His people like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season. And yet, His people forsook God and went after idols and because of this, God pronounces that they shall bear no fruit.
God similarly laments in Jeremiah 8, 13, when I would gather them, there are no grapes on the vine nor figs on the fig tree. The nation of Israel was not bearing fruit like they should have been.
So, prophet Micah says in Micah 7, 1-2, Woe is me for I become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned, there is no cluster to eat, no first ripe fig that my soul desires.
The godly has perished from the earth and there is no one upright among mankind. The phrase no first ripe fig parallels no one upright.
[14:30] No upright man. God's people should have been holy and set apart and living upright and righteous lives for him, but instead they rebelled against him and sinned against him and worshipped these idols.

They were like a fig tree that had no figs. So, this symbolic action of Jesus, this connection is connected by the geographic note that Matthew provided for us earlier in chapter 21 in verse 1 when it says that Jesus came to Bethphage to the Mount of Olives.
The town named Bethphage in Aramaic means the town, the house of early figs. It's the house of first ripe figs which highlights the irony of the scene.
Jesus has come to God's people and to the city of God that should have been the house of early figs, the house of first ripe figs, but instead he has only found the fig tree with nothing on it but only leaves.
The idea of bearing fruit has been a constant theme throughout the Gospel of Matthew. John the Baptist preached this in Matthew 3.8, bear fruit in keeping with repentance.
[15:42] Jesus said in Matthew 7.16-20, you will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will recognize them by their fruits.
And then, in the following parable, in verses 33-46, the parable of tenants that Ed will preach on next week, Jesus will compare God to a master who hires servants to work in his vineyard, and yet, they refuse to give the master the fruit, the produce of the vineyard.
And then, Jesus concludes at the end of that parable, therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. So, the withered fig tree is an acted parable.

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Jesus is pronouncing divine judgment over a fruitless people in the symbolic act. When the disciples marvel, it is pretty amazing, right?
[16:58] I mean, imagine a fig tree that just was full of leaves withering in a moment after Jesus pronounces that. How did the fig tree wither at once? And Jesus uses this opportunity to teach them a lesson on faith in verses 21-22, truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith. These verses closely parallel Matthew 17-20 where Jesus says, truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, move from here to there and it will move and nothing will be impossible for you.
When I preached on that passage in Matthew in February, I mentioned to you that faith like a grain of mustard seed does not refer to a weak faith or to a small faith or a faith riddled with doubt. Rather, it's a strong childlike faith of the little ones of God that Matthew repeatedly speaks of. A mustard seed is the proverbially smallest seed, but a faith like a grain of mustard seed is not a small seed, but it's the faith of small ones.
It's a childlike faith. And I think this passage confirms that interpretation because there, the faith that moves mountains was a mustard seed. Mustard seed faith.
[18:34] But here, the faith that moves mountains is a faith that does not doubt. Moving mountains is not literal, but a figurative speech for doing the impossible.

And a childlike faith that depends on God can do the impossible with the power of God. The best way to illustrate childlike faith is by using the example of children.
Let me give you just a couple examples. One time, I showed my girls, I'm sorry, this is kind of embarrassing, showed my girls a video of the English Greyhound Derby.
Anybody seen that? Nobody's seen that? Not even the Brits in our church? Yeah. It's like the Kentucky Derby, except it's not with horses, it's with dogs.
Yeah, more specifically, it's with the greyhounds. And the greyhound, if you didn't know already, is the fastest dog breed in the world, and their top speed reaches up to 45 miles per hour, 73 kilometers per hour, which is about the same as the top speed of a horse.
[19:45] It's crazy. And they actually accelerate faster than the horse does, so if you do pit them against each other in a short distance race, the greyhounds dominate the horses.

All that to say, they're extremely fast. And my girls watched this amazing clip in Wide-Eyed Wonder, and then afterward, they turned to me, and with earnest curiosity, asked me a very important question.
Dad, do you think a greyhound is even faster than you? It's a very cute question.
Of course, I told them the truth. It's hard to say, girls. I think it would be pretty competitive. I'm just kidding.
That's not what I did. I didn't tell them. Yeah. Of course, I wouldn't stand a chance. I remember when a $100 bill was like the largest denomination of money that my girls were aware of, and Hannah and I somehow had lost $30 or something, and we were talking about it in the car and lamenting that we lost these $30, and I forget exactly how we lost this and what happened.
[21:04] Something happened, and then one of the girls overheard the conversation in the back of the car and then asked a very concerned question. Mommy, Daddy, are we going to have enough money? Thankfully, we're not in that kind of poverty.

I chuckled and explained to them, you don't have to worry about money. That's Mommy and Daddy's job to worry about money, so you don't have to worry about money. Just to dispel their lingering doubts, I told them how much our house costs in Cambridge, and that seemed to put them at ease because that's an unimaginable amount of money for a child who only knows a $100 bill.
In the world of small children, parents are like giants and superheroes. I had this line in the sermon before Lauren shared that prophecy about superheroes.
They can lift things that children can't lift. They can reach things that children can't reach. They can solve things that children can't solve. They can buy things that children cannot buy.
And isn't it infinitely more so the case in our relationship with God, our Heavenly Father? Do you believe that nothing will be impossible with God?

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[22:28] God, what are the mountains in your life that you feel that can never be moved? Do you believe that God really can deliver you from that besetting sin that has been plaguing you for a decade?

Do you believe that God really can bring that stubborn family member to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ? Do you really believe that God can bring peace and contentment in your life even as you wrestle with loneliness in your singleness?
Do you believe that God really can change your tumultuous marriage? Do you believe that God really can forgive you of all of your heinous and hidden sins? Do you believe that God really can take your disorder and messed up life and put it right back into order?
Believe him as a child does to his father. You are weak so ask your heavenly father who is mighty to intervene on your behalf. And as you do that be importunate be impudent and to be persistent in your prayers because I can assure you that's what children are like.
It's really hard to turn them down or to turn them away. They just keep coming right back. I was trying to talk to somebody yesterday and my youngest was like daddy can I have a snack?
[23:55] Daddy can I have a snack? Daddy can I have a snack? Yeah yeah you could have a snack. It's our heavenly father's prerogative to say no of course if we're asking for things that are not to his glory and which is not to our good he can say no of course.

But unless you've heard a firm no from him persist in your prayers to God cling to him as a child does to his or her father. This concept of faith is a central one in this passage and the same Greek words repeated twice more in verse 25 and verse 32.
Why then did you not believe him? That's just a verbal form of the word faith. The tax collectors and the processors believed him and even when you saw it you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.
It's the main point of this passage. Whatever it is that we are not currently believing God in, trusting our heavenly father in, we must change our minds and believe in him.
After the active parable of the fig tree, Jesus encounters the fig tree in the flesh, the fig tree in real life which is faithless Israel. In verse 23 he says, when he entered the temple the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching and said, by what authority are you doing these things?
[25:27] And who gave you this authority? Keep the narrative context in mind, what we looked at a couple weeks ago. On the previous day before this, Jesus cleansed the temple, driving out all the money changers and the pigeon sellers who were turning the house of prayer, what ought to be a house of prayer, into a den of robbers.

And in doing so he infuriated the Jewish religious establishment. And having cleansed the temple the previous day, Jesus returns to the temple in the morning and then he begins to teach the people that are there.
And the chief priests and the elders cannot believe this man's shameless boldness. Imagine if you were a teacher at a school and then someone comes into your classroom, gets rid of all the stuff and the furnishings that you use to do whatever you do there, and then starts teaching your students.
Excuse me? What are you doing here? Can I see your badge? Can I see your license? Who gave you the authority to do this? By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?
Because we are the chief priests and the elders and we did not authorize you to do this. The chief priests and the elders I think intended to trap Jesus with this question.
[26:48] On the one hand, if Jesus says that his authority comes from God, that he's working and teaching with divine authority, then they could accuse him of blasphemy, which is exactly what they will do in a few short days in Matthew 26, 64, 66, when they condemn Jesus, the Jewish council condemns Jesus to death.

And remember in verse 16 of this chapter, Jesus quoted Psalm 8, verse 2, which speaks of the children crying out the praises of God, and Jesus applied that passage to himself.
Oh, they could use that against him. On the other hand, if Jesus says that his authority comes from man, then they can point out that they are the legitimate human authorities.
And they never authorized him. They can discredit him in one fell swoop. And that, of course, was their massive theological mistake.

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They think that the temple of God belongs to them, that they're the custodians of the temple, not realizing that they're speaking with the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God and light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made.
[28:09] Jesus perceives the Jewish leaders' intentions, their duplicity, and he asks them a question about John the Baptist, which catches them in their own trap.

He says in verses 24 to 25, I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man? John the Baptist was earlier described in Matthew 3 as the one who prepared the way for the Lord God and for the Lord Jesus. He did this by preaching in Matthew 3 verse 2, repent for the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
And then when Jesus arrived on the scene, Jesus preached the exact same message in Matthew 4 verse 17, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. So Jesus' ministry has been along the same vein as the ministry of John the Baptist, because John was Jesus' precursor.
And the people understood this. And this is why Jesus asked the religious leaders the question about John the Baptist. You question my authority, well, what do you make of John the Baptist?
[29:21] How did you regard my precursor? And notice that Jesus specifically singles out the baptism of John, which is probably to the Jewish leaders the most odious aspect, the most, the aspect of John's ministry that they despise the most.

We saw in chapter 3 that John took the concept of Jewish proselyte baptism, which they reserved for Gentiles who were converting to Judaism, they would baptize them.
And then John took that idea and he started baptizing Jews, conveying the radical idea, even if you are among the ethnic people of God, the chosen people of God in Israel, you cannot take that for granted.
You must not repent of your sins and trust in the Messiah in order to be saved. And that was unthinkable to the Jewish establishment.
How dare you suggest that we need to be baptized? But they can't give Jesus a straight answer.
[30:36] They don't tell them what they actually think. Why? You can see their internal deliberations in verses 25 to 26. If we say from heaven, he will say to us, why then did you not believe him?

But if we say from man, we are afraid of the crowd for they all hold that John was a prophet. Their opinion was at odds with the popular sentiment and so they can't voice it.
Most of the crowd revered John the Baptist and considered him a true prophet of the Lord because he was. If they dismissed John's baptism as merely man's invention, then they would find themselves sidelined by the crowd as out-of-touch elites.
But if they concede that John's baptism indeed came from God, then they themselves make, they make themselves liable to Jesus' accusation. Why then did you not believe him?
Neither option is acceptable to them, so they answer, we do not know. Which then allows Jesus to say, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.
[31:35] Jesus will, in a few short days, openly claim that he is the divine son of God while he's on trial. However, now is not the time of his death, but even now, his implicit claim is obvious.

John's ministry was authorized by heaven, by God himself. How much more than the ministry of Jesus, the messianic king that John was merely preparing the way for? If John himself, as Jesus said in Matthew 11, 9, was more than a prophet, how much more so Jesus, of whom John said in Matthew 3, 11, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The chief priests and the elders held their positions at the behest of Rome, but Jesus and John the Baptist before him derived their authority from heaven, from God himself.
But why couldn't the chief priests and the elders not recognize Jesus' superior heavenly authority? I think the reason can be inferred.
They had too much to lose. Imagine the chief priests and the elders who are the leaders and teachers of the Jewish people having to admit they themselves are sinners who must repent and be baptized.

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[33:06] Imagine them sitting under the teaching of this upstart preacher from Nazareth who was not authorized by any reputable human institution. Jesus has challenged up to this point in the gospel many of the teachings and traditions held by the chief priests and the elders.

Imagine having to own up to the fact that they were wrong about so many things. The fear, the humiliation. When people have a vested interest in the status quo, they are very resistant to change.
They resort to confirmation bias and ignore the contradictory evidence. They resort to tribalism and they close ranks to protect their own, their tribe, in this case the Jewish establishment.
They were too entrenched in their positions of power. How many people in positions of power have failed to admit their disqualifying failures because they love their positions too much?
Several members of our church were previously part of churches where very sadly pastors committed adultery. It's grievous that they committed adultery at all.
[34:30] But what's even more grievous to me is that they do that for years and then only confessed after they're caught? Were they not bothered in their conscience before that point?

I know the Holy Spirit does not wait years to convict us of sin. But that's the danger and seduction of power and reputation.
The ministry exists for Christ, not Christ for the ministry. Shouldn't we rather step down from our positions and bring disrepute to Christ and to his church rather than stay in our positions because we don't want to bring disrepute to our own name?
God help us. In 1 Timothy 6, 5, Paul denounces those who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. Godliness is not a means of gain.
We pursue godliness because it pleases God as an end in and of itself, not because it brings us some profit or position or power.
[35:56] The higher up you go, the further you have to fall. And I think success and fame for these reasons are dangerous temptations. We become more fearful of falling.

What are your positions and stations and relations in life that would jeopardize, that you would jeopardize by submitting to Christ?
Do you stand to lose your sterling academic reputation by admitting that you are a church-going, Bible-believing Christian? Are you willing to admit that you were wrong about something when confronted by the truth of God's word?
Are you willing to confess your sins to others, even if it's really embarrassing? Rosaria Butterfield was a tenured associate professor of English, women's studies, and queer theory at Syracuse University.
She was in a lesbian relationship with a woman who was an adjunct professor of sociology or psychology at a nearby university, and she had been in and out of serially monogamous lesbian relationships for a decade and had been a gay rights activist for two years.
[37:24] By her own admission, she hated the Bible and teaching and taught thousands of college students to do the same. And she writes, I did all of this because I believed with my whole heart that I was gay and that gay was good.

Imagine her giving her life to Christ. How inconvenient and disruptive that would be to her entire life, her career, her social life, her family.
But that's precisely what God did in her life. A pastor and his wife lovingly and patiently shared the gospel with her over hundreds of meals at their house. And after two years of meeting with them and reading the Bible and learning to sing the Psalms, she finally gave her life to Jesus.
And then consequently, she says, she broke up with her lesbian partner, grew out her butch haircut, and then tried to remove all of her piercings. I think the key word is try. She couldn't get it all out.
And she writes this. The gospel, a singular clarion call, a cleft of light in a cavern of darkness, shattered and beckoned me all at once.
[38:47] The truth of Christ's death and resurrection was a truth over which I had no interpretive authority. It was going to be true whether I believed it or not. She continues, my conversion was messy and dangerous.

I lost friends and cultural capital. I did not lose my job because I was tenured, but I did have to go before my tenure board and explain what happened to me. That was fun. I was now despised by the people I loved, but one thing was clear.

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I was once God's enemy, but now I was God's friend. I learned, and I'm still learning how to repent of my sin and its roots. I learned that repentance was the threshold to a holy God and a lifeline of Christian fruits.
Jesus. Are you willing to change your mind and believe in the Son of Heaven, even if it means that you lose your position and your power?
Jesus' parable of the two sons in verses 28 to 31 make the same point from another angle. What do you think? A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today.
[40:06] And he answered, I will not. But afterward, he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I will, sir, but did not go.

Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, the first. Like the fig tree, a son is also an important metaphor for the people of God in the Old Testament.
For example, in Exodus 4, 22 to 23, God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh, thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, let my son go that he may serve me.
And this is what precedes the judgment of the Passover, the slaying of the firstborn males in Egypt. So Jesus is once again making a pointed comment about the Jewish people and about the Jewish leaders in particular.
Israel had made a covenant with Yahweh, with the Lord. They had insisted in Joshua, Joshua 24, 16, far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.
[41:07] For it is the Lord our God who brought us out and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went.

And among all the peoples through whom we passed, and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore, we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.
But they did forsake the Lord and serve other gods. They were like the son who told the father, I will, sir. I'll do what you ask me to do. And then didn't go to the vineyard to do the work.
But God says it would have been better for them to have answered, I will not. And then afterward, change their mind and go. The phrase, doing the will of the father, is one that Jesus has used a couple times already in the Gospel of Matthew.
In chapter 7, verse 21, Jesus said, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven. Likewise, in chapter 12, verse 50, Jesus said, whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.
[42:18] You might say one thing with your mouth, but do your actions betray your words? You might say Jesus is Lord, but is your life actually submitted to him?

What are the areas of your life that are in conflict with the word of God? Jesus says to them in verses 31 to 32, truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.
For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.
Once again, Jesus invokes how the Jewish leaders rejected John the Baptist. The Jewish leaders said that they would do God's will, but they didn't. But the tax collectors and prostitutes who said that they wouldn't do God's will are now turning away from their sins and believing in Jesus and doing the will of God and going into the kingdom of God before them.
The chief priests and the elders of the people are, they're the teachers of God's law. They're the exemplars that are held up for society to say there are the people who follow God's law.
[43:34] You should follow their example. And the tax collectors and the prostitutes are the scum of Jewish society as the people would think of it. The tax collectors were the Jews who betrayed their own people and are in cahoots with the Romans, the occupiers, to tax, to oppress, to extort money from their own people so they can enrich themselves.

They're traitors. The prostitutes are those who are literally whoring after all kinds of people being used and abused.

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And these are the people that the chief elders, the chief priests and the elders would have looked at and said, God, thank you that I am not like these people. But how can it be that prostitutes and tax collectors are going into the kingdom of God before these Jewish leaders?
How can it be that thorn bushes and thistles like prostitutes and tax collectors can bear fruit? If you have really wrestled with this question in your mind, I think you know.
We can't, no matter how hard we work, produce fruit in our own lives, in our own strength. Just trying to be a little harder on ourselves and a little bit more disciplined and beating ourselves up for our failures and trying to pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps never work.
[45:17] As Paul Tripp once said, it's like taking a dead tree and then taking some, picking up some fruit from some other places and then stapling them onto the tree.

Look at my life. Here, here's a fruit. Look at my life. Here's a fruit. It doesn't work because there's no life, no life giving coming into the fruit.
So the fruit just falls and rots because the tree itself is dead. What can sinners like you and me who have messed it all up and have ruined our lives with sin and rebelling against God, whose very roots are rotten up with sin, what hope do we have to ever bear fruit for the kingdom of God?
That's why it is prophesied in Isaiah 11. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.
Isaiah 53 verse 2 says the same thing, speaks of the same plant, the root that comes out of dry ground. Jeremiah 23 5 says, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I'll raise up for David a righteous branch and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.
[46:42] Zechariah 6 12. And in the New Testament, Jesus himself says in Revelation 22 16, I am the root and the descendant of David from the bare.

He is the root, the branch that the prophets prophesied of. He is the live root that is propagated from this barren fig tree that was not bearing fruit.
And Jesus came and lived a life of perfect obedience and then he died as a perfect blameless sacrifice on the cross so that all who trust in him are forgiven of their sins and are grafted onto that root.
That is our only hope for deriving true spiritual life and bearing real spiritual fruit. So he says in, Jesus says in John 15 5 to 6, I am the vine, you are the branches.
Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers.
[47:51] So where is your hope this morning? How do you intend to bear fruit in your life? The only way is to cling to Christ, to change your mind, and to believe in him, trust him, and follow him in every aspect of your life.

I pray that God will help you do that. Let's pray. Father, we do confess of our own sinfulness and rottenness apart from Christ.
But we thank you for your promise that even prostitutes and tax collectors can go into the kingdom of heaven. If only we'd put our trust in Jesus Christ.
So won't you help everyone here, Lord? Those who are not yet grafted into the branch, the vine, the root of Jesus Christ.
Give them faith so that they can be grafted on. And Lord, for all those of us who struggle in various ways throughout our daily lives to conform our will to yours, to obey you when it's hard, when it means loss and sacrifice.
[49:38] Help us to do it. Grant us, help us to derive that life from Jesus Christ, which leads to obedience. We pray all of this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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