**WHAT DOES JESUS WANT?**

**(Matthew 21:18-22)**

Let me describe a scene for you, and you tell me whether it is a familiar one, whether or not you can identify with it. You have been away from home most of the day. When you get back, you realize you have barely eaten. You’re famished. You open up the refrigerator and stand there staring. After a few seconds, you close the door and open up the freezer door. Again, you stand there looking blankly at the frozen items without taking anything out. Next, you go to the cupboard and do the same thing. You are hungry, but you have no idea what you are hungry for. You don’t know what you want.

Has anyone else ever been there, done that?

When Jesus wrapped Himself in human flesh and was born in a Bethlehem barn, He took upon Himself human limitations. He experienced what you and I experience. One of those commonly shared experiences was hunger. Jesus got hungry. Due to the pace of His life, Jesus often missed meals.

Jesus’ tendency to miss meals is hinted at in today’s text. Look at the first verse of our passage—Matthew 21:18. Why was Jesus hungry? Apparently, He skipped breakfast. From Mark’s gospel, we know that Jesus had spent the night in Bethany. Bethany was the home of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary, where He likely spent the night that night.

I can just see it. Martha gets up early, bakes some biscuits, scrambles some eggs. She didn’t fry any bacon or sausage though. Just as she is about to serve breakfast, she discovers that Jesus has already left to join up with the disciples and travel back to Jerusalem.

On the way in, Jesus realizes that He’s hungry, but He doesn’t have a fridge or a freezer or a cupboard or even a sack lunch. There is no Chick-fil-A where He can order chicken minis. Jesus, however, spies a fig tree on the other side of the road. Being spring time, this was not a good time to find figs, but this tree has already leafed out. Once a fig tree was full of leaves, you could expect to find some early fruit. This tree had none. This tree offered nothing to satisfy Jesus’ hunger.

I believe our text teaches there are two things that Jesus hungers for that have nothing to do with figs. There are two things that Jesus wants, and Jesus is going to look for these things in your life and mine.

Let’s read the full passage—Matthew 21:18-22. From this text, let’s answer the question, “What Does Jesus Want?”

1. **JESUS WANTS HIS PEOPLE TO BEAR FRUIT.**

The story found in our passage is admittedly strange. In the eyes of some, it makes Jesus look bad. It almost appears that Jesus is throwing a temper tantrum. Jesus is hungry. He hopes to sate His hunger with fruit from a fig tree. The fig tree has no fruit; so, He curses it, and thus kills it.

I know that when people are hungry, when they haven’t eaten, they can be a little testy. We have all seen the Snickers commercials that show how temperamental the person is before he eats a Snickers and then how composed he is after he eats the candy bar.

That is not what is going on here. Jesus is not acting badly because He is hungry.

Bible teachers say that what we have here is an enacted parable. Jesus spoke many parables in His teaching ministry. In fact, latter in this chapter Jesus will give us two parables, and the next chapter will open with another.

A parable has been described as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” The Greek word for *parable* is one word that comes from two. *Para* means alongside, and *bola* means “to throw.” A parable takes something from this life and throws it alongside spiritual reality to teach us a spiritual truth.

In this passage, Jesus enacts a parable. He performs a physical miracle but does so to teach a spiritual truth. Many of Jesus miracles were done for this very reason. Yes, He wanted to meet human need, but He also wanted to illustrate Kingdom truth.

* When Jesus heals a man of blindness, He is saying, “I am the one who can give you spiritual sight.”
* When He feeds a multitude, He is saying, “I am the bread of life. I am the one who can sustain you and satisfy your spiritual hunger.
* When He raises a man from the dead, He is saying, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. I am the one who can give you real and eternal life.”

What is Jesus teaching when He comes upon a fruitless tree and curses it? He is saying, “I have come to Israel, those who were to be God’s people. I have found them barren. They have not produced fruit, and so they will be judged.”

This is not the first time that Jesus has addressed the problem of barrenness, and it is not the first time He has promised that judgment would be God’s response. Jesus said in Matthew 7:19, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Look at the parable that Jesus told in Luke 13:6-9. Listen to how it is rendered in *The New Living Translation:*

**6**Then Jesus told this story: “A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always

disappointed. **7**Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s just taking up space in the garden.’

**8**“The gardener answered, ‘Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. **9**If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.’”

That story tells us that God is patient. He is wanting His people to be fruitful, but He won’t wait forever, and if we persist in a state of barrenness and fruitlessness, judgment will come.

Jesus wants and expects those who belong to Him to be fruitful. Jesus said in John 15:8, “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples.” What does it mean for Christians to be fruitful? What does that look like?

I can think of three kinds of fruit. **First, there is the fruit of the Spirit.** We find these enumerated in Galatians 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” These are Christian graces that should be obviously present in the life of a follower of Christ. If your life is devoid of these nine fruits of the Spirit, you are not a true believer. When you place your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, His Spirit begins an agricultural work in your life. In the soil of your life He grows nine fruits. Each year the yield should be greater and greater. Each season of your life, the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control should grow in increasing measure. If those graces are absent from your life, you don’t really belong to Jesus, and you face the just judgment of God.

There is a **second** fruit that should overflow in the life of a Christian. **There should be the fruit of good works.** These are deeds we do that give tangible expression to the fact that Jesus lives His life in and through us. When we bless people, when we help people, when we love people, when we meet the practical needs of people, we are bearing fruit.

We read in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” The NLT makes the meaning even clearer: “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things He planned for us long ago.”

God doesn’t save us by the good things we do, but He does save us so that we can do good things to help others and thus bring glory to God.

Let me ask you: Are the people around you better off because you believe in Jesus? If they are, that means you are bearing the fruit of good works. If the people around you are not any better off, where is the evidence that Jesus has saved you and changed your life?

**There is a third kind of fruit, and that is the fruit of saved souls.** Think about it. Apples come from apple trees. Oranges come from orange trees. Peaches come from peach trees. God created the animal world and the world of vegetation to be fruitful and to multiply after its kind. That being so, from where do new Christians come? God uses believers to birth new believers. This, of course, is not a physical birth; it is a spiritual birth.

God wants to use you and me to lead others to a saving knowledge of Jesus. That means we have to actively tell others about Jesus, about who He is, about what He has done, and about the new life He offers to those who turn from their sin and turn to Him in faith.

The population of planet Earth is approximately 7.8 billion people, and it is growing. Of that 7.8 billion, I have contributed 2. So far, Ruth Ann has contributed 9—six kids and three grandkids.

I have no idea what the population of the Kingdom of God is, but God wants you and me to be spiritually fruitful. He wants to use us to fill heaven with new believers. Let me ask you, “Who is a citizen of the Kingdom of God because of you?” Can you name individuals who will be in heaven because you were instrumentally used by God in their conversion?

Claude Alexander is a Bishop of The Park Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. He spoke about what he calls “bold leadership.” His message was not just meant for pastors or those who are vocational ministers. Leadership has to do with influence. Everybody has influence over someone else. If you are a parent, you are a leader. If you have younger siblings, you are a leader. If you have friends, you can be a leader. Listen to what Claude Alexander said:

There are questions that beg to be answered. There are dilemmas to be overcome. There are gaps to be filled, and the challenge is for you to fill them. That is the essence of the high call of spiritual leadership. There is a purpose for your being here. You are meant to answer something, solve something, provide something, lead something, discover something, compose something, write something, say something, translate something, interpret something, sing something, create something, teach something, preach something, bear something, overcome something, and in doing so, you improve the lives of others under the power of God, for the glory of God.

Your family has needs. This church has needs. Our community, nation, and world has needs. Those needs demand that we do something. We can’t do everything, but because we can’t do everything, that is no excuse to do nothing. Under God’s leadership and with His strength, let’s do something. That is what it means to be fruitful.

Jesus wants His people, that means you and me, to bear fruit. There is a second thing He wants.

1. **JESUS WANTS HIS PEOPLE TO HAVE FAITH.**

From Matthew’s account, it appears that the tree withered before the eyes of the disciples. Mark, however, makes it clear that the disciples noticed it the next morning when they passed by it. Regardless, the disciples knew this was a miracle. A tree fully leafed-out simply does not wither in a single day.

In vv. 18-19, Jesus issued a warning, but in vv. 20-22 we find a promise. The promise comes to those who have faith. The promise has to do with prayer. God hears and responds to the prayers of those who have faith.

Properly understood, faith is not an object we hold on to like a rabbit’s foot or a four-leaf clover. Faith is not to be understood as a possession. Rather, faith is a force that possesses us. Those who are possessed by faith are impelled to act because they believe God is going to act for, in, and through them.

Throughout the great 11th chapter of Hebrews we are reminded what the old testament saints did by faith. Their faith caused them to act. Their faith did not make them think something; their faith caused them to do something.

* By faith, Abel made an offering.
* By faith, Enoch was taken straight to heaven without passing go and without collecting $200.
* By faith, Noah constructed an ark.
* By faith, Abraham obeyed God and went out letting God lead Him.
* By faith, the aged Sarah conceived gave birth to a son.
* By faith, the parents of Moses hid him from the murderous intent of Pharaoh.
* By faith, Moses aligned himself with God’s people.
* By faith, Moses left Egypt.
* By faith, the people crossed the Red Sea.
* By faith, the walls of Jericho fell.
* By faith, Rahab welcomed the spies.
* By faith, great victories were won.

What are we doing by faith? What are we attempting to do that we know we would fail if God did not show up and lend His aid?

Let me show you something buried in v. 21. Jesus does not say “a mountain.” He specifies “this mountain.” We shall speak to “this mountain.” To which mountain does Jesus refer. Jesus either had in mind the Mount of Olives or the temple mount in Jerusalem where the temple stood. Either way, whatever stood in opposition to the purposes and true people of God would be vanquished, God’s people would be victorious.

This battle would be won in prayer. It is worth noting that the verbs in vv. 21-22 are all plural. This means the promise is not given to individuals; it is given the community of faith. Whenever the community gathers and prays in faith, God will act on their behalf.

Personal prayer is good. It is important. All of us need to cultivate the personal discipline of prayer. United prayer, however, is essential. God is calling the people of faith to become His house of prayer and to give ourselves to praying together. That is what God has ordained, and that is what God will bless.

Let me share with you a story I told back in November. I tell this story again because it fits so well our text and this message. There was a small congregation nestled in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. This congregation built a new sanctuary on a piece of land that had been willed to them by a church member. Just ten days before the congregation was to open, the local building inspector came by to look things over. He informed the pastor that the parking lot of the church was too small for the size building they had built. He told him that until the church doubled their parking lot, they would not be allowed to use their new sanctuary.

This posed a problem because the only additional land the church had was the mountain against which the new building had been built. They would have to move the mountain or at least a good chunk of it out of their backyard.

The next Sunday morning, the pastor explained the problem and invited all those who had mountain moving faith to meet with him that night in a prayer session in which they would ask God to move the mountain from behind them and to give them the money to have it paved and painted before the dedication which was scheduled for the very next Sunday.

That evening, 24 of the church’s 300 members showed up for the prayer meeting. That is only 8% of the church members who came to pray. These faithful few prayed for three hours until the pastor said the final, “Amen.” The pastor announced, “We’ll open next Sunday as scheduled. God has never let us down before, and I believe He will be faithful this time, too.”

In the morning, while the pastor was in his study, he heard a knock at the door. After calling, “Come in,” a construction foreman opened the door, and removed his hard hat as he entered. He said, “Excuse me, Reverend. I’m from Acme Construction Company over in the next county. We’re building a huge shopping mall over there, and we need some fill dirt. Would you be willing to sell us a chunk of that mountain behind the church? We’ll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge, if we can have it right away. We can’t do anything until we get dirt in and allow it to settle properly.”

Next Sunday, the church dedicated their new sanctuary as planned.

Would you have been at that prayer meeting? Would have trusted God to come through? Jesus wants us to come through by bearing fruit and having faith. That’s what He is hungry for.