

What Does Jesus Hunger For? – Pastor Ray Harms-Wiebe – Matthew 21:18-32

Mark It Up – **Matthew 21:18–32**

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ 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!” And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” ²¹ 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. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

²³ 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?” ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ “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.’ ²⁹ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.

Let's Warm Up

1. When have your expectations been let down?

Perhaps you were excited to eat, only to be served something that looked nothing like the photo on the menu (<http://i.imgur.com/QRsFrUt.png>). Did you go on vacation expecting tanning at the beach but got torrential rain instead? Maybe you thought a day at Disney would be all sorts of adventure, but the only adventure you had was waiting in long lines.

In this week's passage, Jesus experiences some failed expectations from a fig tree.

2. What was the biggest thing you've ever asked for and received as a kid?

One Christmas my dad said my brother and I could have whatever we wanted. This was highly unusual. My brother asked for a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Raphael Grand Slammin action figure ([https://turtlopedia.fandom.com/wiki/Grand_Slammin%27_Raph_\(1991_action_figure\)](https://turtlopedia.fandom.com/wiki/Grand_Slammin%27_Raph_(1991_action_figure))). I asked for a Super Nintendo Entertainment System (<https://youtu.be/eSBFw93V3Rg>) as a total reach. Somehow, we both got what we asked for. I wish my brother had asked for some Nintendo games instead of that turtle.

How about you?

In this week's passage, Jesus tells us about asking God.

3. Have you ever had your authority challenged?

We want to do what we want, but we can't. I bet everyone's been told by their parents that they had to do chores instead of playing with friends. You've probably tried to get something done at work but didn't have authorization to access those files. Or you wanted to remodel your home, only to realize you need a permit from the city or approval from your strata.

What's your experience?

In this week's passage, the religious leaders challenged Jesus' authority to teach, do miracles, and confront the religious system.

Let's Get Started

4. What do you think most people pray for, whether Christian or not?

A study back in 2016 found that most praying Canadians pray to thank God, ask for help, help others, seek God's guidance, and find peace (<https://angusreid.org/prayer-in-canada/>). Surprisingly, 27% of people who reject religion think prayer has a positive effect. Does this align with what you think? What do you hear around you?

In this week's passage, Jesus tells the disciples about praying and receiving.

5. Where do people believe the authority to determine right from wrong comes from? How do these different views lead to conflict?

For some, authority comes from power. The country with the biggest military power can bully other countries to adopt its values. Those with political power get to make laws that dictate what's allowed. For the spiritual and religious, authority comes from some "higher power". The universe, some divine spark in each of us, or God/god/gods dictate universal rights and wrongs. And still, others believe each person gets to determine what they believe is right or wrong. You do you.

What happens when these people disagree?

In this week's passage, Jesus butts heads with the religious leaders about whether or not He has the right to call them out. Does He have the authority to do so?

6. Why is it difficult to stand up for what's right when others disagree?

On one hand, Canada is very friendly to many Christian values. There's no problem when we gather to worship God or tell others about Jesus. We can love and care for those around us how God wants. But find conflict with our culture when discussing views on sex and gender (LGBTQ2S+) and the dignity of human life (MAiD and abortion). What makes it hard to share what we believe?

In this week's passage, the religious leaders care more about the crowds and their social standing than the truth, but Jesus risks His life (and gives it up) to do what's right.

7. Do we need a temple now?

Jesus curses the fig tree and the temple system with its sacrifices and priests gets demolished a few decades later. The Israelites needed a priest to offer sacrifices to atone (pay for) the people's sins and clean them (Leviticus 16:29-34). It was a central place where God's people could gather to worship (e.g., Ezekiel 20:40). The high priest could use the Urim and Thummim to seek God's will (e.g., Numbers 27:21). Are we now missing out?

Does Pastor Ray need to sacrifice goats and sheep for us like a high priest and sprinkle its blood on us? I would imagine that there would be some health code violations and our custodial staff wouldn't be too happy.

There's way too much to share, but in a nutshell: no. We don't need priests because Jesus was the ultimate priest *and* sacrificial lamb (Hebrews 10:8-18). God's followers have the Holy Spirit to guide them. This Spirit also lives within us so we can worship anywhere (John 4:23-24) and we are the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Let's Dig In

8. What's the significance of fig trees in the Bible?

Figs are all over the Bible. Adam and Eve wore fig leaves (Genesis 3:7). That's why some Jewish scholars thought the fruit was a fig (Sanhedrin 70b). The spies brought figs from Canaan (Numbers 13:23). Figs appear in illustrations (Judges 9:10-11; Jeremiah 24:1-10). Israelites eat fig cakes (1 Samuel 25:18). Good times of peace are marked by every man living under their own fig tree (1 Kings 4:25). The prophet Amos took care of figs (Amos 7:14). Jesus knew Nathanael was under a fig tree before Jesus met him. Figs were a common thing.



There's a legend of a boy miraculously causing a fig tree to produce fruit. His dad, a famous Jewish teacher, told the son that God would kill him young for bothering God with this. The son died young (Ta'anit 24a.3-4). In our passage, Jesus causes a fig tree to wither instead.

9. Why did Jesus curse the fig tree?

As Pastor Ray mentioned, leaves should indicate figs are ready to eat. Pliny the Elder lived around Jesus' time and wrote: "The fig is also the only tree whose leaf forms later than the fruit." (Natural Histories 16.49). Check out this video of a fig tree in Israel (<https://youtu.be/ZBnGq7YblBY>).

Of course, the issue isn't the tree. When Jesus talks about leaven, He's thinking of bad teaching (Matthew 16:5-12). When He mentions soil types (Matthew 13:18-23), He's thinking about hearts.

The fig tree symbolizes the Jewish religious system. From a distance, it looks fruitful (productive) but isn't. Imagine God looking at the temple. From afar, it looks productive. Lots of visitors and tons of sacrifices and money being given. But upon closer inspection, people aren't turning from their sins to worship Him. It should be

STEP 1: People turn from their sins and want to worship God. (FRUIT)

STEP 2: People go to the temple to sacrifice, give money, and pray. (LEAVES)

God doesn't care about the rituals if people aren't turning to Him (Psalm 51:16-17). Just like a fig tree is useless if it has leaves, but no fruit.

Jesus had talked elsewhere about the need to bear fruit (Matthew 3:10, 12; 7:16-20; 13:18-23, 37-43). Because the temple worship system prevented fruit, Jesus curses it and anticipates its destruction (Mark 13:1-2).

Luke 13:6-9 – And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let

it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Now it's over. In 70 AD the temple would be destroyed. Almost 2,000 years later it still hasn't been rebuilt.

10. What can we pray for in Jesus' name that will bear fruit?

I was surprised Pastor Ray's example was throwing McDonald's into the ocean. I would've expected Brazil's football rival, Argentina, or Canuck rival Oilers. I've included his summary of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and how to respond to each point.

- Hunger for God and his righteousness. If you don't have this hunger, ASK for it
- Meekness. If you don't have it, ASK for it.
- Mercy. If are not merciful, ASK for it.
- Purity of heart. If you are given to lust, ASK for deliverance.
- God as your heart treasure. If something else has become your heart treasure and you want to be set free, ASK to be set free.
- Confidence in God for the basic necessities of life. If you are anxious, ASK for God's peace to fill your heart and rest in God's provision.
- Forgiveness. If you are having a hard time forgiving someone, ASK for a deeper understanding of God's grace and decide to forgive.
- Love for your spouse and faithfulness to him/her. If you lack love for your spouse and are tempted to commit adultery, ASK for love and faithfulness.
- Love for your enemies. If you have been wronged, you are angry and are tempted to retaliate, ASK for healing and love for your enemy.

11. Pastor Ray said, "It took me time to realize that I was God's mission field. I needed to change." Is it easier to pray for God to change ourselves or other people? Why or why not?

Oof! This hit me like a ton of bricks. It's all too easy for me to be so focused on getting God to change *others* that I forget that God wanted *me* to change, too.

For me, it's way easier to focus on other people changing. I can see their faults more easily than I can see my own. And I see how their sin negatively affects me. On the flip side, I can't see my own blind spots.

I can also justify wanting God to change others because my job is to serve others. Isn't that what God wants? And if they have issues and failures, it impacts my ministry which is also God's ministry. Wouldn't

want God to change those people so they won't interfere with the amazing work *I'm* doing for God? Of course, the reality is that my own sin and heart interfere with my ministry more than the sins of others.

How about you?

12. How can we align to Jesus' heart?

These are some suggestions from the sermon.

Who is Jesus? As Pastor Ray pointed out, the religious leaders are ultimately asking, "Jesus, who do you think you are?" Let's remember who Jesus is. He's the God of the universe and He loves us so much He died on the cross to save us from our sins. It's easier to follow someone when we remember they're more than worthy of our obedience.

Respond to God's revelation. The religious leaders wanted to interpret God's Word and make it fit their desires. When you read God's Word, don't just memorize facts or fulfill a duty. Meditate on it (<https://youtu.be/MIwHSEpYyX0>). What does it reveal about who God is and what He wants? What can you do to align yourself with God? Is there something that makes you uncomfortable? Don't be passive.

Be concerned about God's people. The religious leaders saw people as a way to gain status (Matthew 23:5-7), money, and power. But Jesus saw them as sick people needing a doctor (Matthew 9:10-13) and sheep needing shepherding (Matthew 9:36). He has compassion (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32; 20:34).

Submit to God's authority. The religious leaders were too wrapped up in defending their own authority instead of submitting to God's. Let's ask God to help us give up our authority to obey Him, especially when it hurts or requires realigning our goals.

Entrust, surrender, and obey. We need to take action to give our hearts to Jesus, surrender our pride, and obey God.