

Part 38: Kingdom Authority

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If you have ever bought or sold a house you know the drama that comes with appraisers and inspectors. These mysterious figures come into your home and they begin to make secret and invisible judgments on everything.

It's not the obvious code violations that we fear, it's the subjective perception and valuation they place on the house. We don't know in advance what it is they are looking for, and because of that we can't adequately prepare our house, and because of that we have a sense of anxiety in light of this assessment. We don't know what they are looking for and we don't like it.

Don't have a home, don't worry, you know this anxiety too. As you sit on a date, and you know that the other person is trying to make sense of who you are, and yet you have no idea what it is that they are presently inspecting. Or you go to job interview and they ask one of those vague questions like: "If you could change one thing about our company what would it be?" And you are crippled in your fears because you have no idea what they want to hear and by what metric they are going to analyze your answer.

We don't like it when we know someone is looking at us, but we don't know what it is they are looking for. Maybe this anxiety is even how you approach God. You know one day he will examine you, but you are not sure what his standards for examination are, so you try to do everything and anything in hopes that someday it might be enough. Enough to satisfy you. Enough to satisfy God.

Well what I want us to consider in light of this feeling of examination and anxiety is the first few verses, and the last few verses we will look at today in our text in Matthew. Look with me at **Matthew 21:18-22, 43**.

Why are these two texts important in light of our fears of assessment? Because here Jesus is making assessments, but he is telling us what he is looking for. What is Jesus looking for in your life? He is looking for fruit.

Why is Jesus doing this? And what is the fruit he is looking for? How can you have confidence before God? This is what Matthew is going to answer for us today. What we are going to see this morning is that **Jesus is the authority who is due fruitful and obedient faith**. This means three things which we will look at today: Jesus is the authority, Jesus as the authority is to be obeyed, and Jesus as the authority is to be rejected.

There is an interesting story which headlines our text today describing an encounter with Jesus and a fig tree. Last week we saw the conclusion of Jesus' triumphal entry where Jesus left and exited the city to stay in Bethany. And here the next morning he comes back into town.

On the way he gets hungry and he sees a fig tree growing in the distance. It looks healthy, it has leaves, it should therefore be expected to also have fruit. So he goes over to it for breakfast. But when Jesus gets there he finds that despite the appearance of health, this tree has no fruit and so he curses it.

He says, "May fruit never come from you again!" And the tree withered. Now I have a tree in my backyard that has been there since I moved in. I had no idea what this tree was, but every year it would do tree like things. It would grow leaves, give shade, and then lose its leaves in the winter.

But this fall I met a man who used to own my house and he asked how the plumb tree he planted in the back yard was doing. Apparently this tree, which looked and acted healthy to me, was really a tree which was supposed to bear fruit, but never did.

The reason I never went into my back yard and cursed this tree is because I was not an authority on the tree. Meaning I didn't know it was supposed to do that. Additionally, I could yell at that tree all I want and nothing would happen because I am not an authority over that tree.

But Jesus is. And what Jesus did to this fig tree is a living example of what Jesus is finding in the Holy City of Jerusalem. Last week we saw Jesus go into the temple and see that despite all the on goings and business in the temple, it was empty of worship. Jesus is going to continue this examination process of Jerusalem and he is going to continually find leaves and no fruit.

For those who claim to be believers in this room you also ought to consider where your life may have leaves and no fruit. Where do you care only about looking the role instead of actually fulfilling the role? I remember touring a Christian college once where they had mandatory weekly chapels. However they had a student id reader at the door of the chapel and all you had to do was scan your card, saying you were there, and then you could leave. All leaves and no fruit.

But so many of us do this in more subtle ways even when we think about our church attendance. We scan our cards, but we sit here thinking of fantasy football. We wonder if we will be able to talk to that new girl first. We come to church and we have no expectation that it will bear any real fruit in our lives; that we will have to labor at understanding God's word so that we will better know it; we must search our hearts as we sing our songs so that we might respond rightly to it; that in coming to church we are taking part in a fellowship and a care which requires action not attendance. It's only Jesus who flips our leaves to see our empty hearts.

And he is going to speak harsh words to this city and its religious leaders just like he did to this tree. To not bear fruit is to not do what God has made you to do. The issue this is going to raise with the religious officials then is by what authority Jesus gets to make these claims. We see Jesus' authority over the tree, but the Chief priests want to understand what authority Jesus has over them.

This is the first point we are going to look at today: **Jesus as the authority.**

Consider this story: **Matthew 21:23-27.**

Here we see Jesus teaching in the temple and the chief priests and the scribes come and interrupt his teaching. It was normal in that day for people to interrupt a teacher and ask questions. But what's interesting is that it is the historic teachers who are now interrupting this new teacher.

It was one thing for Jesus to speak in the temple, it was quite another thing for him to teach. So these teachers interrupt Jesus with what was a first century equivalent to: "license and registration please." "Who and by what authority are you teaching in this temple?" Was Jesus authorized to preach by a priest? Was he given license to teach by the temple courts? Did his overseeing Rabbi give him the credentials he needed to do this?

They have come to Jesus, to check his authority by leveraging their own authority. "You show us by what authority you are teaching, and we will let you know if you are able to keep teaching."

But here is the irony. Jesus asks them a question. He says answer me this question and I will answer your question. And what is hilarious is that the chief priests answer the question. They play along with Jesus' riddle and by the end they are the ones who are stumped.

You've probably seen in a movie where one character says to another character, "James you're too agreeable." James replies and says, "No I'm not." The other character says, "Yes you are!." And James then says sheepishly, "You're right."

This bit is funny because it affirms itself in irony. And this scene in Matthew is just as rich. The chief priests come and they say, "By whose authority do you do this..." And Jesus replied, "Now you listen to me." And they say, "Ok."

They asked Jesus who the authority is, but in a matter of seconds Jesus has already placed them under his authority. Now this is not because Jesus is a master at speech and debate. This is because Jesus actually is the true authority.

And we know that because of the point he is making with John the Baptist. He asks them by what authority John the Baptist came and baptized. You see these men would have at least known the answer to this even if they didn't believe it. Look back at **Matthew 3:1-3**. John came as God's messenger to prepare the way for Jesus. John himself knew this. Look at what he told the Pharisees themselves back in **Matthew 3:11**.

If John came from God to proclaim the Messiah. And if Jesus is the one whom John proclaimed, then Jesus has far more authority to preach in that temple than these men ever did. Jesus is God's messiah. Jesus is God himself, the Son of God, the one who whether we realize it or not has total authority over us.

This was the dilemma these men found themselves in. If they affirmed John as being a messenger from heaven, then they were obligated to respond to him.

You see each and every one of us find ourselves in a conflict of authority. We are trying to find out who or what has authority in various places of our lives. But amidst the experience of this debate there is one clear authority. The one who curses fig trees because he is the one through whom the fig tree was made.

We love the gospel here at Sovereign Hope. We talk often and frequently about the beauty of the gospel. And how wonderful it is to obey and follow Jesus. But we do not just obey and follow Jesus because he is beautiful. We obey and follow Jesus because he is the authority. There is not only an obligation of delight to follow Jesus, but one of duty as well.

Whether we see him as such or not, just like these men, we owe a response to Jesus. Look at how Paul puts in in **Colossians 1:15-16**. Jesus is due all things from the fruit of fig trees to the allegiance of our hearts.

Now we can see Jesus as an authority. We can see God as our authority. But that still doesn't solve the problem in our hearts. That's because we can respond two ways to this authority we can either obey it, or we can reject it. Jesus is now going to provide for us two stories each depicting these two responses to his authority.

Let's look at story number one: **Matthew 21:28-31a**.

So here we have a parable of two sons, each asked by the Father to go work in a vineyard. The one son says, "I'm not going to do it." But after a while he changes his mind and goes. The other son says, "Sure Dad, I'll go work." But instead he never goes. Jesus asks these chief priests (who still haven't figured out they are being played), who it was who did the will of the Father. Who was it that obeyed?

The first son, they said. The one who said no but ended up changing his mind and going. This is held up in contrast to the son who said he would go, but never did. This is the second point that Matthew is emphasizing for us today: **Jesus as the authority is to be obeyed**.

The chief priests and the elders are wise enough to look at this parable and see that saying the right thing is not as good as doing the right thing. Both sons were met by the authority of the father. They had an obligation that they needed to wrestle with. One said no, but then acted obediently. The other said yes and acted in disobedience.

And Jesus enemies say, that is wrong. And Jesus wins again. Look at what Jesus says, **Matthew 21:31-32**.

Jesus says you are absolutely right the mark of sonship, the fruit of sonship is not looking obedient, or sounding obedient, but being obedient.

He makes it very clear: you are the second son. You are the one who says you will obey but never do it. And he says to them the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of Heaven before you will in your false obedience.

This would have been insulting in two ways, the first is that tax collectors and prostitutes were reprehensible to these men. One commentator said this: "The phrase was proverbial to denote all that was vile, loathsome, and alien to the feelings of the pure, the respectable and the patriotic...To tell the proud, self-satisfied zealots for righteousness that the moral scum of society was nearer to the kingdom of God than they, was to offer them a mortal and unpardonable insult."

The second reason would be that these men would have at once been able to point to a multitude of obedience. We have on the holy clothes which Leviticus calls us to wear. We practice the feast and festivals of the law. We offer sacrifices daily according to the demand of scripture. We have kept ourselves pure of evil. We have made a home daily in God's temple. We have done the work of the Lord.

Maybe this would be you in this instance? Maybe you would point to the marks of obedience in your life. But what was the work of the Lord in this parable? What was the fruit that Jesus was examining

them for? It was to listen to the Father and go into his vineyard and work. It was not a call to anything, it was a call to one thing: "Go and work in the vineyard."

This allegory of vineyard is synonymous with God's Kingdom. And here the call is to obey the Father, come into his Kingdom, and live for his glory.

These men seemingly kept everything, but they did not listen to God. Look at what Jesus said again: **Matthew 21:32.**

John called you to repentance and you did not obey. But those outcasts, those broken people, the people whose lives seemingly appear to scream, "No!," they are the ones who obeyed. They are the ones who changed their minds and listened to God. They are the ones who bore fruit.

Church hear this. When we talk about faith in God we do not talk about a mere belief in God. This son did not disbelieve that this man was his father. He knew the father. He was familiar with him. He knew how to make his way around the father's house but when it came down to it he did not believe him.

Faith, the fruit which Jesus is looking for, is faithful obedience. It is not to have lived a perfect life, but instead to have lived an obedient one. You see often we just like these men think that we can have faith in God apart from obedience to God.

We can say we believe in Jesus, but we do not worship Jesus. We can say we think sin is dangerous, but in our lives we do not live as such. We affirm that God's word is the truth, but in our decisions we ignore it. Faith is not an affirmation the mind. Faith is a submission of the heart.

Look back at what Jesus said in the opening: **Matthew 21:21-22.** Who wouldn't want faith like that? But let's be real with ourselves. Everyone wants a faith that moves mountains, but less people want a faith that moves themselves.

But that is what faith is, it is changing our lives and obeying God through Jesus. It is to first believe that we must be saved by Jesus and then it is to obey the Jesus who saved us. It is to leave the gym and go to the vineyard, but then it is also to work in the vineyard.

You might feel the most vulnerable creature before our God. Here is Jesus, a holy and pure authority. His gaze is piercing and he knows all things. How can you stand up to this God? How can you who once wore the badge of prostitute or tax collector bear the badge of sonship?

By obeying the call of faith and repenting. The early church father John Chrysostom says it this way: **"It is an evil thing not at the first to choose the good, but it is worse not to even change afterwards...Let no man who lives in vice despair and let no man who lives in virtue slumber."**

Jesus will make an assessment of you. What is your confidence? You can be sure if you obey God's call through Jesus Christ. Faith is obedience to Jesus' authority in all areas of our life. It is an obedience which changes our status forever. It gives us access to the King and his Kingdom.

This story shows the power of obedience in Christ to completely change the course and confidence we have in life. But what does it look like to not obey Jesus as the authority?

Look at the second story: **Matthew 21:33-41**.

Where the first parable showed the overwhelming power of obedience, this passage shows the hostility of rejection. This is our third point today: **Jesus as the authority is to be rejected**.

Why do I say that Jesus as the authority is to be rejected. That seems like an odd way to put it. Well I say it this way because that's what this parable goes on to show. If Jesus is the authority then we have only two options. We either obey him. Or we reject him.

No one approaches God and fails to obey him out of ignorance. We only disobey him out of rebellion. We reject him.

This passage makes it clear that there is no middle ground when it comes to obeying God. And in the last parable belief was synonymous with obedience, here disobedience is synonymous with violence.

Jesus once again asks his enemies how this parable would play out in real life. How would the master of the vineyard respond to those wicked men who killed his son? He would throw those wretches out to a miserable death.

Jesus has surveyed these men once more, and he is once more going to make an assessment: **Matthew 21:42-44**

Jesus says to these men: Have you not read. This is what you are doing. You are rejecting the call of God in your life to offer obedience to him.

He sent you the OT scriptures and you will not listen to them. He sent you John the Baptist and you didn't obey him. And now he has sent his own son, and you refuse to listen to him. And even more than that, it is only Jesus who knows how close this parable is to reality.

Did you notice the specific phrasing he used when he gave the parable: **Matthew 21:37**. In the parable the father sent his son not to the vineyard in general. But to the hostile men in the vineyard. In history, God sent his son to the disobedient men living in his own vineyard.

He sent his son to a hostile people knowing full well that they would reject him, and kill him. And Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22 in what would have been a well-known passage in this day.

The chief priests knew this prophecy because it was always thought that the stone that would become the corner stone was Israel itself. But here Jesus is saying to this zealot Israelites, you are not the stone, you are the ones rejecting Israel's salvation.

Jesus is the son who will one day be brought outside the gates of Jerusalem and killed by a wretched and miserable death. To reject Jesus' authority is to participate in his murder. Did you notice that when presented with this little case study, these men who opposed Jesus agreed that if this were to happen, punishment and death would be the fitting response? That's because if we understand our own sin properly, we can't help but see how reasonable this punishment is. Unbelief is a violent rejection of the witness God has sent us in his son.

So what will Jesus do? **Matthew 21:43-44**. Jesus is going to take his blessing, take his presence, take his kingdom away from these Jews and give it to another people, another nation. One which yields its fruit in faith. That is a nation who believes this King. This is a nation of faith.

There will be a people built on this cornerstone. And despite his rejection, it will be marvelous to our eyes.

You see the unbelieving men in this text set out to murder the son so that they might take the inheritance which the son had. But in the gospel, the son will lay down his life to give the inheritance to men who should have died.

The wages of sin is death. Either your death, or Jesus'. You see you will encounter God's obedient son. And when you do you will either have blood on your own hands through your active rejection. Or you will have his blood on your heart by grace through faith. Blood on your hands and you will be crushed. There will be judgment for those miserable and wretched men.

But blood on your heart and you will receive the inheritance: the very Kingdom of God. And if he has done that for us we look around at the vineyard that we are in. We see all that God has provided for us: the fence to keep us safe, the winepress to stock our labor, the tower to provide us refuge and we say, "Why wouldn't I give you the fruit!" "Why wouldn't I trust you with everything? Why wouldn't I obey you?" "You've given me everything!"

You are not the cornerstone. Your faith is not the cornerstone. Jesus is the cornerstone. He is the son who was obedient unto death. He was the son who obeyed the costly call of the father when we didn't. He said, "Yes I will go to them unto death." That son, and his sacrifice on the cross must be the cornerstone on which you stand.

Look how this text ends: **Matthew 21:45-46**. After three specific traps, the chief priests get it. Jesus was talking about them. They were the ones in danger of judgment because they failed to obey Jesus. I hope you too share the perception these men felt. Jesus is writing about you.

In Romans 9, Paul quotes again an Old Testament prophecy and he says this: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. And whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Jesus will one day assess you. This is what he's looking for. Do you believe in him? Do you stand on him? Do you obey him? As this text shows time and time again knowledge of God is not equivalent to faith in God. Faith always obeys, it always submits, it always trusts. Do you do that?

If so we have much fruit to offer and much praise to give. So let us give our lives to that.

