
The Taking Away of the Kingdom

Matthew 21:1-46

Here is the text for our text this evening, Zechariah 9:9–16 (ESV)

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

¹¹ As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. ¹² Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double. ¹³ For I have bent Judah as my bow; I have made Ephraim its arrow. I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and wield you like a warrior's sword.

¹⁴ Then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning; the Lord God will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south. ¹⁵ The Lord of hosts will protect them, and they shall devour, and tread down the sling stones, and they shall drink and roar as if drunk with wine, and be full like a bowl, drenched like the corners of the altar.

¹⁶ On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land.

The king will come with righteousness and salvation. He will rule the whole world, from sea to sea. Through the blood of the covenant, He will set those held in the pit free. He will restore double to His people. He will speak peace to all the people groups. On that great day, He will save His people. They will be His flock and His crown jewels. This is what will happen, Zechariah says.

Matthew records for us how the kingdom was taken from one group, Israel and given to all the nations. He shows how the fulfillment of Zechariah brings about the loss of the kingdom for some and the giving of the kingdom too the nations.

This text is structured in three sets of two's, two trips, two parables and two judgments. Its parallel structure looks like this.

Two Trips

- The Triumphal Entry
- The Cleansing of the Temple
- The Curse of the Fig Tree
- The Challenge in the Temple

Two Parables

- The Parable of Two Sons
- The Parable of the Landowner

Two Judgments

- The Biblical Authority
- The Kingdom Taken Away

Two Trips**(v. 1-27)****The Triumphal Entry****(v. 1-11)**

¹ Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ⁵ "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.' "

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰ And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹ And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

Jesus gives His instructions to the disciples. They are to go into the village and borrow a donkey and colt. If challenged, they are to invoke the Lord's authority. They are to bring them to Him as He needs them for His entry into Jerusalem.

Matthew connects what is taking place with Zechariah 9:9-16. Jesus is self-consciously fulfilling the prophecy. So at this point in the life of Christ these events unfold. But even more significantly, Matthew links the events together. To read the "Triumphal Entry" in isolation from its surroundings will almost certainly lead to misunderstanding it.

While the Gentile kings usually rode in chariots or great war steeds, Israeli kings had traditionally ridden on donkeys or mules. What Jesus is riding is not signaling humility, but that the king is arriving in peace.

So the scene unfolds. Jesus, seated on the donkey, rides down the road from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. The crowds begin to gather, waving palm branches and strewing them along His path. Hosannas ring. Children shout. The whole city is stirred.

But who is this? This is the Messiah, right? Not what they say! "This is the prophet, Jesus". First hint that all is not well. Now look what He does...

The Cleansing of the Temple**(v. 12-17)**

¹² And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

¹³ He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."

What a scene this is. Crowds following as He rides up to the Temple. The children are running around shouting the slogan. He strides through its courts, overturning tables as He goes. Money bounces to the flagstones and pigeons fly free. The place of fellowship with God has been polluted by the presence of thieves.

¹⁴ And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, ¹⁶ and they said to him, "Do you hear what these 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'?"

But now that the true king has come, the lame and blind are healed. The people are filled with joy. But the religious leaders? What a sorry, sinful, jealous lot. Jesus rebukes them with the words of Septuagint translation from Psalm 8:2. Listen to how this reads though:

¹ O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ² Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. [ESV]

Do you see how He has basically said, "On the strength of the praise of babes and infants, the enemies of God are to be silenced. Why, because the name of the Lord is majestic in all the earth.

¹⁷ And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

End of trip one – he goes outside the city and spends the night in Bethany.

The Curse of the Fig Tree (v. 18-22)

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.

Ok, Waffle House is lit up but not serving food today? So, burn it down. Is this what Jesus has done? Is this just "It's not nice to fool Jesus?" These events and the recording of them by Matthew are being ordered for our instruction and our example. This is here because it really belongs here.

So why is this here? Because the triumphal entry is nothing but beautiful leaves on a figless tree. Yesterday's response is no the good fruit it appeared to be. It is beautiful. It is what a fig tree can produce. But it is not the true fruit. The beautiful tree of Israel is barren and about to be cursed.

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."

Well, frankly, the disciples don't get it. They still do not see how powerful the Word of Jesus is. When He curses, the tree withers. But Jesus seems to take this and on the surface turns it into a lesson on praying by faith. But let me ask you. Do you see Him pointing to a particular mountain? Where was He pointing when He said, "This mountain"? I think to Jerusalem and the Temple mount. The polluted place of fellowship with God will be brought down by the power of prayer. What God has planned in the fall of Israel and Jerusalem will be brought about in human terms by the faith-filled praying of the apostolic band. We call this, the book of Acts.^{xvi}

The Challenge in the Temple**(v. 23-27)**

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.

You can see the story line here can't you? Yesterday, Jesus challenged the evils going on in the Temple. Today, the religious leaders challenge the authority of Jesus. I love His no-answer. It uncovers the hypocrisy of Israel's national leaders. They may be hypocrites, but they are not stupid. They know they have been caught by their own rejection of John as the forerunner and their craven fear of man.

But actually, He has just answered their question! He is doing this on the same heavenly authority of John. John's baptism was from heaven. So is Jesus' authority. Both Jesus and John were rejected – so the two parables.

Two Parables**(v. 28-41)**

The two parables that Jesus now gives to the disciples and the religious leaders explain why the fig tree is cursed and the Temple mount is thrown into the sea.

The Parable of Two Sons**(v. 28-32)**

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.

This parable is about the rejection of the forerunner. A simple story about two boys sent to their task. One pretends to go the other refuses but then actually later goes. Who did what his dad wanted? The one who actually went.

Jesus applies the story to the national leaders of Israel. The people they considered great sinners would enter the kingdom ahead of them. In fact, they will never enter because even when they had originally rejected John's call to righteousness, they refused to repent later and thus enter the kingdom. Jesus is making the point as to why the fig tree is withered and the mountain cast into the sea: the leaders of Israel rejected the forerunner of the Messiah and the righteousness of the kingdom.

The Parable of the Landowner**(v. 33-41)**

³³ "Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went

into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

This parable is about the rejection of the Messiah. This must have been a shocking parable. A landowner entrusted his vineyard to tenants, having gone to great time and expense to improve the property and protect his investment. When it was time to collect his harvest, he sent several servants over time to collect his due. They beat one, killed another and stoned the last. Finally, he sent his son hoping they would respect him and do what was right. Instead, they saw it as an opportunity to kill the heir and steal what was not theirs. So, here is the question to the religious leaders, "What should the landowner do?" Well their words are self-condemnation, even though they don't recognize. It is likely the disciples, having heard Jesus predict His death, see the implications of the question and its answer. The owner should bring justice upon the tenants, find other tenants and get the fruit that is his due."

Now, we easily hear the redemptive-historical storyline in this parable. Do you hear the common theme, the repeated words running back to the withered fig tree? Do you see that God is the disrespected owner and Israel the vile tenants. So Jesus' follow-up comments on this to the Pharisees.

Two Judgments

(v. 42-46)

Two judgments follow.

The Biblical Authority

(v. 42-44)

⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22-23. But listen to how the whole stanza explains what is happening now. Listen to the connection to the triumphal entry, rejected cornerstone, the festal sacrifice and gathering, the Temple and the salvation for God's people.

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. ²¹ I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. ²³ This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴ This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵ Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. ²⁷ The Lord is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal

sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar! ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you. ²⁹ Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

The cornerstone, the king coming through the gates, the owner of the vineyard, has been rejected. Therefore, the great King will take His kingdom away from the fig tree, the Temple mount, the original tenants and will give to those who will produce the true fruits. The kingdom will be those who call upon the Lord to be saved and who enter the gate of righteousness, the Lord Jesus.

The Kingdom Taken Away (v. 45-46)

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

Wow, how astute of them. All of this is aimed at them. The kingdom is about to be taken away, will they repent? Will they fall at His feet and call out for forgiveness? No, they are intent on destroying Him. They really want to arrest Him, but they are very afraid of His popularity with the people.

But sadly, once again, the people do not really see who He is. In words that harken back to the opening scene, the people do not see their Messiah, they hear a prophet. But what is at stake is not just God's revelation, but God's rule and reign.

Reflect and Respond

Let's close by hearing one last connected text from the Old Testament.

Isaiah 62:10–12 (ESV)

¹⁰ Go through, go through the gates; prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway; clear it of stones; lift up a signal over the peoples. ¹¹ Behold, the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."

¹² And they shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord; and you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.

Behold your King and His Holy, Redeemed people!

^{xvi} This is another of those texts that is yanked out of its context and thus misused. Without know where it is, it sounds like we can move physical mountains if we only had strong enough faith in our praying. Thus you have the false teaching that our word in praying can do what God's Word in Jesus' mouth does. I do not think that is what is going on here. However, if that is the interpretation you make then the application is simply, "Christians can cause anything to happen through prayer if they just believe enough." Then the word of faith folks are right – your troubles are your fault. Believe enough, and you should be able to pray them away. Unfortunately you have just turned prayer into incantational magic which you either don't use or really doesn't work.