

The Power of the Messiah in Judgment

Matthew 21:12-22

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh.)

1. The Reason for Judgment
2. The Corruption of the Temple
3. Jesus Cleansed the Temple the Second Time
4. The “House of Prayer” Had Become a “Robbers’ Den”
5. God Hates False Religious Ritual
6. Jesus Healed the Blind and the Lame
7. The Reaction of the Religious Leaders
8. Jesus Cursed the Fig Tree
9. The Fig Tree Pictures Israel
10. Come to God on His Terms
11. God’s Power Available to Those Who Believe

Matthew 21 began with the Triumphal Entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem. Jesus was unveiled as the Messiah to the nation of Israel and came into the city to the acclaim of the people, riding on a donkey in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Yet the nation was unwilling to have Him. The nation would not accept a king that was coming in humility and gentleness, but rather they were looking for a political deliverer with physical power. It was an indication that the nation was in a state of spiritual decadence. They did not recognize their tremendous spiritual need and that first they needed spiritual deliverance and spiritual cleansing, so they rejected the Messiah that God offered.

1. The Reason for Judgment

In Luke 19:41 it is recorded that Jesus lifted up His eyes and wept over the city of Jerusalem. On that occasion He spoke of the coming judgment that would be poured out on that city for its unbelief. The city would be destroyed, not one stone would be left upon another. The Roman armies fulfilled that prophecy in A.D. 70.

Matthew 21:11 says, **“And the crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.’”** The people refused to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the One prophesied in the Old Testament. The King entered the city in glory, but the nation was unwilling to have Him as their king.

As noted previously, Matthew was not concerned with chronology; He put his material together topically according to his purpose of revealing Jesus to be Israel’s Messiah.

He next turned the attention of his readers to matters of judgment. A series of events were recorded, but they were not recorded in order or with reference to time. To get the chronological arrangement, read Mark’s Gospel which tells how things happened in order.

Two events are recorded in Matthew 21 that display the power of the Messiah in judgment: the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree. The first deals with false worship and the second with false profession. The worship of Israel was in a decadent state: the nation professed a relationship with God and a desire for God's Messiah, but it was an empty profession, and for that they would be judged. The judgment was balanced by a demonstration of the Messiah's power in bringing deliverance and healing, offering His power to work in the lives of those who would believe in Him.

2. The Corruption of the Temple

Matthew continued his account in Matthew 21:12, **“And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves.”** Mark's gospel indicates that this occurred on the day after the Triumphal Entry. Jesus had left the city of Jerusalem after His Triumphal Entry and went back to Bethany on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives and spent the night. The next day He returned.

As Christ came into the temple, a hectic and unsettling scene confronted Him. The outer court of the temple was filled with business activity. It was within the temple walls but outside the inner temple proper. It was called the Court of the Gentiles because this was as far into the temple area as Gentiles were allowed to go. A map or model of the temple shows that this was a large open area where people set up business activities. Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves. It had become a marketplace. This was called the Bazaars of Annas, and Annas was the high priest.

When a Jew came to the temple, perhaps from a far distant place, he was required to pay his temple tax, and it had to be paid in acceptable currency. If he was from another part of the empire, then he would not have the temple currency so he would have to exchange his money. If he came to offer sacrifice, he had to offer an animal that had been approved by the priests, an unblemished animal. If he traveled a great distance, it wasn't practical to bring an animal with him, so he bought one at the temple. Also, even if he lived nearby, that animal had to be approved, and if he didn't buy it in the temple, there was a good chance the priest would find something wrong and reject it.

This had become a tremendous moneymaking operation for the high priests and their families. They literally got rich on this. For example, if you were going to have to exchange your money for temple money, the rate of exchange could be very bad. If your animal was not acceptable; you would have to buy one at the temple. Even those who were selling doves would mark them up, and this was particularly repulsive because the poor who could not afford an animal for sacrifice were to offer doves. As an example, in the temple it cost four dollars for a pair of doves to sacrifice, but outside the temple, you could buy a pair of doves for a nickel.

You can see how the high priest and his family were taking in money and becoming very rich through this activity. It was a total corruption of the temple. What was the temple supposed to be? What was the purpose of the temple? It was to be a place where the people of God met with their God, communed with their God, and worshiped their God, but it had become a business.

The very people who were to be leading the people in their worship of God, the high priests and their families, were using it for material gain. Jesus came into this setting and He drove out the merchants from the temple area.

3. Jesus Cleansed the Temple the Second Time

This was the second time during His earthly ministry that Jesus cleaned up the temple. The first time happened shortly after the first miracle in the earthly ministry of Christ recorded in John 2: the turning of water into wine at Cana of Galilee. Following that, Jesus went to the Passover of the Jews at Jerusalem, and at that time He went into the temple and He drove out the merchants. That was at the beginning of His public ministry. He displayed His power as the Messiah in cleaning out the temple, consumed with a zeal for His Father's house according to John 2:17. Jesus also prophesied His coming death and resurrection. John 2:19-21 says, **"Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking of the temple of His body."** So He cleansed the temple, the center of worship for the nation, at the beginning of His public ministry of offering the kingdom to the nation and Himself as the Messiah. Three years later, the temple was again in its previous decadent condition, indicating there had been no response nationally to the Messianic ministry and the nation was still spiritually decadent. The second time He came to the temple and cleansed it was within days of His coming crucifixion, on the verge of the fulfillment of the prophecy He gave at the time of the first cleansing.

There are no details given on how Jesus went about cleansing the temple. The large temple area would have been filled with merchants and masses of people. Jesus drove them all out by Himself. This was probably a display of His power that was resident in His person as the Sovereign Messiah of Israel, something perhaps similar to what happened in the Garden when they came to arrest Christ. Upon asking the identity and location of Christ in the Garden, Jesus came forward and said He was the One; and the very power of His person caused them to fall to the ground. Similarly the power of His person was displayed as He moved through the temple and drove them out. There was no brawl, no fighting back. The authority of His person was such that they retreated before Him, and He cleansed the area in a demonstration of Himself as the Lord of the temple. In Matthew 12:6 Jesus said, **"But I say to you something greater than the temple is here."** He was the One for whom the temple was built! He was the One who was to be worshiped in the temple! He was the Lord of the temple. He came and cleansed that temple.

4. The "House of Prayer" Had Become a "Robbers' Den"

In Matthew 20:13 Jesus addressed those He drove out, **"And He said to them, 'It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a robbers' den.'"** He used two Old Testament passages for support for what He had done. He attacked the very religious center and the religious leadership of Israel, the family of the high priests and their business. Jesus came into the temple, and in the power of the Messiah He rendered judgment on the worship system of the nation.

Isaiah 56:7 is the first part of the quote, **"My house will be called a house of prayer."** The

context of Isaiah 56 is the millennial reign of the Messiah, and as the Messiah reigns in glory, the temple of God will function as God intended it to function, as a center of prayer for those who have believed in Him. It will be the place where those who worship Him come to commune with Him. That is what the temple was meant to be, a place where God met with His people, communed with His people, and they worshiped Him. But rather than it being a place of worship and communing with God, it had become a place of robbers.

The last part of the quote is from Jeremiah 7:11, **“Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight?”** Jesus referred to these merchants as robbers. They were stealing the people’s money by saying it cost a certain amount to worship God. They were taking the worship of God and making it an occasion to get rich.

There wouldn’t have been anything wrong with selling a pair of doves for a nickel, there is nothing that says the merchants had to give them away. But they were robbing the people!

The spiritual decadence of the nation had not changed for the good in the 800 years since Isaiah prophesied or in the 500 years since Jeremiah prophesied! The same pitiful, spiritual rebellion was practiced by the nation.

The context of Jeremiah 7 gives an interesting insight into the matter of worship. Jeremiah warned the people in Jeremiah 7:8-11, **“Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, “We are delivered!” -- that you may do all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,’ declares the Lord.**” He saw what the people were doing, going through the motions of worship. Through the week they were living with no thought of God and pursuing sinful activity, and then they came into the temple and they thought that some magical or mystical thing happened so that they were okay before God. They did not understand that the temple was to be a place where the people of God worshiped their God. They thought it was a place where people who continued to pursue sinful activity could come and be cleaned, like going through a car wash! They never did understand that the temple was to be a place of prayer, a place of communion between the people of God and God. They thought it was an excuse for sin. They thought that as long as they got to the temple on Saturday, everything would be all right. That’s pitiful.

5. God Hates False Religious Ritual

But things have not changed in the 2,000 years since Jesus cleansed the temple. Many religious people live their lives through the week: they covet, they lie, they lust, they cheat, they go on in their normal routine of things; and then they come to church on Sunday and think that going to church makes things alright. It is like they think some kind of magical thing happened just because they made it to the church building on Sunday. Some how they think that this makes it all right before God to go back out into the world to cheat and to lie and to lust and to steal and to go on doing all those things. They fail to understand what is involved in the worship of God and in a relationship with God. God does provide cleansing and forgiveness for sinners so they can be transformed and changed to live their lives in obedience to Him. I dare say the average

religious person thinks that he will be all right before God because of certain external religious activity, such as going to church, being baptized, being confirmed, or going to confession.

Some people get very uncomfortable and some people get very indignant when you say anything about anybody else's religious practices. But the harshest things in the Word of God are directed toward those who are pursuing religious practices contrary to the revelation God has given. Isaiah 1:10-15 says, **"Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah. 'What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?' says the Lord. 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle; and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies--I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen.'"**

Although Sodom and Gomorrah had been long gone, gone for centuries, He told the Jews who were coming to the temple at Jerusalem that their worship reminded Him of Sodom and Gomorrah. If I went and spoke in certain places of worship in this city and started out my message, *"You people of Sodom, you people of Gomorrah,"* they would say, *"Who gives you the right to say that?"* God has the right to prescribe how He will be worshiped and that is what He does. *People who worship Me will worship Me on My terms,* God says. In Proverbs 28:9 God says that even the prayer of one who will not listen to the Word of God is an abomination, **"He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination."**

The Jews had some foundation for what they were doing in the temple. The Book of Leviticus gave them instruction in offering certain sacrifices and in coming before God in a certain way. But in Isaiah God told them He despised what they were doing. Why? Because the required sacrifice was to be offered in worship by a people who believed in Him and submitted themselves to Him. It was never meant to be an external ritual as if it had some magical significance to cleanse a people who did not believe in God as their Savior. When worship degenerates, it reverts to the externals. There was nothing wrong with the animal sacrifices for Israel. But they only had validity and acceptance before God if the people believed in the revelation God gave of Himself.

That is the danger for you and me as we gather together. We come to think that true worship of God takes place when we meet in this building at the appointed time and use a certain order of worship, stand at a certain time, sit at a certain time, listen to a preacher and go home. Then we say we went to worship this morning. But those are only externals. I am not saying there is anything wrong with them in themselves; but they are only valid when they reflect a heart of worship in the worshiper who believes the revelation God has given of Himself. Today that revelation centers in His Son, Jesus Christ. A true worshiper must believe that he is a sinner for whom Jesus Christ died and must trust Him alone as Savior. Then he can worship God when believers come together corporately, and he can also worship Him on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday as well, because worship does not consist in the

externals, but it consists of the internal. The external without the internal is a mockery! It is unacceptable before God.

6. Jesus Healed the Blind and the Lame

After Jesus came into the temple and rendered judgment on the worship system of the nation, He displayed His power by healing in Matthew 21:14, **“And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.”** What a contrast! Some had been driven out of the temple, and others were welcomed by Him! The contrast is beautiful. This demonstrated the principle very clearly: God’s power was available to bring healing and cleansing, but only for those who would submit to Him. God was teaching people to worship Him, but only those people who would worship Him on His terms.

In John 4:23 Jesus talked about true worshipers. He explained that true worshipers are those who worship Him in the spirit and in truth! Then He closed verse 23 by saying that the Father seeks such to worship Him. Then Jesus said, **“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth”** (John 4:24). God desires people to worship Him, but they must worship Him on His terms! What are His terms? Worship in spirit, not in the material realm, not in the physical realm.

We are all gathered in the same physical place here today, but worship occurs in the realm of the spirit, the inner man or person. So we can all be here at the same time, go through exactly the same activity, hear the exact same thing, leave at the same time, but some have worshiped and some have not. Because worship is not a matter of going through certain physical activity; worship is a matter of submission of your spirit as a person to God, bowing down before Him in the context of His truth. Worship happens in spirit and in truth. So for worship to occur it must take place in the context of God’s truth.

The problem with Israel was that they picked out certain things and neglected others. They picked out things that had to do with the externals, and they went through those external rituals; but they forgot that God demanded of them a heart that was changed by Him.

So it is today. God requires that a person recognize himself as a sinner and recognize that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for him and he must place his faith in Christ alone as his Savior. Unless a person has come to place his faith in Jesus Christ as the One who died to pay the penalty for his sins personally, no matter what else he does, no matter what else he has done, he cannot worship God. That’s important! You cannot skip that step and still worship God in this church, or worship God in any other place, because you must worship God in the context of His truth! God says no one can come to Him but through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus says in John 14:6, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”** Paul wrote to Timothy, **“For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”** (1 Tim. 2:5).

True worship is conditioned, then, upon our submission to the truth that we must worship God in light of what He has revealed about Himself. We cannot worship on our own terms. The word used for worship literally means, *“to bow down before.”* Most people are attempting to worship

in any way but bowed down. They try to tell God how they are going to worship Him. But God says, *“The only way you can worship Me is on My terms, those I revealed in My Word.”*

7. The Reaction of the Religious Leaders

In Matthew 21, it is evident that the religious leaders were out of touch with spiritual reality. Matthew 21:15 records their reaction, **“But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ they became indignant.”** Interesting! The chief priests and scribes were the spiritual leadership of the nation. They saw how He cleansed the temple, healed the afflicted, and was the object of the praise of the children. The young people of the temple who had the perception of who this was cried out **“Hosanna,”** meaning salvation now, and **“Son of David,”** acknowledging Him as the Messiah and the Savior.

When the chief priests and scribes saw the mighty works of Christ and heard the cries of the children, **“they became indignant.”** This is a strong word meaning *“to become very angry.”* All of its uses but one in the New Testament refer to anger that is a result of sin. The one exception is when Jesus Christ Himself was angry at sin. The spiritual leaders were angry with the Son of God!

Things haven’t changed. If you share the truth of God with a spiritual leader in this city who is not a believer and you tell him that he is a lost sinner on his way to hell and that unless he believes in Jesus Christ there is no hope for him, this often stirs up anger. Religious leaders and religious people become angry with God because God says, *“It can’t be your way; it has to be My way! You must worship Me on My terms.”* That makes sinful people angry.

The religious leaders brought this to Jesus’ attention, Matthew 21:16, **“and [they] said to Him, ‘Do You hear what these children 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 for Yourself.””** That was an important response; it meant that Jesus heard what the children said and accepted it, **“Hosanna to the Son of David.”** He accepted that praise and that acclaim which was directed towards Him and which called Him the One who was bringing salvation, the One who was the Messiah.

Then Jesus said, **“have you never read;”** they had read Psalm 8:2 but they had never understood it. **“Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise for Yourself.”** Jesus said that this was what God was talking about in Psalms 8:2. He used infants and babes and gave them the insight to give praise to Him even while the adults were walking around in a stupor. The spiritual leaders were blind. What a rebuke!

And what a claim here! Note the end of the verse that Jesus applied to Himself, **“You have prepared praise for Yourself.”** Jesus said that what these children were claiming was a proper application of that verse to Him. God had prepared praise for Himself from the mouths of children! Jesus was saying that He is God! *“This praise prepared there is for Me!”* He took this verse, which was referring to God, and applied it to Himself! The praise was right, He is worthy! Jesus was telling the spiritual leaders that the children perceived His character and they did not.

This tells something about the spiritual perception of children. Praise God for children! Praise God for the ability to reach children. Children are much more responsive to the Word than adults. Some of you are here this morning because God worked through the lives of your children. They came to trust Christ through a Sunday school class or something like that; they had more perception than you did! You may have been to college and graduated, but this little 4-year-old knows who Jesus Christ is and understands matters of heaven and hell and eternity! But a 42-year-old Ph.D., Th.D., M.D., Q.R.D. or whatever, is walking around in a fog and hasn't the slightest idea what eternity is all about or what life really means.

8. Jesus Cursed the Fig Tree

In Matthew 21:17, 18 Jesus spends a night in Bethany, **“And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry.”** Mark 11 shows that Matthew reversed the order of these events. The actual chronology is, first, the Triumphal Entry, after which He returned to Bethany, then the next morning He got up and went to the city of Jerusalem, and on the way He cursed the fig tree, and then in Jerusalem He cleansed the temple. Matthew records these events topically to demonstrate judgment on the false worship of the nation and then the power of the Messiah in judging the empty profession of the nation. Matthew was showing that they not only do not worship God, but their profession of knowing anything about God was a lie.

So Christ returned to the city, and on the way to the city He was hungry. **“Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, ‘No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.’ And at once the fig tree withered”** (Matt. 21:19). You have to understand something about fig trees. The figs come on preceding or with the leaves, so the sign that the figs are ready is when you see the leaves. The presence of the leaves on this tree indicated the figs should be there. That is important because Mark said that it wasn't the time for figs; it was too early for figs to be ripe, so it was too early for there to be leaves on the trees. The point is that the tree professed something that it did not offer. There was more to it than a tree that did not have fruit.

Why did Jesus curse the fig tree? Trees have no moral responsibility, no moral accountability; but on a number of occasions in Scripture the fig tree represented the nation of Israel or individual Jews. That is the case here. This fig tree was representative of the nation of Israel, and the leaves pictured what the nation professed. What did the nation profess? They professed to know God. They professed a relationship with God. They professed to be waiting for the Messiah of God. They professed to be the people of God, and they professed to be obedient to God. But it was all a lie. There was no reality to their profession. There was no fruit.

9. The Fig Tree Pictures Israel

In two Old Testament passages, Hosea 9:10 and Joel 1:7, the fig tree was used as an analogy for Israel, and earlier in Christ's ministry He used the fig tree in a parable to picture Israel. The cursing of the fig tree was really a follow-up to this parable. In Luke 13:5, Jesus told the Jews that unless they repented they would all likewise perish. **“And He began telling this parable:**

‘A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, “Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?” And he answered and said to him, “Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down”’” (Luke 13:6-9). The fig tree pictures Israel. For three years Christ ministered to the nation of Israel. There was no fruit, no response. The nation, as a nation, rejected Him. The cursing of the fig tree pictured the time that was coming when the nation would be destroyed. In A.D. 70 that would be carried out, and that generation would suffer the destruction that Christ promised.

In Matthew 21:19 Jesus said, **“No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.”** If forever meant forever and the fig tree was the nation of Israel, did that mean God was done with the nation of Israel forever? No, that would be a conflict with the rest of Scripture. Romans 11 predicts that there is a time coming when all Israel will be saved. The point in Matthew 21 was that this generation in Israel would be destroyed. The generation which was on earth when Christ was present and was rejected, and their children, would see the coming destruction of the city and, within that generation, some 40 years or less, the destruction of that nation. So it was the nation at that time that was pictured in the withering and death of the fig tree.

The profession of the nation is a key point. People profess many things. The nation professed to be the children of God. In John 8 the religious leaders claimed that they had God as their Father and Abraham as their Father. That was their profession. Jesus said to them in John 8:42, **“If God were your Father, you would love Me.”** He told them that they had an empty profession; they claimed something that was not true because if God were their Father, they would love Him. They were similar to those that Paul described in writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:5, they had a form of godliness but they denied the power thereof. Jesus was the Son of God, the Savior and Deliverer; they rejected Him.

10. Come to God on His Terms

But things haven’t changed in 2,000 years. People today are going through the motions of religious activity, gathered in churches, but have not yet come to understand that they are sinners under condemnation and that the only hope of salvation is to recognize that Jesus, God’s Son, died on a cross to pay the penalty for their sins. He was raised from the dead because the penalty was paid, and only by placing their confidence in Him, not their works, not their church, not their religious deeds, but only in Christ and His finished work, can they have cleansing and forgiveness. You know what they’re doing? They have a form of godliness, but they deny the power because the only power for forgiveness and cleansing, the only power to make you acceptable before God and to bring you into right relationship with Him, is the power of the finished work of Jesus Christ. So everything else is an empty form. It is disassociated from that central truth! That is the standard by which every religion, every belief, must be measured!

You may have been born in a Christian family, raised in the church, a Sunday school teacher, a deacon, and an elder, you may have given money to the church, and you may plan to be buried in the church cemetery, but the only thing you’re assured of is the church cemetery! God does not

say that if you do all of those things, then you will have forgiveness of sins and enjoy eternity with Him. Those are mere externals. There is nothing wrong with being born in a Christian family, raised in a certain church, a Sunday school teacher, a deacon, and an elder; and there is nothing wrong with being buried in the church cemetery! You've got to be buried some place! The point is none of those things will get you to heaven or bring you into right relationship with God! ONLY faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ can do that!

When people try to come to God on their terms, God says, *"They're trampling My court. Their prayers are an abomination to Me. I never required that."* In Isaiah 1:18 God offered an invitation, **"Come now, and let us reason together", says the Lord; though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool."** God told the nation they couldn't come on their terms. He hated what they were doing; but He invited them to come on HIS terms. The nation professed something, but it was fruitless. Just like multitudes of religious people today. They would die for their profession, as the Jews would, but their profession was empty.

What is religion all about if it's not about forgiveness and right relation with God? Who needs religion? If there is not a heaven and if there is not a hell, then there is not a God to be dealt with; you might as well join a service organization or a country club! Religion is about a relationship with God and being acceptable to Him. It is about forgiveness, and that brings up the issue of Jesus Christ.

11. God's Power Available to Those Who Believe

In Matthew 21, Jesus made an application of this to His disciples. **"Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, 'How did the fig tree wither all at once?' And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive'"** (Matt. 21:20-22). This was the reiteration of a truth that He had taught them before in Matthew 17:20 about the power available to them.

On both of these occasions, in cleansing the temple and in cursing the fig tree, Christ's power revealed in judgment was put beside that power at work in a believer. In the temple, He judged and drove out those who were corrupting the worship of God, but then He welcomed those to come who needed healing to be made whole by Him. He cursed the fig tree, but then He offered His power to all those who would believe in Him and trust Him for it. The contrast is made between that power at work either in judgment or in cleansing; and you cannot escape the power of Christ, either at work against you or in and through you.

The analogy that was made, that I have the power available to me to do anything that God wants me to do, does not mean I have an independent use of that power, because Jesus said, **"All things you ask in prayer, believing."** He did not give me all this power so I could go out and do what I want. There is never on any occasion that I can remember in the New Testament any of the disciples casting mountains into the sea. That would be a tremendous feat to take the Mount of Olives and cast it into the sea. The Mount of Olives is not near the sea. But I never find any of

the disciples doing that. Didn't they ever want to try it out? Does that mean that no one had the faith to move that mountain so we ought to have groups of people over there working on it? The disciples were not giving any seminars on how to move mountains! What was the point? The point was not how to move a mountain. The point was to show that there is no limit to the power of God working in and through the life of a believer who is submissive to Him and functioning in His will. That's the point, so we ought not limit it more than this.

This does not give me unlimited power. I cannot come to God in prayer and ask God for what is contrary to His will and His nature and His character. What is happening in prayer? The Spirit of God is moving me as I submit to Him, burdening me to seek from God what God wants to do. So He works in and through me. Why does God even use us? Why doesn't He just skip the process? Paul said in writing to the Corinthians **"we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God"** (2 Cor. 4:7). God has chosen to use us. This is a reminder, then, that this power is available to work in and through every child of God who will trust Him and allow Him to work His purposes in and through their life.

We often get in a framework in which we begin to evaluate the work of the Lord, trying to determine how much we can do and asking how much potential we have. But I need to back up and ask, *What are the limits of the power of God in this ministry? What could God do in and through us if we make it a matter of seeking His will and praying for His power to be at work in and through us?* That is the limit of the power; that is the limit of the potential. The power of God is available to me without reserve to do the will of God; it is available to you without reserve for the accomplishing of the will of God. I cannot grasp how much potential we have.

It is encouraging to see the balance. To the unbeliever, the power of God is demonstrated in judgment. He is a God of wrath, a God of violence, if you will, a God of anger in dealing with those who stubbornly reject Him. He is the God of love and mercy and kindness, inviting those who need healing and cleansing to come to Him, offering His power to meet their every need if they will but submit to Him.

That leaves only one question to be answered. Where are you in relationship to the power of God? Do you stand opposed to Him, or have you submitted yourself to Him as your Savior? This is something we cannot do corporately as a group; it is something you must do individually. You must recognize that you are a sinner; you must recognize that Jesus Christ died for you, and you must believe in Him. The moment you do, instead of being an object of wrath and condemnation, you are one that He has welcomed, that He has healed, that He has cleansed and forgiven, that He has brought into a right relationship with Himself. One in whom all of His power resides to work in the accomplishing of His purposes in your life.