

# Recognizing God at Work

Thomas Robinson, *Jesus and the Presence of God 2*, June 7, 2015

## **Matthew 21:12-27** (ESV Adapted)

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> He said to them, "It is written, '**My house shall be called a house of prayer**' [Isa 56:7], but you make it '**a cave of brigands.**'" [Jer 7:11]

<sup>14</sup> And the **blind** and the **lame** came to him in the temple, and **he healed them**.

<sup>15</sup> 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,

<sup>16</sup> 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?'" [Psa 8:2]

<sup>17</sup> And **leaving them behind**, he went outside the city to Bethany and lodged there.

<sup>18</sup> In the morning, as he was returning into the city, he was hungry. <sup>19</sup> And when he saw **one fig tree** by the road, he went to it and found **nothing on it** but only leaves. And he said to it, "Let **fruit no longer** come from you **forever**." And the fig tree dried up immediately.

<sup>20</sup> When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree dry up immediately?"

<sup>21</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have **faith** and are not at odds with yourself, you will not only do this to the fig tree, but even if you say to **this mountain**, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. <sup>22</sup> And whatever you ask in the prayer, **believing**, you will **receive**."

<sup>23</sup> 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?**"

<sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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?' <sup>26</sup> But **if we say**, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." <sup>27</sup> 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.**"

## **Jeremiah 8:10b-13** *God's judgment on the leaders of Judah in Jeremiah's day.*

<sup>10</sup> "From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. <sup>11</sup> They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. <sup>12</sup> Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD. <sup>13</sup> When I would gather them, declares the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered."

## **Matthew 3:10** *John the Baptist warning Saducees and Pharisees, repeated by Jesus in Mt 7:19.*

<sup>10</sup> "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

## **Matthew 7:28** *People respond to Jesus after his Sermon on the Mount.*

<sup>28</sup> And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

## Invading a Temple of Symbols

Jesus enters the Jerusalem Temple, the most powerful symbol of Israel in his day. Since God gave the Tabernacle at Sinai, it symbolized God's presence and covenant with his people.

The priests who presided in the Temple were the most powerful group among the Jews.

But the Temple was in deep dispute. Ezekiel described the departure of God's glory, destruction.

Malachi foretold the return of God to his temple, but warned of its judgment. Jewish kings in 2<sup>nd</sup> cent bc usurped the role of high-priest (HP).

Essenes (Dead Sea Scrolls) rejected the corrupt temple. Herod assassinated HP families and installed his own; richly rebuilt temple.

Now Romans named the HP, Caiaphas & family, wealthy collaborators, Sadducees. John Bap. called them a '*brood of vipers*' (3:7-10). For others Temple was focus of insurrection.

People hoped for a Messiah/Son of David to purify the temple, drive out Gentiles. '*Hosanna, Son of David!*' was for many a call for Jesus to set up a new regime.

Mt describes Jesus twice entering the temple. The first preceded by the sign of the Humble King [Zech 9:9].

The second preceded by the sign of Judgment on the Fruitless Tree [Jer 8:10-13; Mic 7:1-2].

Both lead to Jesus confronting the chief priests/Sadducees, prepared for earlier in the Gospel.

Chief priests see but confuse meaning. Babies praise God better than these leaders. They sell out to the Romans, partly by letting the temple be a center of anti-Roman violence.

## A Fig Tree, a Mountain, and Faith

The story of the fig tree bothers us. It seems petulant magic. Jesus statement about faith seems to say that if we believe hard enough, we can make God do whatever we want.

It's important to see that it is a prophetic sign, like the donkeys. Both John the Baptist and Jesus condemned the Sadducees and Pharisees for not '*bearing good fruit*' [Mt 3:7-10; 7:19].

Jesus enacts the judgment of Jer. 8:10-13. Note the weighty language '*forever.*' As often happened, the disciples only partially understand the sign. Jesus draws them in.

The heart of Jesus' indictment of the chief priests is their loss of any real faith in the God whose temple they run. They have lost their identity, they're at odds with themselves.

Jesus has highlighted real faith – the centurion [Mt 8:9-10], the Canaanite woman [15:22-28] – people who recognize God's power/authority in Jesus' work and won't hold back. The Sadducees/chief priests don't know God's power [22:29]. God's house is their power base.

When Jesus says, '*this mountain,*' remember he is approaching Jerusalem, Mt. Zion. Jesus may be echoing the vision of judgment in Zech 14:4,9. The rich stones Herod built will be torn down; the temple will move to where God's Spirit works. A unexpected transformation.

## Can You Recognize God's Work when You See It?

Jesus enters the temple again, and they challenge his authority, implied in '*Son of David.*'

The question of Jesus' authority has run through his ministry. People recognized it in his teaching and healing [Mt 7:28; 9:6-8, healing a paralyzed man]. That authority implied Jesus' identity and mission. To speak, heal, forgive sins as he did put him in the role not only as a prophet but as the temple itself, the place where one met God and received forgiveness.

Jesus asks about John the Baptist. The priests could step forward and join Jesus, but they can't muster the courage. The people knew John as a prophetic messenger of God, but the priests felt the sting of his voice and did not want to change. Who was he to judge them?

But Jesus was baptized by John, anointed by the Holy Spirit, affirmed by God [Mt 3:16-17].

Affirming John affirmed Jesus! The priests embody doubt. God doesn't enter their reality.

God has come to his own house in Jesus, can we recognize him, step forward, join him?