

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: What God Wants

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Scripture:

Matthew 21:18-22

Jesus Curses a Fig Tree

¹⁸ Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. ¹⁹ Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.

²⁰ When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked.

²¹ Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. ²² If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

Transcript:

Good morning everyone. Welcome to those of you who are worshiping with us online. My name is Rich Leatherberry. I'm the missions pastor here, and I get to read this scripture from you and preach on it from Matthew 21. Context is we're backing up a week. It's holy week. It's the day after Palm Sunday, and that's where our passage begins. It goes like this. "Early in the morning as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up but found nothing on it except leaves. And he said to it, may you never bear fruit again. And immediately the tree withered. When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. How did this fig tree wither so quickly? They asked. Jesus replied, truly, I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, go throw yourself into the sea and it'll be done. If you believe you'll receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

Now, in some ways it's kind of a awkward passage because it seems like Jesus is making a make it or claim it promise, and there's a lot more going on here. But I got to say, usually I can blame Scott Dudley for passages like this. He's the one that assigns these texts, but I picked this one, so let's pray. Father, your word is good and is right and is the best. And so we pray that you would help us to understand what this really means for us this morning, and we pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, when I was in high school, I wanted a bunch of things, but mostly what I wanted to do was to meet girls. And I had so much going for me. I was shy, socially awkward, insecure. So with a mix like that, how could anything possibly go wrong? Right? Well, one afternoon I was with some friends when a girl I didn't know came up and she was talking with me. And soon I realized this really wasn't a conversation, it was an interview, and she was the one asking all the questions. Did I play guitar? No. Do you surf? No. Do you own a car? Well, define half. Own, define that. Does driving my parents' turquoise blue Chevy station wagon count. Yeah, end of conversation. End of interview.

That's when I decided I needed to increase my cool score because I was sure I was in negative numbers. So in the next couple of years, I took guitar lessons, learned how to surf, and I bought a 69 Camaro, which I turned into a hot rod. Now, all that was a lot of fun and I eventually learned that I didn't need any of those things to meet someone.

But back then I wanted to be interesting and cool. So I built my life around some things in order that I would have the cool factor that I wanted. So let me begin with this question this morning. What do you want in this season of your life, for people to like you, to raise your kids so they'll thrive and flourish, to be perceived as important or the best at what you do? Peace for your soul? To be sleeping in rather than listening to this sermon? What do you

want from your life? Now, I ask this question because whether we realize it or not, each of us is building our life around the answer to that question. You can trace everything that you do back to something that you want.

And if you want people to like you, well then you'll do things to make them happy. If you want to be the best at what you do, then you're going to study harder, work harder, and be comparing yourselves to the people around you. Back in high school, I wanted to meet girls. I learned to play guitar and surf and bought this car. Now we want different things and in different times and seasons of our lives, but we always build our lives around what we want. Now, that's why Jesus asked Matthew and John when they start following him, Jesus asks, "what do you want?" And Jesus wants to know if they're ready to build their lives around him. See, discipleship is a matter of aligning our wants, our desires, our longings around what God longs for, what God desires, what God wants. So what does God wants?

Now, God's answer is not a plan for our life. It's not a bunch of decisions that we need to make about our job or our school or about the kinds of activities that involve our kids. And all those are matter and they're important. But what God wants more than anything in this world is you. He wants to be in relationship with you. And our best life is lived in relationship with Jesus no matter what we are going through. Now, Augustine was this brilliant theologian philosopher way back when, and he was influential for a lot of Christians thought. And he wrote this about God. He said, "You created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." See, life is ultimately about intimacy with God. God, we are made by God to love God, to have a intimate relationship with God. And mixed in here, with all of our wants and desires and longings is this restlessness that just isn't satisfied until we rest in Jesus.

Only until we surrender and give our allegiance to Jesus, only until we follow him as Lord, only until we experience him intimately will we find the rest that our souls are searching for. Which brings me to the story of this fig tree. This fig tree or the fig tree was one of the most important trees in Israel. It was symbolic of prosperity and peace for all Jews throughout their history. And more practically, fig trees typically had ripe fruit on them about four months out of the year. But the fig tree in this particular story is not that at all. It was not bearing fruit and it didn't have the fruit that it was supposed to have. So Jesus curses this tree in part because it was probably diseased, and so Jesus is just making it what it is. But there's more going on here because Jesus is using this experience symbolically.

It's symbolic of God's judgment on how fruitless and useless the Jewish faith had become at that time. They'd turned what God had meant as a way to know him and love him, they'd turned that into rules and regulations and practices, and they'd neglected the most important

things like love and mercy and justice and care for the poor and witness to the nations. Like this tree, God's chosen people had become fruitless. You see, Christianity is not a set of principles that we have to follow. It's not a bunch of glorious ideas that we're required to believe. It's an intimate relationship. It's a passionate adventure where we have deep conversations with God, where we walk in his presence, where we trust in his goodness and make bold moves because we're empowered by his love. And wherever you are this morning on that journey, I just want to tell you that there is more to what you are experiencing right now. More life, more joy, more intimacy, more love, and it is a lifelong journey with Jesus.

So there are three ways that we can build our lives around what God wants that come from this text. And the first one is this. You may never have heard this point before. Let go of your withered fig trees. See, the disciples are absolutely amazed at what has just happened to this fig tree, as we would be too. There is no physical explanation for what has just happened, so they're just staring at this tree. But as they're staring at the tree, they're absolutely missing what's going on around them. They are clueless to what's just happened, and they're clueless to what Jesus wants them to understand. They just keep staring at this tree.

And some of us here this morning have withered fig trees in our lives that we're staring at, and they are keeping us from a closer, more intimate relationship with Jesus. They are the experiences in our past that hurt us and continue to hurt. There are things that happened that we just don't understand. How could that have happened? Why did that happen? And maybe some of you are going through that right now, disappointment, betrayal and injustice, death, a sudden illness, the heaviness and isolation you've been experiencing as a student. It is hard to want an intimate relationship with Jesus or even think about one when we're staring at the wilted, withered tree in our lives. We feel empty. We feel stuck, unable to move.

And I want to say I understand about withered trees and over the years, I shared some of the experiences that I had, many of those in my previous church, like holding a healing service for someone who I was really close with who'd been diagnosed with cancer. We had members of the church praying for her 24 hours a day and she still died. And then our family doctor, such a close friend, who delivered two of my kids, flying his plane back from Lake Chelan when a storm suddenly came on, it iced up his plane and it crashed and he was killed instantly. And then one of my former students in my youth group, and she was our babysitter for years. We sponsored her through confirmation, I officiated her wedding, and

her parents, who we were so close with, climbed into a small plane with her and her husband to go on a joyride. And unexpectedly, it crashed. No one survived.

Now, I didn't walk away from faith, but I sure didn't have much after that. How can you really trust Jesus when there's such pain, when what happened doesn't make much sense at all, when God could have intervened and changed the outcome but didn't? I eventually went to a counselor and I happened to be in a small group with guys who prayed for me and supported me.

But God also surprised me in that season of my life in two pretty significant ways. The first one was this. He showed me that all of my anger, all of my hurt, all of my doubt, couldn't chase God away. There were these moments and especially that happened in worship when God just met me unexpectedly refreshed me and revived me. But then second, Jesus kept reminding me of times in my life when he'd been so faithful, like when he had provided for me in miraculous ways and in such miraculous ways that the only explanation for that was Jesus. Now, those experiences, they showed me that the things that hurt me didn't mean that God had stopped being God. Nothing can do that. It just meant that I didn't understand what happened and I probably was never going to understand.

Now, I have had other withered trees in my life, mostly because this is a broken world and God didn't make this world that way. And while there's really no explanation or no good answer for why bad things happen, God loved us enough to do something about it by sending his son Jesus. And one day he will make all things right and one day there will be new heaven and new earth, and one day he will be Lord over it all. God is still God even when we don't understand. Now, those experiences which hurt, they don't hurt me nearly as much since I've stopped focusing on those wilted trees. So let me ask you, what are your withered trees this morning? And who can help you hand those over to Jesus for your own healing?

We build our lives around what God wants when we let go of our withered trees. And secondly, when we repent, we repent from the things that are preventing our relationship with Jesus from being full and fruitful. And our repentance is how we say no to the brokenness of our culture. And we say yes to Jesus and the invitation to follow him. Our culture, it pressures us to want to do what it tells us to want to do, but that comes at a pretty steep cost. Our relationship with Jesus becomes less intimate and it becomes less fruitful. So repentance, it's not an emotion. It's a decision to want what God wants. It's a realization that Jesus is telling the truth and that his way is really our best life. It's a decision that doing the same old things and behaving in the same old ways isn't going to produce that life. So to repent is to say no that way, and yes to Jesus and his way.

Now, a number of years ago, I was on an extended study leave and I was focused on revival. And it was a time in my life when I was yearning for more intimacy with Jesus. And so my prayer daily was, Jesus, please revive me. And as part of that, I attended a conference at a church in Redding. And one evening while we were worshipping, the worship leader stopped singing. And while the music was still playing, he encouraged us to just sing out words that the Holy Spirit was placing on our hearts, words that we wanted to sing to God. And well, that was kind of awkward. Where's the sheet music or where are the lyrics? So I kind of fumbled around and I don't really remember what it was that I sang, but over time, man, it just like the spirit seized me and I just started singing these words.

And as I did, I began to experience what felt like these layers, layers that had distanced me from God, I just felt them sort of falling away one by one. I felt lighter and freer as each one was being removed and God was nearer and nearer. It was beautiful. It was intimate. Well, later when I prayed about that, I just asked God to show me what all was going on there, what's going on? And God showed me that those layers were all these habits and all these choices that I was making in my life that were pushing Jesus to the margins and keeping him there. I realized I was more concerned about my job and my family and a whole myriad of other things than I was about my relationship with Jesus. And Jesus was saying, those things matter. Those are so, so important. But your fear and your worry and your desire to do great things in those areas have edged me out of your life.

And when I realized that, all I could say was, "Man, I'm so sorry because Jesus, what I want is more of you. And I will get rid of anything that keeps me from that." That's repentance. See, trusting in Jesus as Lord and Savior doesn't mean that we're automatically going to be delivered from what tempts us and from what moves us away from Jesus. Because the truth is that the battle with lust and greed and anger and pride, whatever, it still goes on inside of us.

But the good news about Jesus is that we can be honest with him about our sin. Jesus is the only God who loves sinners. All other false gods hate sinners. But Jesus loves us because he sees our sin as something alien, as something that has chained itself to us, as something that mastered us in the moment. And he's able to see right through that mess to see who God really created you to be. He removes our sin by his bloodshed on the cross. And through the intimacy of our relationship with him, he sets us free. So let me ask you this morning, what are you hiding that Jesus wants you to uncover? How have you pushed Jesus to the margins of your life?

And we build our lives around what God wants when we let go of our withered trees and when we repent. And third, when we let our faith be bold. Now when the disciples ask Jesus

how this how this miracle happened, he tells them, "If you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, go throw yourself into the sea and it'll be done. If you believe you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." Now, Jesus is about to be crucified in just a few days. And this is one of the last moments Jesus has to teach and instruct his disciples in order to prepare them for the ministry that is before them. And what he's telling them is that if they move in bold faith, they will be able to do the same kinds of things that Jesus has done. And in fact, they'll be able to do greater things.

Now, fear, fear limits our ability to move in bold faith, doesn't it? Fear of failure, fear of inadequacy, fear of rejection. Many of you experienced some fear when you were having gospel conversations. And there are many fears right now for you students who are facing so many decisions about so many things. Bold faith is not the absence of fear. It is the presence of action in the face of fear. Faith is not the confidence that God will do whatever we want him to do for us. It is the conviction that we can do what God wants done for him and we will trust him for the consequences.

Now, 10 years ago, I told you about Gene McAllister in a story that I shared in a sermon. And Gene was this professional who fell in love with Jesus and went to seminary. Then she started volunteering in the adult education here at Bell Press. She joined a ministry that eventually planned a trip to Rwanda. And during that planning, Jean heard and felt God nudging her to go to Rwanda. So at the age of 67 years old, Jean McAllister went on a short-term mission trip to Rwanda. And while she was there, one of the last nights there, she heard God say to her, you could do this. You could live here. So a year later, Gene moved to Rwanda. Well, I told you that story as an illustration of bold faith. And I told you that story because I wanted you to hear about some of the fruit that Gene's ministry was producing. Like Gene started mentoring these Rwandan leaders in their ministries and she started helping them be successful. And one of those leaders was a man named Alexis. And none of you, yeah, none of you knew-
Hallelujah.

That's right. None of you knew Alexis back then, right? But now most every one of us knows Alexis. That was 10 years ago. None of us knew him. Now, Gene returned from Rwanda seven years ago, but the fruitfulness of her ministry is still multiplying. Alexis is Pastor Alexis now, he's on staff here at Bell Press. He pastors New Hope, revival. And that community is helping us be a much better community together. You see, none of us can see now what God will do through our bold moves. We don't get to see the future, but we can move in

faith that with God, all things are possible. And you could say that Gene McAllister moves some mountains, and in fact, those mountains are still moving.

God is not unpredictable or unreliable, and he does not change. He has a single relentless stance toward us. He loves us no matter what we have done, just did or will do, he loves us. By his mercy, Jesus has restored us to right relationship with God. Through his life, death and resurrection, he has conquered sin and death. And that means there is no condemnation, not some, not a little bit, no condemnation for any of us who follow him. We are forgiven, not slightly, not a little bit, it is a permanent condition. We live for God's forgiveness. Nothing and no one is stronger than Jesus. He is the God who is present with you right here, right now. You are never alone.

Now, mark chapter 10, Jesus meets this blind man named Bartimaeus. And Jesus asks, what might seem like an obvious question, what do you want me to do for you? Which is what He is asking each of us here this morning. So this week, will you pray your response to Jesus question, what do you want him to do for you? Because what God wants is an intimate relationship with you. Our best life is built around our relationship with Jesus, where we are fully known and fully loved. And that means letting go of our withered trees. That means repenting, that means moving in bold faith. And when we do, Jesus gives us more joy, more courage, more peace, more love. And it's a relationship that Jesus is calling you into in a deeper way right now. Hallelujah.

So I'm going to pray for us, and as I pray, I'm going to give you a moment to respond what God might be asking of you in this moment. And after the service, we're going to prayer ministers. And I'd invite you to come up, talk with one of the prayer ministers about your relationship with Jesus, or what God is putting on your heart.

So Jesus, wow, we thank you that you are the God who loved us enough to do something about it. You're not content with being distant from us, but you've created us for you, to love you, to be an intimate relationship with you. So Jesus, would you show us what you are saying to us today? What's standing in our way? What's pushing you to the margins? What are those events in our lives that are keeping us frozen and withered? Jesus, just hear our prayer. Just hear what we want to say to you right now. What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Jesus, would you hear our prayer? Whether that comes to you this morning as a cry for help or Lord, just maybe confused, not sure what to ask for, or maybe we're just silent before you, you know what we need. So Jesus, show us the way. And we pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

April 16, 2023

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Describe a time in your life when Jesus did something that amazed you, like the disciples in this story?
- Where in your life would you like more faith? What would that look like and what bold steps would you like to take?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.