

The Fruit That God Wants Us To Produce

Matthew 21:23-46

Key Verse: 21:43

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

by Kevin Albright

This passage records the events of Tuesday of Jesus' Passion Week. Jesus had less than four days to live. What did Jesus do with only four days left to live? He was teaching in the temple courts. In today's passage, Jesus answers a question with a question and tells two parables. Especially we want to think about five fruits that God wants us to produce.

First, God wants the fruit of repentance. Look at verses 23-24. Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. **“By what authority are you doing these things?”** they asked. **“And who gave you this authority?”** The previous day Jesus had entered the temple courts and had driven out all who were buying and selling there. He rebuked them saying, **“It is written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”** Now it was the next morning. The Jewish chief priests and elders came challenging Jesus. They asked about his authority - by what authority he was doing these things and who gave it to him. Way back in chapter 7, after Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were amazed at Jesus' teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law (Mt 7:28-29). Jesus spoke with authority from heaven repeating words like, **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”** (10 times in Matthew's gospel) or, **“Truly I tell you...”** (79 times in the four gospels). Jesus' authority clearly came from God. But the people with position and power didn't accept Jesus' authority.

In our sinful nature, we sometimes like to question authority, whether it's police authority, presidential authority, or parental authority. Where does their authority come from? The Bible tells us that it comes from God. This is why we are commanded, **“Honor your father and your mother,”** (Ex 20:12) and, **“Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority...”** (1Pe 2:13). How about God's authority? Our sinful disobedience and rebellion toward God goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. In fact, disobedience to God was the first sin of humankind (Rom 5:19). How did Jesus answer their question

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regarding his authority? Maybe Peter wanted to interject, “Obviously, his authority comes from God, duh!” But Jesus answered their question with a question. Jesus often answered questions with a question. We should learn from Jesus. Sometimes answering a question with a question, rather than giving a quick and easy answer, is the best way to help others to open their minds and hearts to the truth. Jesus replied in verses 24-25: **“I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism--where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”**

Since they questioned Jesus’ authority, Jesus asked them about the authority of John’s baptism. The people held that John the Baptist was a prophet. But the chief priests and elders did not hold this view. Rather they questioned and rejected John just as they were doing to Jesus. So they formed a huddle to consider their options to Jesus' question: **“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’** (Hmm, not a good option.) **But if we say, ‘Of human origin’--we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.** (Another bad option.)” So they chickened out and said, **“We don't know. Final answer.”** The obvious answer was that John’s baptism came from heaven. It was God’s ministry given to John to lead people to the truth through repentance and faith in Jesus. But the religious leaders refused to believe that John was from God, for that would mean they had to repent and believe in Jesus.

This is the first fruit in our passage that clearly God wants us all to produce - the fruit of repentance. Back in chapter 3 verse 8, John had rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees saying, **“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”** Why must they repent? For the same reason we must all repent: because of sin. We all sin every day in our words, our thoughts and our actions. Sometimes our sins are active sins that we commit - something evil that we think or say or do. Sometimes our sins are sins of omission - that is, not doing the good we know that we ought to. For example, I promised my wife that I would go to her faculty dinner last night. The problem was I wasn’t done with this message, so I broke my promise. As sinners, we must repent of our sins every day. This means we must admit our sins to God and turn away from sin and evil. Ezekiel 18:30-31 says, **“I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”**

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Repentance is the way to forgiveness and a new heart. God wants us all to produce the fruit of repentance in our lives.

Second, God wants the fruit of faith. When both John and Jesus started their public ministries their message was the same: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”** (3:2; 4:17). Along with repenting, people must believe the message of the kingdom of heaven. John’s message did not stop with the kingdom of heaven. John pointed to Jesus, the one coming after him. He said, **“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire”** (Mt 3:11-12). God wants us to believe that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and Jesus will one day judge all souls. God wants us to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, God wants the fruit of obedience. The religious leaders flunked Jesus’ pop quiz with a lame reply, **“We don’t know.”** So Jesus said to them, **“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”** Jesus then told them three parables. We will consider the first two parables in this message. Let’s look at the first of these two parables in verses 28-31. **“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ ‘ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ‘Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. ‘Which of the two did what his father wanted?’ ‘The first,’ they answered.** Both sons in the parable had problems. One was outwardly rebellious, talking back to his father, **“I will not.”** In that society, such a rude remark to one’s father could result in severe discipline, even stoning to death. Fortunately, for this rebellious son, he had a change of mind and went and did what his father told him to do - to go and work in the vineyard. The other son looked and sounded humble and obedient. He said, **“I will sir! Yes, sir! Aye, aye sir! Sir!!”** But then he made many lame excuses not to do what his father told him to do. He wanted to watch TV, play video games and go out with his friends. His words were so obedient but his actions were not. His actions were rebellious. So which is better: to be outwardly rebellious but inwardly obedient, or to be outwardly obedient but inwardly rebellious? Of course, the best attitude is to be outwardly and inwardly obedient. It’s too bad that there was no third son in the parable: one who was perfect and obedient, who said, “Yes, sir,” and then went and did what his father wanted. This shows that we are all sinners, openly or

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secretly, and we all need to repent. As sinners, we must repent and believe, and obey God's commands. Jesus warned in Mt 7:21, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”** God wants more than nice words. He wants the fruit of obedience.

So who did the two sons represent? Jesus tells us in verses 31b and 32. **“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”** John showed us that the way of righteousness is to repent and believe that the kingdom of heaven is near. The way of righteousness is to believe what John said about Jesus. John the Baptist called Jesus **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”** (Jn 1:29). He also said, **“I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One”** (Jn 1:34). Paul explained that the righteousness that comes from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Rom 1:17; 3:22). The way of righteousness is to repent, turn away from sin and follow Jesus in faith and obedience.

Fourth, God wants the fruit of relationship. Jesus told yet another parable to his critics. We call it The Parable of the Tenants. It is a very disturbing parable. But it is a prophecy of exactly what would happen to Jesus. The parable foretells Israel’s history and Jesus’ own rejection and death in verses 33-39: 33 **“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”**

What a horrible story! But this actually happened. It happened with the people of Israel. Isaiah chapter 5 says that Israel is the vineyard (Isa 5:7). God gave Israel so many blessings and privileges. God also gave them his guidance through the words of his prophets. But they rejected God’s servants again and again. For

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example, the prophet Jeremiah was opposed and beaten (Jer 20:2). In the prophet Elijah's time, many prophets of the LORD were killed by Queen Jezebel, the wicked wife of King Ahab (1Ki 18:4). The prophet Zechariah son of Jehoiada was stoned to death for rebuking King Joash (2Chr 24:21). Israel time and again forsook the Lord their God and rejected his servants.

Rejecting God was not only Israel's problem. It has been the universal spiritual problem of all people of all time. Quoting Old Testament passages, Paul wrote in Romans 3:10-12, **"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."** Isaiah prophesied, **"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."** (Isa 53:6) Jesus foretold the Father's extreme love. God's extreme love is expressed in verse 37. **"Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said."** God the Father sent Jesus to show the world his perfect love. Apostle John wrote, **"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."** (1Jn 4:10)

Because of our sins, Jesus went all the way to the cross. Jesus did so out of perfect love for God and for us. It was to reconcile us to God. 1 Peter 3:18 says, **"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."** To bring you to God. To bring me to God. To bring sinners to God. For this, Christ died. Paul declared the same amazing love in Romans 5:8, **"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** God wants us to have a right relationship with him. Our sins destroyed our relationship with God. But through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, we are healed (1Pe 2:24). We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ! (Rom 5:1) By God's great mercy and grace, we are united with Christ as a branch is united to a vine, and in this relationship we can bear much fruit. Apart from Jesus we can do nothing (Jn 15:5).

Jesus' parable sounded worse than a horror movie. How could anyone treat the owner's son like that? Jesus asked, **"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"** They knew the answer. **"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."** Such thankful tenants produce good fruit from their right relationship with the owner.

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Fifth, God wants the fruit of participation. Jesus knew he would be rejected and killed. But he knew something more. Jesus said to them, **“Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”** Jesus was quoting from Psalm 118, a psalm of joy and praise. Jesus foresaw his death. But he also foresaw his resurrection. Jesus would be exalted. The rejected Stone would become the Cornerstone, the most important stone in God's household. Jesus is our foundation upon which we stand (Eph 2:20). Peter, whom Jesus nicknamed “Rock,” liked to talk about this cornerstone passage. He declared in Acts 4:11, **“Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’”** Peter understood that Jesus is the Rock who will either save us or crush us in judgment. He wrote in 1 Peter 2:4-8, **“As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and, ‘A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the message--which is also what they were destined for.”**

Jesus ended with a strong warning and admonishment in verses 43-44, **“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”**

God is not in a losing business. God always has people who will produce fruit for his kingdom. Who are these people? They are those who love and obey Jesus. They are those who repent and believe the gospel. They are those who have a relationship with him based on his grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. These are the ones who produce the good fruit of the kingdom of God.

After hearing these parables, the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that Jesus was talking about them. Still, they did not repent. Rather, they looked for a way to arrest Jesus. But they were afraid of the crowd since the people held that Jesus was a prophet. They lived in fear of people, rather than faith in God. They were blinded by their pride and self-righteousness. As long as they held on to their pride, they could not bear the fruits of repentance, faith, obedience, relationship

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and participation. These are the fruits that God wants us to produce. Producing these fruits does not depend on our desire or effort, but on God's mercy (Rom 9:16). May God have mercy on each of us that we may repent of our sins daily, believe the gospel of Jesus, and obey his will. May God enable us to produce the fruit of a right relationship with him and of participation in his fruitful kingdom.