

Let's keep our Bibles open at Matthew 21. We've come to a major moment in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples have completed the 120-mile journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. And Jesus knows what awaits him there. Three times—in Matthew 16, 17, and 20—Jesus told his disciples that in Jerusalem he would suffer, die, and rise again. And now, the time has come. Jesus likely entered Jerusalem on Sunday, March 29, 33 AD. And by Friday, April 3, he will be dead.¹ That means, the final 8 chapters of Matthew—over ¼ of the book—cover the final week of Jesus's life.

Mark, Luke, and John each give a similar amount of space to Jesus's final week, which has led some to say the four Gospels are essentially passion narratives with extended introductions. That may be overstating it a bit, but what we're about to see is certainly very significant. So, we'll take our time with these 8 chapters, just as we've done with the whole book. And this morning, the first thing I want you to see is that Jesus is intentionally stepping into the spotlight as he makes his way into Jerusalem. This is a shift in his behavior. Up to this point, we've seen Jesus traveling through small towns and remote areas. We've seen him leave crowds and retreat to desolate places by himself. We've even seen him command people not to speak about his power and his identity.

In Matthew 8, Jesus healed a leper and then, *Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone..."* (Matthew 8:4).

In Matthew 9, Jesus healed two blind men, *And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, "See that no one knows about it"* (Matthew 9:30).

In Matthew 12, we read that *many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known* (Matthew 12:15-16).

Finally, in Matthew 16, after Peter correctly identified the truth: that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah) the Son of the living God... we read, *Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ* (Matthew 16:20).

Why? Why wouldn't Jesus want them to tell everyone? Because they did not yet understand the true nature of his mission. Jesus did not come to save his people from Roman oppression and establish an earthly kingdom, which is what most people in Jesus's day expected the Messiah to do. Jesus came to save his people from their sins and advance the kingdom of heaven, which required his death and his resurrection. And now, Jesus knows that time has come. So, no more secrets. It's time for Jesus to tell everyone who he is. In our passage today, Jesus reveals himself as our humble king and our holy God. I want you to see how he makes these truths known, and how they fuel our worship. First, consider...

1. Jesus, Our Humble King

Let's pick it up in verses 1-2: *Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you..."* (Matthew 21:1-2).

Again, the journey to Jerusalem is complete. Bethphage is a suburb on the outskirts of the city, just a mile or so away. Jesus stops here and sends two of his disciples into the village on an errand. In verses 2-3 he tells them, go into the village *"...and immediately you will find a donkey*

¹ Köstenberger and Taylor, *The Final Days of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once" (Matthew 21:2-3).

Commentators debate whether this is an example of Jesus demonstrating divine knowledge—miraculously aware that there will be a donkey and a colt tied up for him to take—or something he has prearranged. It doesn't matter either way. The point is, Jesus is taking the initiative. He wants this donkey and this colt because of the message this will send as he enters the city. Look at verses 4-5. Matthew says, *This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden'"* (Matthew 21:4-5).

I've titled our series in Matthew, "The Promise Fulfilled," because throughout this whole book, Matthew is determined to show us that every promise of God finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And in our passage today, Matthew will continue to drive that point home with several biblical quotations and allusions.

I'm not sure if you got to see the fireworks last weekend since so many shows were rained out. But in any good firework show, you have a steady stream of explosions, all leading up to the grand finale with a large cluster of fireworks going off at once. Well, throughout Matthew there's been a steady stream of Old Testament connections, but the grand finale is starting—and in our passage today we'll see a cluster of quotations and allusions.

It all begins with this verse from the book of Zechariah. Zechariah lived during some dark days in Israel, prophesying around 520 B.C. Several decades earlier, in 586 B.C., the land of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem was defeated, the temple was destroyed, and the people of God were sent into exile. In 538 B.C., they were allowed to return to their homeland, and Zechariah was among those who went back to Jerusalem. But when he and the other exiles returned, they found much of their city ravaged, reduced to ruin and rubble. With their walls torn down they lacked security. Their defenses were weak, and their enemies were strong. On top of all this, they had to live under a great burden of guilt... knowing that their exile, and the pain that came along with it, was ultimately a result of their rebellion against the Lord.

But into this darkness of sorrow, fear, and shame, God spoke a promise: A king is coming! And Zechariah describes him as a righteous king, and a powerful king, and a humble king. He won't ride into Jerusalem on a war-horse, to conquer through military might. He will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, to serve his people and to bring them peace. And now, in a moment 500 years in the making, when Jesus told his disciples to get the donkey so that he could ride into the city, he is revealing himself as that long-awaited humble king. Jesus is heading into Jerusalem to save a people trapped in the darkness of sorrow, fear, and shame, by laying down his life and bringing them into peace with God. He had every right to be served, but in humility he chose to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. For you and for me! This is why he is worthy of our trust. And this is why he is worthy of our worship.

In 1738, Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon called "The Excellency of Christ." In that message, Edwards reflects on several qualities which typically stand in contrast to one another but come together in beautiful harmony in Jesus's life and ministry. Edwards called these qualities "admirable conjunctions of excellencies." And one of his examples is the way Christ's majesty pairs with his meekness. Here's how Edwards describes it...

I've modernized the English just a bit, but he says, "Christ is mightier than the noise of many

waters, even than the mighty waves of the sea... at his presence the earth quakes and the hills melt... he sits in heaven and all the inhabitants of earth are as grasshoppers to him... he is the King of kings, and Lord of lords... he is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and of whose dominion there is no end. And yet he was the most marvelous example of meekness, and humility."

And as his first example of Christ's humility, Edwards points to this story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. When you look at the powerful people in this world, and see that they are so often marked by pride, don't you long for someone who possesses both authority and humility? Majesty and meekness? Well, that's what we see in Jesus! And Edwards is right, it's excellent. Jesus is our humble king—worthy of our praise—which is precisely what the crowd does next. Look at verses 6-8: *The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road* (Matthew 21:6-8).

As Jesus begins the 1-mile journey from Bethphage into Jerusalem, people line the road with cloaks and branches, honoring the path of this humble king. Verse 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!"* (Matthew 21:9). The word "Hosanna" comes from a Hebrew word which means, "Save us!" By the 1st century, it had become a common cry for blessing and even a declaration of praise. And notice where the people are directing their praise: to the Son of David. To the long-awaited king. To Jesus. It all creates quite the scene. So, we read in verses 10-11: *And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee"* (Matthew 21:10-11).

The whole city of Jerusalem knows he has arrived. They hear the praise: Hosanna to the Son of David! And they ask, *"Who is this?"* Who are you praising? Who are you declaring king? And the people respond, *"the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."* How will the city respond? Not well. In just a few days, the Governor Pilate will bring Jesus before them and say, "Behold your King!" And they will cry, "Away with him! Crucify him!" Riding on a donkey was not his ultimate act of humility. This king will humble himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. But before it happens, Jesus also wants to make it clear that he is our holy God.

2. Jesus, Our Holy God

Sometimes people say that Jesus was a prophet, a popular teacher, even a miracle worker, but that he is not equal with the Father, and that he never claimed to be God. Well, that's not what we see here. Jesus knows who he is, he knows his divine status, and he's not afraid to show it. Look at verses 12-13: *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. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers"* (Matthew 21:12-13).

This event took place the week of the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Many people have traveled to the city—some from great distances—to celebrate and sacrifice at the temple. And since it would be inconvenient, if not impossible, for everyone to bring their own sacrificial animals with them, merchants in Jerusalem set up tables and booths with animals for sale. There was nothing wrong with this in principle. In fact, something like this could be quite

beneficial. But Jesus has at least two problems which he identifies with two Old Testament quotations. (The grand finale of OT quotes and allusions continues!) The first is from Isaiah 56:7, where God says, *"My house shall be called a house of prayer."* The temple was to be a place of peace, set apart from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, for reverent worship. But bringing the sale of animals and the exchange of currency into the temple precinct itself was a massive disruption. Can you imagine if the Arlington Heights Farmers Market took place in the back of our sanctuary every week when we were trying to worship? That would be distracting and irreverent. That's one issue.

The second issue is the motive of those selling animals and exchanging money. Jesus quotes Jeremiah 7:11 which describes the way some have turned God's temple into a den of robbers. Greedy men have infiltrated God's house. They are working for selfish gain. Overcharging like the convenient shops at the airport. And this infuriates Jesus. So, he flips over their tables and drives them out. In all of this, he looks a lot like the Old Testament prophets. But he is so much more! Let's keep reading. Look at verse 14. Matthew tells us, *And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them* (Matthew 21:14).

In Jesus's day, the blind and the lame were considered unclean, and therefore, restricted from access into the temple. But Jesus is welcoming them in and making them well. So, think about it: Jesus arrives in Jerusalem with no official temple position. He's not a priest. But he waltzes in like he owns the place, driving some people out and welcoming others in. Imagine this happening in Buckingham Palace. Someone barges in and starts driving people out, opening the doors to others. Who can do that? Who has any right to behave that way at the palace? Only the king. And who can do this? Who has any right to behave that way in the temple? Only God.

Is that who Jesus is? Watch what happens next. Verse 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...* (Matthew 21:15). Why are they indignant? Because Jesus is taking over. And because people are praising him! You can't praise a man! Praise is reserved for God alone. Right, Jesus? Verse 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'?"* (Matthew 21:16).

Don't miss this. The chief priests and the scribes say, "Jesus, do you hear what they're saying? They're praising *you* in God's temple!" And Jesus says, "Yes, haven't you read Psalm 8?" This is very significant. Psalm 8:2 speaks about praise coming out of the mouths of babies and infants. It's a picture of the weak praising the strong. And who is the strong one receiving praise? Psalm 8 begins with these words, *"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"* Psalm 8 is a psalm of praise to God! And when these children cry out in praise to Jesus, he says, "Yep, that's what Psalm 8 said would happen." Because Jesus is God! Our holy God, worthy of our praise. That's what this scene is all about.

We need to take this to heart. If we want to worship God, to praise him rightly, we must worship his Son. Philippians 2 tells us that *God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* If we're not bowing before Jesus, and praising Jesus, we're not glorifying God.

Let's think about what that means for our times of corporate worship. After all, the temple was a place designed for corporate worship, but many people were missing the point. Some were there for selfish gain, so Jesus drove them out. Others were there with a commitment to God's law, and to the temple traditions, but they gave no regard to God's Son. Church, we don't want to make either mistake. We know that tragically, there are those who use church as a means for selfish gain, pastors who are only in it for the money or the influence, parishioners who only come for what they can get from others, not what they can give. It happens. And we don't want anything to do with it.

But perhaps our more common danger is that of the chief priests and the scribes. They were there for God, and his Word, and the traditions of their religious community. Which are all commendable things. But they missed the most essential thing. They failed to worship God's Son! And it's possible to come to church out of a general belief in God, an interest in learning his Word, and a commitment to religious traditions. But if your heart doesn't well-up with worship to Jesus, if your lips don't declare his praise, you're missing the point. And in the end, that will lead to disaster, which is what Jesus foreshadows in the final scene of our passage today.

Look at verses 17-19: *And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. 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* (Matthew 21:17-19). If you keep reading, in verses 20-22, you'll see that withering fig tree becomes another lesson from Jesus on the power of faith and prayer. The disciples want to know how this happened, and Jesus reminds them that anything can happen for those who believe. He doesn't mean anything will happen, but he reminds them that nothing is impossible for God. So, they should pray boldly and confidently.

But here's what I want you to see: The disciples wonder *how* this happened. A better question is *why* this happened. Why did Jesus do this? Was he just angry and lashing out at the fruitless tree? No. Coming on the heels of the last story, it's a picture of what will happen to fruitless people, people who visit the temple (or come to church) but bear no real fruit of authentic worship. As D.A. Carson says, it's "a warning against hypocritical piety." That kind of life only ends in destruction, under God's curse, like the one Jesus casts upon this tree.

Conclusion

So, friend, here's the question, the most important question you will ever answer: How will you respond to Jesus? He came into this world as our humble king. Full of majesty and full of meekness. He had every right to be served, but he chose to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. He died upon a cross to pay for our sins, he rose again to deliver us from death, and therefore God has highly exalted him.

Will you be indifferent? Will you be indignant like the chief priests and the scribes? Or will you worship Jesus Christ, our holy God? Will you cry out in praise, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Save me!" Do this, and you will not wither away... you will live forever.