

Intro

Anger. Jesus throwing tables around in the temple. What should we think about it? Is anger always wrong? Can my anger be pleasing to God? Is it possible that my anger is justified, but my anger is being managed in sinful ways? Am I using today's passage to justify sinful anger?

Prayer. Promises from God that he'll do the impossible. Promises that whatever we ask for will be received. Is prayer a blank check? Is God a genie? What about submission to God's will? Should we expect anything to come from our prayers? If so, what?

With questions like these in mind, let's turn to Matthew 21.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Point 1: Righteous anger is Godward (21:12-16)

An angered Messiah

From Mark (11:1-25) we learn that Jesus entered on a donkey on Sunday (Palm Sunday). It was the next day, Monday, that Jesus caused a stir in the temple.

- 1) money-changers – those who exchanged currency
- 2) those who sold pigeons

Doves and pigeons were standard offerings of the poor in Leviticus (Lev 1:14; 5:7; 12:8).

- 3) all who sold and bought in the temple

Visitors were coming from out of town. These services were helpful because animals had to be spotless and traveling with one's animal sacrifices left room for the possibility that animals could become unclean during travel. Sacrifices could be purchased on site.

The problem was the location of the sales. A place of worship had been transformed into a flea market. The religious authorities should never have allowed this.

Jesus uses Scripture to justify his actions:

He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." – 21:13

Jesus cites Isaiah 56:7. Isaiah 56 speaks of Gentiles who will be true worshippers and pray in the temple. The temple exists for prayer, not financial gain. The temple's intended purpose, prayer, was neglected. A "*den of robbers*" = some unspecified corruption.

Righteous anger

This is righteous anger. Anger at sin. God's law was violated. Godward.

An angered establishment

Healings of the blind and the lame are accompanied with praise. Again doing what the Messiah would do. Praise provokes a hostile religious establishment.

Children (under the age of puberty) are crying out, *"Hosanna to the Son of David."* "Son of David" = calling Jesus the promised Messiah of the Old Testament.

Chief priests

The chief priests were composed of former high priests and their families. The high priest was chosen from this group. They were the heads of priestly orders and were in charge of large groups of priests. They were comprised primarily of Sadducees.

Scribes

The scribes were the learned scholars and teachers of Scripture. They interpreted the law, taught doctrine, and applied Scripture. They were guardians of the Jewish oral tradition. They also judged legal cases. They were composed primarily of Pharisees.

Indignant = angry.

Wonderful things = Jesus' healings. Good things. Remarkable acts that should have inspired wonder, not anger. The chief priests and scribes should have been praising too.

Psalm 8:2

The religious establishment insinuates Jesus should be outraged that he's being praised:

"Do you hear what these are saying?" – 21:16

Jesus uses Scripture to justify their praise:

And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, "' Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?" – 21:16

Jesus insinuates they're ignorant of Scripture. Shouldn't you know this? Jesus appeals to Psalm 8:2, a Psalm of praise that begins and ends with *"how majestic is your name in all the earth!"* The point seems to be that God created (prepared) praise in the mouths of young children in days gone by and he's doing it again. God is in the business producing praise. And that's what he's doing right now. God is the one causing these children to praise me. This is what God does. Shouldn't you know this?

Jesus asserts his divine authority in three ways:

- 1) He has authority over temple practices
- 2) He has authority over sickness and disease
- 3) He has the right to be praised, and only God is worthy of praise

Application: righteous anger

Jesus was angry for good reasons. The religious authorities were angry for sinful reasons. Anger can be justified or sinful.

I'm not saying Jesus' outburst justifies any outburst we might have. I'm not saying we can say hurtful things, destroy property, etc. and justify it with this passage. I have in mind the person who tells it like it is in a

demeaning, hurtful, aggressive, threatening way. The person who gets even and calls it righteous anger. The bully who steps on people and calls it righteous anger. Anger that becomes destructive is sinful! Reasonable anger can lead to sin.

Like when we won't forgive. When someone sins against us = justifiable anger, but we won't let it go, our justifiable anger ends in sin.

Jesus was deliberate and intentional. Not a fit of irrational rage. Anger grounded in truth. Anger directed at sin. He wasn't trying to wound. He was confronting sin. Correcting misuse of the temple. That's **constructive anger!**

Righteous anger is directed at sin, Godward. We care because God's law is violated. When we're angered by sin, something's right in our heart. When we're indifferent to sin, something's wrong in our heart. Child abuse, fraud, etc. should anger us.

Illustrations of misuse of the passage

The child who attacks someone who said something mean or destroyed their stuff and calls it righteous anger.

The friend or spouse who utters abusive words, whether a fit of rage or intent to harm, and calls it righteous anger.

I've witnessed people justifying their sin with this passage!

My anger that a child attacked a sibling and carrying out corrective discipline = good use of the passage. Constructive. Godward.

Selfish anger

Our anger is sinful when our motives are selfish. Ask yourself. Am I angry because my plan, my expectations, my preferences, my convenience, my pleasure, my desires got messed with? This is self-centered anger. God is absent from the picture. Like our responses to weather or traffic.

Final Illustrations

Anger that my kid is embarrassing me or making my life inconvenient (bad)...anger that my kid is mistreating a sibling, developing habits of laziness or rebellion (good)

Church discipline...vindictive leader that feels threatened (bad) or a group of elders who are concerned for the sinner's faith, the spiritual health of the body, the church's reputation in the community (good)...that's constructive anger. Godward.

Application: when the local church forgets its function

The temple existed for prayer. The money-changers and sellers turned it into a business. We must beware lest PCC loses its function.

Why does the local church exist?

"We exist to glorify God by building a community that is growing in Christlikeness and making new disciples." That's from Matthew 28:19-20. Does the way we function as a community reflect a church that exists for maturity and mission? Give me some feedback!

Point 2: Engage in mission, trusting God to do the impossible (21:17-22)

Explanation

Having slept in Bethany (21:17), Jesus returns to Jerusalem in the morning. He's hungry and spots a fig tree. Leaves on the tree suggests figs would be available. He finds nothing and curses the tree:

"May no fruit ever come from you again!" – 21:19

Is the point Jesus had a temper? He's irritable like you and me? No, the tree is an object lesson about Israel's failure to bear fruit and the judgment that was coming. Jesus has rejected the religious establishment and judgment is certain, but hope remains for the believing remnant. Overturning tables foreshadows 70 AD when Rome invaded and the temple was destroyed.

I'm guessing you find Jesus' promise confusing.

"Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." – 21:21-22

In my experience, passages like this are either misused or explained away, but we're rarely told what this actually means.

Prosperity preachers

Some twist these promises to mean that Christians will have perfect health and wealth if our faith is strong enough. Meaning Christians with strong faith don't experience trials. You can find plenty of preachers on TV that take this promise this way. When I was a new Christian and lacked discernment I watched a major Christian network and many preachers went in this direction. Some preachers on the network were evangelical, but most were prosperity preachers who taught a different gospel, false teachers. Using these promises to teach something Jesus didn't mean.

If someone's discouraged because they've been taught something like this and they're doubting God because their prayers aren't being granted, take what you learn today and help them see they're trusting in something God hasn't promised.

How do I know their conclusions are wrong? Because they contradict numerous teachings in Scripture. Like when Jesus appointed Paul to be an apostle (Acts 9:15), he said, *"For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name"* (Acts 9:16). Paul instructed Timothy to take wine for his ailments (1 Tim 5:23), not to have stronger faith. James instructed believers to view trials positively, because tests of our faith produce character (Jas 1:2-4). And James rebuked the wealthy in the congregation for mistreating the poor (Jas 2:1-7). Poverty wasn't a sign of God's displeasure.

What it doesn't mean

- Jesus is trying to fire up our faith here. When we explain away the promise it's like pouring water on a fire. Jesus is pouring gasoline on the fire. Promises intend to move us to believe in the impossible.

Because of prosperity preachers, it's common to explain this passage away without teaching what it actually means for us. Evangelical preachers correctly teach things like God isn't a genie and our prayers are subject to God's will (1 John 5:14-15). Like when Paul prayed three times for God to remove his thorn in the flesh,

but God's answer was no, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor 12:8-9). These are true. The prosperity preachers are heretics. But what is Jesus communicating to us?

The interpretation

To get a better idea we need to look for clues in the immediate context. How can we best ensure we are understanding the Bible correctly? By both careful attention to the near context and by taking into consideration everything the Bible says elsewhere about the matter.

- 1) Jesus' promises are a response to the disciples' amazement.
 - Their question: "*How did the fig tree wither at once*" (21:20)? Jesus' promises are an answer to this question.
- 2) But there's a condition, an obstacle, to doing marvelous works: doubt.
 - "*if you have faith and do not doubt...if you have faith*" (21:21-22)
 - Doubt speaks of indecision within us, uncertainty, hesitation, wavering, being "*driven and tossed by the wind*" (Jas 1:6).
- 3) Jesus's statement about throwing a mountain into the sea is a picture of doing what's impossible, not a literal promise of control over God's creation
 - Our mission isn't moving Mount Katahdin. Or cursing fig trees.
- 4) When Jesus speaks there are assumptions he shares with his disciples that he doesn't have to spell out.
 - They already know God isn't a genie. They know prayer isn't a blank check. They know God doesn't transfer control to us. They know answered prayer is contingent on God's will. These are things that don't need to be said.
- 5) Jesus isn't trying to suppress faith. He's trying to encourage faith. He's trying to discourage doubt.
- 6) The promises are made to a group, not to individuals.
 - Every "you" in verses 21-22 is plural (more than one) not singular.
- 7) The promise in 21:21 isn't connected to prayer.
 - If you trust me without indecision and uncertainty you will do the impossible.
 - The promise of answered prayer is tacked on to this initial promise.

Conclusion

Jesus is saying to his disciples that if his disciples trust him without hesitation or indecision (e.g., is God able? does God care?), the impossible will be done through them, as a group of disciples. As a church.

And he's saying that if we pray, as a group, as a church, without uncertainty or indecision (e.g., is God able? is God good?), we will receive from God.

Personal health or finances aren't what's in mind here. Those may be secondary applications. But what Jesus has in mind is the mission he's been preparing them for. The mission he'll send them on after the resurrection. Jesus is saying, if you trust in me, your mission will yield impossible results.

Corporate application

What does this mean for Palermo Christian Church? We aren't the apostles. We don't have the same authority. The works God prepared beforehand for them to do (Eph 2:10) aren't the same works God has prepared for us to do. But God does have a mission and purpose for Palermo Christian Church today. God has works for us to do which he's prepared beforehand.

Unwavering faith fuels mission. The way we come to Christ is the way we do mission! When we came to Christ we trusted God's promises. We believed God was holy. We believed we sinned against this holy God. We understood the cross, that Jesus died as a substitute for sins we committed. And we trusted God to save us on the basis of Jesus' merits, not our own. And we repented of our sins. Trusting Jesus we learned from him and followed him. **The faith that trusted Jesus for personal salvation needs to trust Jesus for empowerment in evangelism.**

Evangelism is a fight for faith. Like fights against temptation. The fight to believe God cares. The fight to trust the Bible and reject the culture's lies. **We need to evangelize out of faith, not guilt!**

Wavering faith kills mission. Does God really care about Palermo Christian Church? Can God really save my friend Can God really overcome hardened hearts in this town? Can God really overcome the lies in our culture?

Unwavering faith that goes into our community, does good, lives honorably, and boldly engages in gospel conversations. Because we trust God is able to do the impossible through us. What I'm saying is faith in God stirs mission. There's no guarantee God will do amazing things among us. But I do know that if we waver, if we give in to discouragement, if we neglect duty in evangelism, amazing things surely will not happen. God won't hold us accountable for results. That's his job. But God will hold us accountable for our response to his commands to proclaim the gospel and make wise use of conversations with non-Christians (Matt 28:19-20; Col 4:5-6).

God empowers the church do the impossible is the takeaway!

Non-Christian

Christianity is Godward. We oppose sin because we trust that what God says is true. That his ways lead to human flourishing. We engage in evangelism (proselytizing) because we trust Jesus will build his church. Christianity is a religion of trust in a personal God. A God who forgives our rebellion. A God who walks with us as we plod through life. How should you respond to Jesus? Trust him. Follow him.

Conclusion

Righteous anger is Godward. Am I angry because God was dishonored? **Engage in mission, trusting God to do the impossible.** Trust Jesus to help you in evangelism like you trust him to save you.