

The Reason for the Cross

Series: Come to the Cross

Matthew 21:1-46

For the next few weeks as we prepare for Easter Sunday, we are going to take a break from 1 John. Instead we are going to turn our Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew. I will be bringing a series of messages about the Cross of Christ. There is an awesome power about the cross of Christ. In John 12:32, Jesus said this about the kind of death He was going to die, **“But I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”**

It is at the cross that sinners are convicted; the arrogant are humbled; the hardened are broken, the skeptics convinced, the weak strengthened and the repentant forgiven. Max Lucado in his book *No Wonder They Call Him Savior*, says of the cross:

The cross rests on the time line of history like a compelling diamond. Its tragedy summons all sufferers. Its absurdity attracts all cynics. It's hope lures all searchers... My, what a piece of wood! History has idolized it and despised it; gold plated it and burned it; worn it and trashed it. History has done everything to it but ignore it. That's the one option that the cross does not offer. No one can ignore it! You can't ignore a piece of lumber that suspends the greatest claim in history. A crucified carpenter claiming that he is God on earth.

Paul wrote about the impact of the cross in 1 Cor 1:18 where he said, **“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it IS the power of God...”**

I believe this with all of my heart: if we will take seriously the message of the cross – God is going to impact us with His power. The power of the cross is this—by it God changes lives. I pray that we are not the same people on April 4, 2010 that we are today. I really believe if we will get a glimpse of what God has done for us on the cross, it will change us forever.

I pray that the preaching the cross over the next 6 weeks will bring some people to turn from their sin and selfishness and to turn to Jesus for salvation. And for those of us who are already saved, I pray that the cross of Christ will ignite our love for Jesus Christ like never before; that we would become—real, alive, sold out, transformed, light bearing, soul saving, hope giving, life changing, prayer believing, Bible toting, scripture quoting, truth sharing, sin hating, God loving, Jesus lifting, Satan crushing—believers ... AND the reason I am so excited about this series is not because I am confident in the power of my preaching—BUT because I am confident in the message of the cross. It is the power of God.

Did you know that the crucifixion was no accident? The cross was always in the heart of God. Before the world was ever created God had it in His heart to give His one and only Son to die for us. Revelation 13:8 speaks of Jesus as the Lamb of God, **“slain from the foundation of the world.”** Jesus predicted how He would die many times and there are many events that led up to what we call Good Friday—the day Jesus gave His life for us. But today we are going to start

less than a week before the cross. We begin on Sunday—five days before Jesus was nailed to the cross. And as the time draws closer to Friday, we begin to see the reason for the cross.

The reason for the cross is that people have REJECTED God, His love, His authority and His Son.

Today we will look at some events beginning on Palm Sunday that demonstrate men's rejection of Jesus; events that set the stage for the cross.

I am thankful to Pastor Coy Wylie for an excellent outline that I will draw from as we look at Matthew 21. We are going to see the reason for the cross as we look at the PRESENTATION of the Messiah, the PURIFYING of the temple, the PROPHECY of the fig tree, and the PARABLES of rejection.

I. The Presentation of the Messiah (vv.1-11).

This passage is traditionally known as The Triumphal Entry or the Coronation of Christ. It shows us that for a very brief time, the people of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus as their Messiah. When England's Queen Victoria was coronated in 1838, she wore a crown encrusted with giant rubies and sapphires surrounding a 309-carat diamond. Her royal scepter was capped with a diamond cut from the Star of Africa weighing 516½ carats. Jesus' coronation was much simpler, much less regal but much, much more important.

- 21:1 **Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples,**
2 **saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me.**
3 **"And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them."**
4 **All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:**
5 **"Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.'"**
6 **So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them.**

Jesus deliberately set these events into motion. He was not swept along by chance by the crowd. His face was set to do the preordained will of the Father. He sent two disciples ahead to find a donkey and her colt.

Matthew says that the donkey was needed **"that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet."** The specific prophet was Zechariah who foretold the event 500 years earlier (Zech.9:9). He quotes that prophecy in verse 5.

You would think that a king should enter the city on a white charger but the prophet foretold he would come in a **"lowly"** manner riding a **"donkey,"** a **"beast of burden"** (NASV).

Jesus did not come as a mighty conqueror but a gentle Savior, not a militant general but a sacrificial Lamb. He came in poverty, not wealth; meekness, not grandeur; not to destroy Israel's enemies but to save humanity. Palm Sunday was really a time of humiliation, not glorification.

- 7 They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them.
- 8 And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road.
- 9 Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' Hosanna in the highest!"

Verse 8 tells us that there were multitudes or great crowds followed Jesus on His way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They didn't understand that they were in the company of God's Passover Lamb.

The "**very great multitude**" encircled Jesus and began to "**spread their clothes on the road**" This was an old custom (cf. 2 Kgs.9:13) that symbolized respect and submission for a king. Others "**cut down branches**" from "**palm trees**" (Jn.12:13) and "**spread them on the road.**" The palm branches were a symbol of joy.

They shouted "**Hosanna**," a Hebrew word meaning "save now." They wanted Jesus to save their nation from the Roman oppressors. They called Him "**Son of David**" the Blessed One who "**comes in the name of the Lord**," a Messianic title. They quoted the Conqueror's Psalm (118). They were literally saying, "**Save us now, oh great Messiah.**" And although they were speaking the truth and fulfilling Scripture, I think most of them had no idea what they were doing or why.

- 10 And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?"
- 11 So the multitudes said, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee."

After this grand event "**all the city was moved**" or stirred up. Though the people who came with Jesus had praised Him as the Messiah, the "**Son of David**," now the people of Jerusalem asked themselves "**Who is this?**" Notice here they stopped calling Him their Messiah and referred to Him as "**the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.**"

In just five days the people of this same city would say to Pilate in Lk.19:14, "**We will not have this man to reign over us.**" They wanted a Messiah on their terms, not God's.

Many people today want God on their own terms. They want a Jesus who will fulfill all their wishes. However, like the multitude at the Triumphal Entry, they turn from and reject Him when He does not deliver what they expect.

The Triumphal Entry is the first sign that Israel had begun to reject her own Messiah.

Look at the next one:

II. The Purifying of the Temple (vv.12-16).

12 Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

13 And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"

14 Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.

15 But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant

16 and 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 babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise'?"

Verse 12 is now the next day. Jesus having spend the night back in Bethany according to the Gospel of Mark. On Monday Jesus came directly to "**the temple of God.**"

There were many injustices in Israel but according to Jesus one of the greatest centered on their worship. Worship is always a focal point with God. If our worship is wrong, nothing else will be right.

Jesus began His public ministry at the Passover celebration in the same way He ended it. According to **John 2:13-17**, once before Jesus had driven out those who "**bought and sold**" with a "**whip of cords.**" Now, three years later the market was just as corrupt as ever.

The area in question was called "the Court of the Gentiles." The priests had set up lucrative businesses here. Any animal offered as a sacrifice had to be approved by the priests. They typically only approved the animals they sold themselves. The price was often 10 times the regular market value. A person could not give an offering in just any currency. Money had to be converted to the temple currency. Therefore official "**moneychangers**" would convert a pilgrim's cash for a 25% fee. It is no wonder Jesus referred to this place as in v.13 as "**a den of thieves.**"

Without hesitation, Jesus "**drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple.**" He "**overturned the tables of the moneychangers and those who sold doves.**" It was a madhouse! Animals were fleeing, doves were flying, coins spilled onto the pavement! Mark adds further "**He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple**" (Mk.11:16).

In the midst of the melee, our Lord shouted, "**My Father's house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.**"

Mark adds the full text of Is.56:7 "**a house of prayer for all the nations**" (11:17). The "court of the Gentiles" was supposed to be a place where anyone, even non-Jews could learn of the one true God. Yet the priests and the religious leaders had made it into a crooked marketplace.

Even while the greedy merchants fled and those who used this place as a short-cut for carrying their wares found another way, the needy people came to Jesus.

"The blind and the lame came to Him in the temple and He healed them."

Jesus receives the poor in spirit, those who know they are in deep need.

But not everyone will come to Jesus to be healed. The "**chief priests and scribes**" were not physically blind nor lame. They "**saw the wonderful things that He did**" in the court and walked "**out in the temple**" only to hear the joyful voices of children crying out "**Hosanna to the Son of David!**"

Their reaction to all this shows their spiritual disability. When they saw and heard, "**They were indignant.**" They snorted and threatened because they could do nothing else. They were amazed at His power to heal, transfixed by His ability to command the crowds and furious that He ignored them.

Finally, they approached Jesus directly and asked with contempt, "**Do You hear what these are saying?**" They were asking, "*Don't you hear that they are proclaiming that you are the Messiah? Why don't you stop them?*"

Jesus said, "**Yes.**" Of course He had heard them. Their song was literally music to His ears. He asked these highly educated men, "**have you never read...**" then quoted Ps.8:2, "**Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise.**"

Even if the religious leaders wouldn't praise Jesus, her children would. Maybe that is why Jesus said, "**Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.**" Jesus will be praised. Lk.19:40 records that Jesus said during the Triumphal Entry, "**I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.**"

III. The Prophecy of the Fig Tree (vv.17-22).

17 **Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there.**

18 **Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.**

19 **And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away.**

20 **And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?"**

21 **So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done.**

22 **"And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."**

A. Because of Fruitlessness the Fig Tree was Cursed (vv.17-18).

Then Jesus does something rather strange. He spoke a tree and said, "**Let no fruit grow on you ever again.**" With that divine curse "**immediately the fig tree withered away.**" It was a symbol of what would happen to Israel.

B. Because of Faithlessness Israel was Rejected (vv.19-22).

1. Jesus made a visual illustration of unbelieving Israel. They looked impressive in their religious efforts. There were plenty of beautiful leaves. Yet there was no genuine spiritual fruit and this was evident in their rejection of their Messiah. Like the **"fig tree"** Israel would wither away.

2. Have you ever seen that principle displayed? Sometimes it happens in a local church. There are churches that have a pretense of spiritual life, they look good on the outside, but have no real commitment to Christ. They had no real spiritual fruit. They are in danger of withering too. Let's commit to never let that happen here!

3. The tree puzzled the disciples. They **"marveled"** and asked Jesus, **"How did the fig tree wither away so soon."** Mark tells us they asked this the next morning. They had seen trees slowly wither away taking months to die, but nothing like this.

4. In v.20, Jesus speaks of **"faith"** that can move a **"mountain."** Like the *Parable of the Mustard Seed*, even a little faith in God can cause great things to happen.

5. Jesus said **"Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."** Prayer is the key. Jesus just said, **"My house shall be called a house of prayer."** When we pray **"according to His will"** we know that our prayers are heard and answered (1 Jn.5:14-15).

6. Unlike Israel, let us not merely attempt to look and sound spiritual but let us exercise faith through prayer and produce genuine fruit, not just religious leaves.

During these last days, Israel utterly rejected Jesus as her Messiah. Jesus later said in Mt.23:37, **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"**

Jesus tells two parables of rejection.

IV. The Parable of the Two Sons (21:23-32).

A. A Question of Authority (vv.23-27).

23 Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, **"By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"**

24 But Jesus answered and said to them, **"I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things:**

25 **"The baptism of John; where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'**

26 **"But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet."**

27 So they answered Jesus and said, **"We do not know."** And He said to them, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."**

Embarrassed, these religious leaders answered, "**We do not know.**" Jesus responded by refusing to answer their question as well. He would not give them any more ammunition to use against Him. In fact, He would ignore them from that point on.

The Lord said in Gen.6:3, "**My Spirit shall not strive with man forever.**" The Scripture clearly teaches that when men willfully continually reject the light of truth, God removes what light they do have. There is a limit to His grace. Let's read.

B. A Question of Belief (vv.28-32).

28 **"But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.'**

29 **"He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went.**

30 **"Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go.**

31 **"Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.**

32 **"For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.**

Jesus then proposes a question by means of a short simple parable. Jesus stresses that doing is more important than saying. Jesus indicted them because they claimed to be looking for their Messiah but rejected Him even as He stood before them. He said, "**Tax collectors and harlots** [the scum of their society] **enter the kingdom of God before you.**"

He said, "**John came in the way of righteousness and you did not believe Him.**" These men who were the students of God's Word and the keepers of God's temple would not see "**the kingdom of God**" because of unbelief. Their self-righteous pride kept them from faith.

Even though the religious leaders heard the message and saw the changed lives of societies worst sinners, they would not "**relent and believe.**" They rejected Him.

V. The Parable of the Vineyard (21:33-46).

33 **"Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country.**

34 **"Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit.**

35 **"And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another.**

36 **"Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them.**

37 "Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'
 38 "But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'
 39 "So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.
 40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?"
 41 They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."
 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'?
 43 "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.
 44 "And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder."
 45 Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them.
 46 But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.

The point of the parable is plain, isn't it? God is the **"landowner."** The beautiful **"vineyard"** was Israel with its laws, covenants, provision and protection. The **"vinedressers"** are the Jewish leaders. The **"servants"** are the prophets who were killed and abused. The **"son"** is Jesus who was about to die at their hands.

The parable meant that the **"kingdom"** was to be **"taken"** from Israel and given to another **"nation."**

In v.44, Jesus said, **"Whoever falls on this stone will be broken."** The gospel is offensive and our pride must be **"broken"** to receive it (cf. Rom.9:33; 1 Pet.2:8). However, judgment will fall on the one who rejects Christ and **"grind him to powder."**

Finally, the leaders got the point, **"they perceived that He was speaking of them."** They wanted to **"lay hands on Him"** or arrest Him but **"feared the multitude"** who believed He was **"a prophet."**

The reason for the cross is that people have REJECTED God, His love, His authority and His Son.

Governor Nash stepped out of his office and, for a moment, out of his role as Governor of Ohio. He tucked his large, black Bible under his arm and made his way down the hallway of the State Penitentiary, in Columbus, Ohio. As a Christian, his heart burned with desire to share Christ with a certain young man waiting on "death row."

Guilty of first-degree murder of his girlfriend, the condemned one sat in his cell, just hours away from his appointment with the electric chair. Upon

seeing the elderly man with a dark suit and Bible under his arm, he thought him to be a minister or the prison chaplain. His anger boiled over and he cursed as he sent the man away.

A guard standing nearby could hardly believe his eyes. "You fool," he said, "don't you know who that was?" "A preacher, I guess," was the reply. "No, that was the Governor, the only one who could set you free, and you sent him away." The young man died a few hours later, guilty not only of murder, but of sending away his only hope for freedom and life.

Have you sent away Jesus, your only hope?

You see it is in the heart of God to accept us and to forgive us and to love us. But in the heart of man there is a rebellion against God and a rejection of His love and His savior. Only by the grace of God can any of us come by faith to receive Jesus—rather than reject Him. Mankind is sinful. The same city that hailed Jesus as messiah on Sunday, rejected Him and crucified Him on Friday. That is what was truly in their hearts—sin, ugly sin, murderous sin, sin that destroys and tears us away from the God who loves us and gave Himself for us.

That is the reason for the cross. People have rebelled against God, and rejected His Son. But God's grace is greater than our sin. The cross was in the heart of God all along. The cross was necessary because of our sin. God did it because of His love.

The city of Jerusalem rejecting Jesus and crucified Him. What will you do with Him?