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## BETTER THAN A VENDING MACHINE Matthew 21

Recently some passengers were beginning the boarding process for a Delta airlines flight when they received some unwelcome news. Their flight would be delayed. The news got worse. The delay wasn't going to be minutes, it was going to be hours. It turned out to be a good 5 hour delay. What they didn't know was that the First Officer for this flight was one Michael Townsend, a truly outstanding pilot. One of his duties was to do the preflight walk around. One of the flight crew always goes out on the tarmac and does a visual inspection of the aircraft before it ever goes anywhere. This is a practice that goes back to the earliest days of aviation when pilots were always on the lookout for potential problems with their airplanes. It almost seems redundant, since now there are lots of people around a modern airliner. But it is not. In this instance as Michael was inspecting the airplane he discovered a significant hole in the tail. It appeared the plane had been struck by lightning which blew a hole in the tail. Somehow, no one had noticed the hole.

Michael reported the problem to the captain, who immediately consulted the maintenance people. They determined that flying that plane in its existing condition would be a really bad idea. The flight would eventually continue, but a new plane would have to be flown in. The passengers weren't happy. They weren't getting an on time trouble free flight. But do you suppose any of them would have said, "Oh, just fly the plane anyway?" I doubt it. Delta gave them what they really wanted, which was a safe flight. Hopefully they went away saying, "Well, it was inconvenient, but it's nice to know that someone was looking out for me."

Wouldn't it be nice if we could have that perspective? Wouldn't it be great if we could know that someone is looking out for us, whether we get what we want in the short run or not. It turns out there is. Let's find out about that by looking at Matthew 21.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW JESUS ARRIVED

The chapter opens with the familiar story of Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem for the last time, known as the Triumphal Entry. This is the climax of his life. He has been building toward this moment all his life, but especially during his years of

ministry. As he entered many people shouted “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Hosanna meant “Lord, save us.” It was associated with the coming of Messiah. Add to that calling Jesus the Son of David, and you have a proclamation by a large crowd that Jesus was in fact, the promised and long awaited Messiah.

### JESUS CLEANED HOUSE

Jesus followed that up by ejecting merchants out of the temple area. The area had become home to businesses that sold approved sacrificial animals to pilgrims coming to worship, as well as financial traders who exchanged the various foreign currencies for the coin that was required for paying the temple tax that was levied on all Jewish males. Those businesses began as a service to the many people who came to Jerusalem for feasts and to offer sacrifices, but they had turned into thriving commercial enterprises. The point was not to help people worship, but to make money off of them. It was all about making a profit, and some of the religious establishment got a cut of the profits. This was an established and accepted institution that people never gave a second thought. But Jesus was very clear that it represented something that was part of the problem of the religious establishment of Israel. They were all about themselves. They wanted to be respected and important and look holier than other people, and they wanted to be rich. They used religion to get it. Religion actually was a way for them to gain selfish, this world focused ends. That was also true of the temple area businesses. So Jesus made a statement that this was not acceptable to God. God is to be worshiped, not used for selfish purposes. Jesus made that statement by kicking the money makers out.

### JESUS WITHERED A TREE

The next thing that happened was pretty weird. Jesus cursed a fig tree and it died right away. This seems like a strange little incident that is curious at best, but I am actually going to focus on it. So we will return to spend time looking at this story shortly.

### JESUS' AUTHORITY WAS QUESTIONED

Jesus' act of throwing all the businesses out of the temple was like swatting a hornets' nest. It seriously upset a lot of people. Some would have thought it just made life more inconvenient for them. They thought it was unnecessary and unwarranted. But others, especially the religious leaders, were furious. That act had the potential both of exposing their motives and of hitting them where it hurt, right in the wallet. So they questioned his authority. Who gave him the right to do what he had done? Who made him king of the temple? Jesus didn't answer their

question directly or try to argue with them. He did an end run around them. He asked, “You want to talk about authority? All right, let’s talk about authority. Where did John the Baptist get his authority?” Boom! He had them. If they said, “Well, it came from God because he surely was a prophet,” then they knew Jesus would say, “Then why didn’t you listen to him and obey him?” But if they said, “He didn’t have any authority, he was purely acting on his own,” they would have seriously lost credibility with the masses, because they all loved John and highly respected him. So they said, “We don’t know.” Jesus knew that really meant, “We won’t answer your question because it boxes us into a corner.” So he said, “Fine, if you won’t answer my question about authority, then I don’t feel like I need to answer yours.” Bam, conversation over.

### JESUS LAUNCHED A PARABOLIC ATTACK

The theme that runs throughout this chapter is Jesus’ identity. Who is he and what authority does he have? It starts with the proclamation that he is the Messiah, the Son of David. Then it asserts he has authority over what happens at the temple. However, the religious leaders rejected him and denied that he had any authority at all. So in the last part of the chapter Jesus told 2 parables. The first depicts 2 sons. One tells his dad he’s not going to do what he asked, but then he changes his mind and obeys his dad. The other says, “Sure, Dad, I’ll do whatever you say,” but then doesn’t follow through. Jesus made it clear the religious leaders were the second son, because they talked a good game but didn’t really obey God. They didn’t really bow to his authority. Then Jesus told a story about an absentee vineyard owner who kept sending agents to collect rent from the guys who were leasing the land from him. They kept abusing them and sending them away empty handed. Finally he sends his son, and the tenants don’t just abuse him, they kill him. So the vineyard owner returns and rains down holy hell on those awful people. Everyone knew exactly who Jesus was talking about. He was saying the religious leaders had never listened to God’s prophets, John included, and now they were about to kill God’s Son. Jesus made it quite clear who he was, as well as revealing that the religious leaders were directly and violently rebelling against God.

### JESUS DID A WEIRD THING

Jesus was staying in a suburb of Jerusalem, so the next day as he was heading back into town he came across a fig tree. He was hungry but when he arrived at the tree he saw there was no fruit on it. So he said, “May you never bear fruit again.” The tree then withered and died. This was a mystifying event that sounds unworthy of Jesus. He’s hungry but the tree doesn’t have any figs so he kills it? That sounds bad, doesn’t it? If you don’t instantly give me what I want then you die. Yikes.

One scholar I read dismissed the incident as a myth because he said it was unworthy of Jesus.

Mark's account of this incident adds a detail that makes it even worse. Mark 11:13 says the tree didn't have any figs because "it was not the season for figs." This incident took place in either late March or early April. Fig season can in some cases begin in June, but in others runs from August to October. So Jesus cursed a fig tree for not having any ripe figs when it wasn't fig season!

That makes no sense. Back in April I almost wrote a letter to ESPN complaining that they weren't broadcasting any college football games. Yes, they had a couple of school's spring games on, but those aren't real games, they're practices. I was going to threaten them with no longer watching them because they weren't broadcasting college football games.

Do you think I really would do that? I hope not. I'd have to be an idiot to do that. They didn't have college football games on because it wasn't college football season. It would be absurd to expect them to show college football games when there aren't any being played. Wouldn't it be absurd to be upset with a tree that wasn't producing fruit because that fruit is not in season?

So at first glance this story makes Jesus sound selfish, demanding, unreasonable and even irrational. But he was none of those things. Notice that none of his disciples expressed dismay or disapproval of his action, only surprise. This should cause us to suspect Jesus was something other than extremely hangry and taking it out on that tree..

This incident was a visual parable. There were several symbols for the nation of Israel that were used in the Bible. Sometimes it was represented as a vine or a vineyard. But one of the common ones was a fig tree. Jesus was using that tree to represent Israel. His issue wasn't that he needed some figs to eat and he was ticked off because that tree didn't have ripe figs. The issue was that Israel was not bearing fruit. It was spiritually barren. The cursing and withering of the tree were pictures of what was coming for Israel. While many had been proclaiming Jesus to be Messiah when he came into Jerusalem it was obvious that the leadership of the nation was rejecting him. In short order the rest of the nation was going to follow suit. He was making a visible statement here that their rejection of him was going to be disastrous for them.

This was the same message Jesus communicated in the final parable in this chapter. Look at verses 43-45. Jesus said, “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. When the chief priests and Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables they knew he was talking about them.”

So this incident did three things. First, it confirmed Jesus’ identity and authority. By having that tree wither and die merely as a result of Jesus saying, “May you never bear fruit again” Jesus showed again power over nature. Second this incident indicted Israel for her lack of faith. Finally, it predicted that the outcome for unbelieving Israel would be deadly.

#### JESUS MADE A CONFUSING PROMISE

The disciples were understandably astounded by what they had seen with their own eyes. Jesus says, “Die tree!” and it shrivels up and dies. So they ask him, “How did this happen?” Jesus responded by talking about faith. This incident took place because Israel did not have faith. They did not believe in their own Messiah. But there is something for the disciples to learn as well. They have seen Jesus heal people of all kinds of diseases. They have seen him raise a man from a tomb he’d been in for 4 days. They have seen him feed thousands of people using one Happy Meal. They have seen him change water into wine. They have seen him stop a powerful storm simply by saying, “Calm down.” They have seen him walk on the surface of a lake. Now when this tree dies they ask, “How did this happen? How is it possible?”

Don’t you want to ask, “Where have you guys been? Have you been paying attention?” Jesus said to them a few chapters back that they had little faith. This is another example of that. They should have been thinking when Jesus cursed the tree, “Uh oh. That tree is toast. It’s a goner.” They shouldn’t have been surprised at all. After the tree withered they should have been saying, “I saw that coming from a mile away.”

As he is talking about faith Jesus makes this astounding promise. “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. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” This is the promise we’ve been waiting for. It’s the one everyone wants to be true. All you need is

enough faith, and if you have it God will give you anything you ask for. He says literally if you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

So if I believe I can ask for anything and God will give it to me? He said whatever, right? Whatever means anything. My mother has mineral rights to some land in Oklahoma. There’s petroleum under that land. I’ve been praying that someone will put wells on that land and start pumping out gas and oil, and that millions of dollars start flowing into the bank accounts of the Myatt family. That’s not so hard. God can make that happen with no sweat at all. Seems to me these words of Jesus are the guarantee that it’s going to happen. Come on Lord, we’ve been praying for quite a while. It’s time to show up!

I’m still praying that the Chargers are a total flop in Los Angeles and that the NFL realizes what a huge mistake it made when it abandoned San Diego, so it brings a team here. I’ll take any team as long as it’s not owned by a Spanos. I believe, I believe, I believe. It’s going to happen, right?

This isn’t the only place Jesus said this. In John 14:14 he said, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” There’s that word anything. Ask for anything in his name and he’ll do it. Oh boy, we’re getting a new NFL team in town!

When researching this passage I came across one pastor who said that the only thing that limits our receiving is our lack of faith. He talked about what this meant for his family at the time. The family had grown and become too big for their dining room table. So he began asking God for a new, bigger dining room table. That should be totally easy, right? He had to go on a trip, and while he was away he would ask his family when he called them, “Did anything special happen today?” He was believing, expecting to hear that a new table had miraculously arrived at their house.

This seems like a terrific promise, but it has an enormous downside. That downside is most of the time it doesn’t work. Every person who has ever tried to claim this promise has at some point been disappointed when he or she did not get the thing they prayed for. The guy who prayed for a dining room table did not get it. So here was his conclusion. “The fact that no big dining room table is there at my house forces me to conclude that I didn’t really believe.” That’s exactly right. If the promise is if you believe you absolutely will get whatever you ask for in prayer

and then you don't get it, there are only two possible alternatives. Either the promise isn't true, or you didn't have enough faith.

An awful lot of people have tried to claim it, and knew that they had total faith that God would answer, only they didn't get what they asked for. That causes them to conclude that it isn't true. That's a fine way to destroy one's faith, and that has happened a lot. This view of this promise leaves us with the certainty that at some point we will not get what we prayed for and believed and therefore will either have a combination of big disappointment and guilt over the fact that we didn't have enough faith, or we will quit believing altogether. At some point the conclusion will be that the promise didn't work for us either because there was something wrong with us or there is something wrong with the promise. In other words, God is not to be trusted.

If we give it even a little bit of thought to this common understanding of what Jesus was saying in this passage we will see that it cannot be correct. There are at least two big problems with it. The first problem is *logical*. It creates impossibilities. Let's envision two young men who are convinced they love the same young woman. Both of them believe this is the woman they should marry and spend the rest of their lives with. Both of them believe in Jesus, and so they both claim this promise. They both pray that God will give them what they want most, which is that this young lady will love them and choose to marry them. How does God answer the prayers of both of these men? It is not possible for God to give them both what they ask because there is only one young lady.

You might say that God could come up with some creative answer in which he somehow answers their prayers by having some other young lady enter the picture and have one of the guys realize to his surprise that he actually wants this lady more than the one he thought he wanted. But there are going to be situations where two people are praying for things that are the direct opposite of each other. I have mentioned before that I had this revelation one day when I was in college. I was playing baseball. It was my freshman year and I wasn't getting a lot of chances to play. One day I got in the game and I knew that I really needed to make the most of my opportunity. I needed to get some hits. As I stepped into the batter's box when my turn to bat came I silently prayed. I asked God, "Lord, I really need to succeed here, so please let me get a base hit here." I realize this was not a prayer of significant importance. In fact, it was trivial. But let's review what Jesus said. "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." My prayer, as small as it was, would be included in "whatever." As I took my stance and looked out at

the pitcher this thought came into my mind. “What if the pitcher is a believer in Jesus and he’s praying, ‘Lord, I really need to strike this guy out. Please let me strike him out’”? How could God answer those two prayers? He couldn’t. There would be no way he could do so. Inevitably if we understand Jesus to be giving us a guarantee that if we believe this situation is going to come about. What does God do? Answer the prayer of the person who believed the most? Give it to the one who deserves it the most? But that is the opposite of grace.

The second problem is bigger. It is *theological*. The Bible says that God is sovereign. Ephesians 1:11 says he is working out everything according to his plan. Psalm 135:6 says, “The Lord does whatever pleases him in the heavens and on the earth.” It doesn’t say the Lord does whatever pleases us. This understanding of Jesus’ promise turns God into a genie or a vending machine. Our wish is his command. Prayer is better than shopping on the Internet because God will never tell us that something we want to order from him is out of stock or no longer available.

In his commentary on the gospel of *John*, theologian John Whitacre wrote of John 14:14, which has a similar promise, “This verse has been understood by some Christians to be a blanket promise that Jesus will give them whatever they want. Such idolatry of the self is the very opposite of eternal life.” He’s exactly right. This is idolatry of the self. This is putting myself on the throne and making God the one who serves me. What a contrast with Jesus. Listen to how he lived. In John 8:28 he said, “I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the Father has taught me.” In John 12:50 he said, “Whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.” Jesus operated by doing and saying only what the Father told him. Philippians 2:8 said of him, “Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Let’s imagine Jesus applying this promise to himself the night before he was executed. Assume he prayed, “Father, please let this cup pass from me,” and he had faith. The Father answers the prayer, he doesn’t go to the cross, and we are left without hope forever.

How are we to understand what Jesus said here? First, we have to pay attention to the clues Jesus gives us to his intent. He says we could say to a mountain, “Go, throw yourself into the sea, and it will be done.” What would be the point of asking a mountain to throw itself in the sea? Was Jesus envisioning some developer who bought a tract of land on a mountain and who saw an opportunity to make a lot of



money if that land was just flat? If the mountain were gone and the land was flat he could build on it he could make a bundle.

I'm thinking that probably wasn't what Jesus had in mind. In fact, the image was an extreme one that no one would have wanted to do. He simply picked an image that was graphic and vivid, but extreme, to drive home his point. In other words, he was using a figure of speech to rivet his listeners' attention and drive home his point.

He said something that would have made it even more startling to his audience. In the text it is clear that Jesus did not say we could tell "a" mountain to throw itself in the sea, meaning any old mountain we might choose. The text specifically said we could say that to "this" mountain. He was not saying, pick a mountain, any mountain. Which mountain was he talking about? Notice verse 18 says all of this happened "as Jesus was on his way back to the city." He was walking into Jerusalem. Listen to Psalm 48:1. "Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain." Jerusalem was known as Mount Zion. It was the mountain of God. Just as God had met Moses on a mountain in the wilderness to communicate his covenant to him, so God met with his people on a mountain, Mount Zion, to continue his covenant.

That is the mountain Jesus referred to when he spoke of "this mountain." So would any godly person ever want to command the mountain of God to throw itself into the sea? Absolutely not. To quote Vizzini in the movie *The Princess Bride*, that's inconceivable. Jesus was using hyperbole here and his readers knew it. Think of the most ridiculous thing you could ever imagine asking for in faith, and it is not impossible for God to accomplish. That is Jesus' point. Nothing is beyond God. The promise was not that God is like a vending machine where you put your coin in and push the button for the item you want and out it comes. The point is that nothing is too big or too small for God.

We must interpret statements like this in the larger context of Scripture, which makes it clear that God is not the Divine Vending Machine. We must not try to order him around to give us whatever we ask. That is worshiping ourselves and it is taking the position that we know more than our omniscient, wise, good, loving God what is for the best. If you've been a believer for any time at all you probably recall several prayers that you are now very glad that he did not answer. While we know what we want, and we think we know what is best, in fact we don't know what we need most. One of the worst promises in the world would be that God

would give us every single thing we ask for. It would be worse than the parent of a 2 year old giving that child everything he or she asked for. They don't know what is best for them, so parents have to give them what they need, not what they want.

Recently Laurie and I were taking care of our granddaughters. I do not have a big fondness for sweets. But I have a few curious weaknesses for some ridiculous ones. One of them is for those Mother's circus animal cookies, the pink and white ones that are coated with sugar. Well we had some on hand once and in a moment of insanity we gave a couple to Ella. She absolutely loved them. She calls them Yampa cookies, after the old guy who has a weakness for them. So when we were in the car she wanted some, but we told her we didn't have any. She started saying, "Go store, get Yampa cookies." We caved in. Then the problem began. She wanted an unlimited supply of Yampa cookies. Forget vegetables, fruit, cheese, meat or bread for dinner. She wanted more Yampa cookies. Should we have given her what she asked? Not if we loved her. So we didn't.

We think we're God, knowing what is good and what is not, when the reality is compared to God, we're 2 year olds. We are just as unwise in our desires and as petulant when we don't get what we think we want as they are. So we must pray and have faith, but we also must always do what 1 Peter 5:6 commands, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand." James 4:7 says, "Submit yourselves, then to God." As Jesus submitted always to the Father in everything, so must we, including when we pray.

## APPLICATION

### HAVE FAITH IN GOD

Jesus wanted to teach his disciples and us that for God nothing is impossible. He wanted his followers to see that faith has incredible power. We can ask God to act in every situation and know that nothing is beyond his ability to answer.

He wants us to never be in despair, to believe that because God is with us there is always hope. Philippians 4:6 urges us to never be anxious about anything, but to give our requests to God. That means that there is nothing either too big or too small for us to ask God about. He wants us first and foremost to be people of faith, people who are confident that our God cares enough about us to act in the tiny details of life, and is powerful enough to handle the biggest issues of life, even if it is as huge as something absurd like throwing Mount Zion into the sea.

This chapter is about Jesus' authority and about having faith in him. It is about knowing that nothing can limit him, and about trusting him with everything in our lives. It's about trusting him absolutely and not wavering.

### SUBMIT YOURSELF TO GOD

It is helpful for us to remember that in John 14:14 when Jesus made another promise similar to this one he said, "You may ask for anything in my name, and I will do it." The words "in my name" are important. We are to ask in his name. But what does that mean? We tend to think it means we end our prayer, "In Jesus' name, Amen." That is sort of like the divine sign off, a holy way of saying, "over and out." But it means something way more important than that.

When Jesus tells us to pray in his name he is tell us to pray as he would pray. Unfortunately there are many things that happen in life that we want to pray about, and we don't know exactly what Jesus would pray. So what does it mean to pray as Jesus would pray? It is specifically expressed in his prayers the night before his arrest. In Matthew 26:39 he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." We always pray, "yet not my will, but as you will." In other words, we don't make demands of God, we make requests, and we submit to God.

I had hernia surgery this past week. I didn't like some of the things that were done. First, there was the gown they made me wear in the hospital. I had to walk down a public hall to the restroom 3 times wearing that gown that doesn't really cover the subject. Why would anyone make a gown like that? The medical people are really smart. Isn't there someone smart enough to make a better gown? Maybe put Velcro on the back so you could actually keep it closed. Hospitals are missing an opportunity to make some money I think. When you check in they could say, "You will get the standard hospital gown of humiliation, or for a small fee I can upgrade you to the deluxe gown with Velcro that actually closes in the back." I wasn't happy with that gown. I had an inguinal hernia on my left side, down low in the groin. The doctor made sure that he fixed the correct area by making a mark on my skin where the hernia was. Then a steady stream of people came in to all make sure he had marked the area to be repaired so there would be no mistake. My problem was that they were all women. It was the day before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and it was like they had a parade. Let's line up all the female employees on the ward so they will come in and make sure this guy has a mark on his groin on the left side. This despite the fact that the doctor had said he would check my right side also because it was possible it might need repair. So it didn't matter where he started. I wasn't

happy about that either. Then, after I had been there for more than 2 hours and they'd been telling me all was ready and I'd be going to the OR any minute, instead the surgeon came in and informed me there was a problem. He was going to do the surgery robotically, and there was a problem with the robot. Gary Martin 2 days before had said, "What if some guy in China hacks the robot? That could be bad." Well, that wasn't the problem, but he said they couldn't use it and they were going to have to reschedule my surgery. I looked at Laurie and said, "Oh, no, the Myatt travel curse is spreading to more than just travel." We waited for the nurse to come in and disconnect the IV. About 10 minutes later the doctor came in and said, "The robot is fixed, we can go ahead." Just what I wanted, a wonky, maybe fixed robot messing around inside my body. I tell you all this because things weren't always the way I wished. But I had to trust the surgeon and the people at the hospital, believing they were capable and were looking out for my well being. I had to let them do it their way, and in the end, they did what was needed. And we have to do the same with God. We make our requests, then trust him. He is capable and is looking out for our well being, so we can leave it in his hands.

We pray about everything. If it causes you stress, if you're thinking about it at all, don't worry about it, but pray. We pray confidently, knowing that God can and will handle anything and everything, knowing that he hears us and he can deal with all of it. But we don't worship at the altar of the Divine Vending Machine who exists to serve our whims and wishes. We worship at the altar of Almighty God. We humble ourselves before him, bowing to his goodness, holiness, wisdom, sovereignty and love, knowing that he will always do what is best for us. So we trust that even if he doesn't give us the Yampa cookies we are so desperate to have, he is loving us and working out what is for our goo



