

“You’re Fired!”

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[0:00] Have you ever been fired from a job? You don't have to put up your hands. But why? If you were fired ever from a job, or maybe you know someone in your office who was fired, why? What was the reason? You know, sometimes there are not good reasons for being fired. Sometimes bosses are just temperamental and they don't like someone. I heard of someone who was fired for not stapling papers the right way.

But there are also legitimate reasons why people get fired. Sometimes firing someone is necessary. Sometimes the boss has to do it, even if they don't want to, because the person's not doing their job. And so when it becomes habitual that a person is just slacking off and they're not pulling their weight and they're not doing the job that they are employed to do, then they need to be dismissed and replaced with someone else.

And when that happens, it is actually good, not just for the company, but for everyone else who works in that workplace, that the person who's not been pulling their weight is replaced.

As we come to this passage, the second half of Matthew 21, that's exactly what we are going to see. We're going to see a firing and a replacement happening. Last week, you'll remember, we saw a very important part of the Gospel of Matthew, and that was Jesus entering into the city of Jerusalem and publicly declaring through his fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy who he is.

He is. That he showed now that the mask has come off. It's no longer a secret. He is the king that God has sent into this world to bring about God's kingdom, to bring about a new regime, to bring God's rule into this world and into our lives.

[1:44] And we saw that as him bringing this new regime into Jerusalem. But, now what we realize, and for a number of chapters, there's a big conflict because there's an old regime that still exists in Jerusalem.

And what we see, the first thing Jesus does now that is in Jerusalem is that he gives notice to the old regime that their employment is going to be terminated.

In other words, what we're reading here this morning is that the big boss has come from head office, and he is going to make some real changes now.

And what we're going to see as we look at this passage is that for those who work for God today, for those who are in his kingdom today, this is going to be an encouragement that this boss takes his kingdom seriously, but it's also, I think, going to be a big warning to us who work for him today.

And so let's have a look at what we see. And we're going to look at, firstly, the firing, and then we're going to look at the replacement. So firstly, we're going to see that Jesus comes into Jerusalem and he fires the temple authorities.

[3:01] That's where he goes. He goes straight to those who are working in the temple, and he issues notice. But why? We've got to understand why he does this, why he fires this old regime, the people in Jerusalem working in the temple.

And in a word, what we discover is he fires them for misappropriation. Now, that's a big word. I don't know if you know what that means. But it's often used in companies today that people are, especially in South Africa, not just companies, but government, sadly.

People are fired, and actually, all too often they're not. But they're misappropriating company funds or government funds or taxpayer money.

And what that means is that they are taking what they have been given by the company or the government to do for a particular purpose. But instead of doing it for the purpose it was given, they're using it for themselves.

They're using it for what they want to use it for. That is called misappropriation. And we see it, we know, all too well in South Africa. But that is what we see in Jerusalem as well.

[4 : 08] The temple authorities were using what God had given them in the temple, and they were using it for what they thought was best.

Because we've got to understand, this temple wasn't their idea. This temple that was a central part of Judaism and Jerusalem in the Old Testament wasn't something that the Jews just came up with themselves.

God gave it to them. We see that in the Old Testament, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers. We see that God has given them this gift of the temple, and He gave it to them for a specific job in the world that He gave them to do.

And that is why Jesus is angry. We don't often see Jesus angry, but this is righteous anger. He's angry as He comes into the temple, and He looks around, and He sees it's not being used for the purpose that it was given.

So have a look at what happens from verse 12. Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there.

[5 : 13] He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. It is written, He said to them, My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.

Okay, it's quite a dramatic way to fire someone. I mean, your boss is not going to necessarily come into your office and flip your table over, your desk as you're working.

But Jesus wants to make a point, and He comes essentially with the authority of a prophet. Because the prophets in the Old Testament often used to dramatize things to make a point.

And He shows people just how much they are misusing what God has given them. And He's angry not because of necessarily what they were doing.

This buying and selling. Often people go, Oh yeah, they were exploiting people and they were overcharging. And the text doesn't say that. He wasn't actually crossed with necessarily the activity they were doing because that was a normal activity.

[6 : 14] Buying and selling sacrificial animals for the pilgrims who came for Passover was a convenience and it was something that was needed. But the problem is where they were doing it.

That's what the text is showing us. Jesus is angry not with what they were doing, but where they were doing it in the temple courts. And that was not the purpose of the temple courts. That space was not meant to be devoted to that activity.

And so what was the purpose of the temple courts? Well, Jesus tells us. You see what He calls it? What He calls the temple. The temple. If you ask Jesus, what is the temple all about?

What is the central role of the temple? You might expect Him to say, Well, animal sacrifices or reading of the Torah. But no, look what He says it is. He says it's a house of prayer.

It's a house of prayer. That's what the temple was meant to be. A house of prayer. In other words, the temple on earth was meant to be the space where humans could come and interact with God in a very real way.

[7 : 24] It was meant to be the meeting place of heaven and earth. These two dimensions. We live in the dimension of earth. Physical world we're used to. There's another dimension with hosts of spiritual creatures that we can't see, but are interacting around us every day where God dwells.

And there's an overlap. There's a way that these two realms engage with each other. And it was here at the temple. The temple was the house of prayer. That's what Jesus means. It's not just a place where people could conveniently come and pray, but it was the house where prayer could actually work.

It was where God and humans could meet together in real relationship. Now, for us today who, you know, we've already prayed in our service quite a bit.

We pray at home. Prayer is a fairly common activity for us. We should be asking, well, why did they need the temple to pray?

Why did they need to come to the temple for that? Can't anybody just pray to God and He listens? Well, actually, no.

[8 : 38] The Bible says, the Bible actually tells us that God doesn't listen to sinners. Do you know that? The Bible tells us that.

God is far from the wicked, Proverbs 15, 29 says. But He listens to the prayers of the righteous. God doesn't listen to everyone. Maybe you don't know that. Maybe you think that when you pray, God automatically is going to listen to you.

The Bible doesn't say that. God doesn't listen to people whose sin has separated them from Him. And that is what sin does.

The sin that we commit. Our rebellion against God's rule in our lives by nature. And all the things that we think are decent but actually in God's sight, in a holy, perfect God's sight, they are disgusting.

Those things that we think and we do, they have separated us from God by nature. And what they do is they separate that meeting place of heaven and earth where we can't actually interact anymore with God because of that separation.

[9 : 45] They separate us from a real working relationship with the holy God. And that's why we have all the problems we have in our lives and our world because by nature we have that separation.

And humans were never meant to be in that position where we are separated from our God. You know that? We're never meant to be people who can't pray. In fact, right from the beginning God made humans to live in open and constant communication and reliance on Him.

That's how we were meant to live. We were meant to live with God's power from heaven flowing through our veins and in our lives. But sin has separated us, cut us off from that. And that is why if we are ever going to be the people that we were made to be and ever have the relationship with our God that we were meant to have, our sin must first be dealt with.

Our sin needs to first be removed. And that's what the temple was for. That's why the temple was so important. You see, through the temple, God had given humans away.

Through the sacrifices that happened there according to God's law, He had given humans away that sin could be atoned for. So that humans could come and pray successfully and have this real relationship with God and experience God's power coming down into their lives and drawing on God's help in their lives and living the way that we were meant to live with God constantly interacting in our world and in our lives.

[11:26] That's what the temple was for. Without the temple in the Old Testament, that would not have been able to happen. The whole point of the temple was that humans could experience real prayer, real relationship with God.

That's why Jesus calls the temple the house of prayer. It's the one place on earth then that successful prayer could happen because of the atonement that was available.

Now, you might well be showing your age if you recognize the idea of a switchboard operator. So I don't know if any of you are old enough to have lived when you wanted to call someone, you couldn't just pick up the phone and dial their number.

You had to tell the switchboard there's someone in the middle, right, to connect you to someone else. I know that's how, or the legends say, that's how people used to phone each other in the olden days.

You couldn't just directly phone them. Well, you see, that's essentially what the temple was meant to do between earth and the spiritual realm.

[12:39] It was the switchboard operator. It was the thing that made the connection between people on earth and God in heaven because of the atonement that happened there. And so it was meant to be a house of prayer.

And the courts of the temple were meant to be a place that people could come and experience that and find God's help for their lives. But then Jesus arrives and it's not being used for that.

It's been repurposed for what the temple authorities thought it could most conveniently be used for. It was not fulfilling its purpose of actually connecting humans to God.

And that is why Jesus is angry here. But, that is also why he goes on to do what he does next.

Did you notice the very next thing after flipping over those tables and showing dramatically how misused the temple was? What is the next thing he does? Verse 14. The blind and the lame came to him at the temple and he healed them.

[13:50] Do you see the significance of that now? Why were they there? Why were the blind and the lame there?

Well, they needed help. You know, back then, if you were blind or lame, you had no pension, you had no medical aid, you had no... They were in poverty. This was the only place that they had any chance of connecting with God.

And yet, it wasn't being used for that. But then they come to Jesus and he's the one who can connect them to God. Jesus is showing here that he can now be the place for people to meet with God and experience God's power in their lives.

And that now makes sense of what he said back earlier in Matthew 12, verse 6, when he said, I tell you, something greater than the temple is now here.

And he was talking about himself. He will be able to connect humans, broken, needy humans, with their gods to find this power from heaven again, which the temple wasn't doing.

[14:58] And the reason he could do that, the reason that he is greater than the temple, is because of what he goes on to do in Jerusalem. We're going to find out later. We remember every Easter.

We remember every time we celebrate communion, which we're going to do later. Jesus came to Jerusalem to die on the cross, to be the true place of atonement for the sins of others, which only he could do.

And all the temple sacrifices were only ever pointing towards that. Jesus is the ultimate place of atonement for people from every nation, anywhere in the world, to be the place that they can come and connect with their God.

So that you, whoever you are, are able to connect with your God, with the God who made you, with the God who put you in this world for a reason.

And you will never find and know that reason, and you will never live the life he's made you for, unless you can connect with him. And Jesus came to this world to be the place that you can, because of dying on the cross for your sins.

[16:10] No one has ever done that. No one else has ever done that for you. So he is the only place you will ever be able to connect with the God who made you, and pray successfully.

Pray in a way that he actually listens. We now have a way, even as sinners, to connect with a holy God, which we shouldn't be able to do by nature, because God is holy and we are sinners.

Jesus becomes that overlap between heaven and earth. Jesus is the place that you can know the power of God in your life, and the only place. And you can start to live as you were always meant to, with God's power flowing through your veins, and find real help and real healing in your life.

Maybe you are here this morning because you are wanting to connect with God. Maybe you are seeking God. Maybe you have realized that you need to connect with God in your life.

Your life is not working. And if you're not there yet, you will be there sooner or later. And you're seeking God.

[17:27] Maybe you've tried by going to church. Maybe you've tried other religions. And maybe you still aren't connecting. You aren't making that connection and you just don't know how. Well, let me tell you what we're learning here is that it's not by coming to the temple that you'll connect with God anymore.

It's not by coming to the church. Or it's not by going to the mosque. Or it's not through religion and doing a certain list of things that we can connect with God. It's through this man, Jesus.

He alone is the way that we come to connect with God. And a church is only useful insofar as it takes you to that man. It takes you to Jesus.

That's why the course we run in February is called Not Discover Church or Discover Christianity or Discover anything else. But it's Discover Jesus because he is the one.

He is the one. This man is the one who will connect you in a real way to your God. If you do not have that connection yet. If God is not in your life.

[18:31] If you do not have this open connection with God where his power can flow into your life. You need to come and you need to discover Jesus. Because he came to make that connection possible.

He came as a way that heaven's power will now come down into our lives and into our world. The temple in his day was not doing that.

And that's why he fires them. But then he goes on in the next little scene to do something very strange with this fig tree. But what we learn here and what he says to his disciples after that is incredible.

Because what he's doing is he's giving the job of the temple now to his disciples. This is now the replacement. He's done the firing.

Now he's doing the replacement. Jesus gives the temple's job to his disciples. Look from verse 18. Early in the morning as Jesus was on his way back to the city he was hungry.

[19:43] Seeing a fig tree by the road he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, May you never bear fruit again.

Immediately the tree withered. By itself, this is a really bizarre story.

It looks like Jesus is just irritated and he curses a tree. But when we read this, and this is not the only gospel that records this event, the gospel writers always connected with what he did in the temple the day before.

So we only understand this incident with the tree in context of what Jesus did at the temple, which is firing them from their role because they were not producing fruit.

See, Jesus uses this fig tree as an acted parable of his firing of the temple just like the fig tree. The temple had leaves. It showed off a lot of religious things and a lot of activities were happening in it, but it actually had no fruit.

[20:59] For all its activity, it wasn't doing the thing that God wanted it to do. It wasn't producing what God wanted it to produce. And so, in this enacted parable of the fig tree, Jesus curses the temple, and because of that, it will never again be the meeting place of humans and God.

The temple, from this moment on, will never be the place that heaven's power comes down to earth anymore.

But no sooner does he announce this judgment of the temple, and his disciples would have been shocked because they would have understood what he was saying here. Because now, if the temple's gone, how do we connect with God?

No sooner does he announce this judgment than he explains why they don't need the temple anymore. Look at verse 20. When the disciples saw this, they were amazed.

How did the tree wither so quickly, they asked. Jesus replied, Truly, I tell you, 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.

[22:19] If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer. You see what Jesus is saying here to his disciples?

He's saying that they will now become the conduit of heaven's power coming down to earth.

The temple no longer will be that because they will be that. And the reason that heaven's power will now come through them to the earth, why they will be the conduit of heaven's power is because of this amazing gift that God is going to give them of direct access to him in prayer.

Prayer that actually works because they are Jesus' disciples and he's made a way to open that access. And through this amazing gift that he gives them of direct access to God's power in prayer, wherever they are in the world, it will enable them to do things that would normally be impossible for them.

So he uses this illustration of just a hyperbole of throwing a mountain into a sea. Is that something any of us could do? No. Not with all the construction vehicles in the world could we do that.

[23:46] Not with all human power could we do that. But Jesus says, you will be able to do things that no humans can do by their own power through prayer, because God will do it in response to prayer now that he listens to your prayers.

Some say that it wasn't just any mountain Jesus was talking about, but the mountain they were looking at, which is the Mount Zion, which the temple was built on. So it could also be an allusion to him saying, you could dispose of the temple now.

But some say it was, you know, because he used this illustration earlier when he was at a different mountain in Matthew. So it's not necessarily talking about that, but the point remains.

What he's saying is that you will be able to do things that are ordinarily impossible for you, because God is now going to listen to your prayers. It's an amazing promise that he's making to disciples here.

We need to stop and realize the promise that he's making to his disciples then and today here.

[24 : 55] If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer. Do you believe that? Now, that doesn't mean that we can suddenly use prayer for whatever we want in our lives.

Jesus has already taught us about prayer extensively in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, the very epicenter of the Sermon on the Mount structurally is him teaching us how to pray well.

Jesus has taught us that there is a right and a wrong way to use prayer, not to achieve our will, but God's will. So, God will not answer prayers that are prayed selfishly.

All the more reason that we need to learn to pray according to God's will, and that is something that takes a while to learn, and we've got to follow Jesus' instructions.

But when we do, as we learn more and more to pray according to God's will, all we ask will be given to us. That is the amazing thing about praying according to God's will.

[26 : 01] He's not going to say no. He will do what we ask no matter how big or impossible it seems to us. That's what Jesus says here. That's what he literally says. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

Do you believe that? That's an amazing ability that Jesus wants his disciples to realize they have that we have today too.

We have, through Jesus, believers in Christ, disciples of Christ, have the ability to engage the power of heaven to do things on earth that we could never do by ourselves.

It's amazing. It's amazing. What it means, we've got to get this morning. What it means is, if you are a Christian, if you're a Christian, you've been saved in order to pray successfully, and therefore you've been saved to do amazing things in the world.

Jesus died and he gave atonement, not just so that you can go to heaven one day and have your sins forgiven. He died and made atonement for you so that you could do amazing things on earth through prayer that works.

[27 : 16] If you're a Christian, you've been saved to do amazing things. That's what he wants his disciples to realize here. So why aren't we?

Why are we sitting here Sunday after Sunday, but not out there moving mountains?

If Jesus is true in what he says here, why aren't we out there moving mountains and doing amazing things? Instead, I look around, I see the modern church.

In today, I don't know what it is, but over the last century, the church has become less and less involved in the world around them. Have you noticed that? I mean, if you look at history, the church was so involved.

It was building hospitals. It was building schools. It was involved in the needs of society because it realized that it is being put there to do amazing things in the world. And yet today, suddenly the church is not involved.

[28 : 28] We don't want to, as Christians, get too involved in our world, the messy world out there, and in our community and all its issues.

Because, well, because it's uncomfortable, but also I think because we don't think we can do too much. We don't think we can make any major difference.

Well, that is failing to believe what Jesus is saying here. We don't get involved in the world. Instead, we seal ourselves off and we wait for heaven as the modern church.

And we have our nice services and we have potluck dinners and music quizzes to keep us entertained. Okay, I'm not saying we shouldn't have music quizzes. I love our music quizzes. Okay.

But we can do so much more than that. Okay. We can do so much more than just have a few nice fellowship events in the year to keep us happy. We've been made and we've been given an amazing power to do so much more than that in our world.

[29 : 33] If we realize the power that God has given us and the role he's given us to be the meeting place between heaven's power and earth's needs. But in order to be the meeting place between heaven's power and earth's needs, you know what we need to do?

We need to go and find those needs in the world around us. We need to be involved in the world around us, not seal ourselves off from it. We need to be willing to get our hands dirty like Christians in history have done and made amazing changes in the world because of it.

And you know why? Because we, Christians, people who come to God through Jesus Christ, are the only people on earth who can pray successfully.

And yet, you know what we do with that power? We tend to use it primarily to make our lives a little bit more comfortable.

And that's it. Imagine, imagine we were living in a disaster area. Imagine for a second we were in somewhere like Gaza or, you know, where people just have no needs met.

[30 : 43] They've got no basic necessities. They don't have any medicine. They don't have any food. They don't even have water. And it's a terrible, terrible situation. But imagine we're in a situation like that.

Imagine you're in a situation like that. And you have been given a radio set that at any moment is able to, you're able to use this radio set to call in an airdrop.

You're able to call in specific aid to land in specific places. What an amazing ability to have in a situation like that, right? In a disaster area.

But imagine then, you take this radio home, and all you do is you use it to call in a few comforts for yourself. That would be a complete misappropriation of what you've been given.

And yet, isn't that what we do with prayer so often? If we've been given something, and I think that's what Jesus is trying to convince us of in this passage.

[31 : 48] If we've been given something that can really help the people around us, we have a responsibility to use it for that. To bring God's power into people's lives and into situations through firstly, being involved in their lives and in their situations.

Seeking out what is broken because we can do something about it. Right? And yet, do we? I don't think we do. And in South Africa especially, we have become experts at ignoring the needs around us.

Because there are so many. And it's just too overwhelming. So we have trained our minds not to see. And not to be bothered by the deep needs around us.

So we've got to break out of that, and we've got to actually look. And we've got to go. And we've got to get our hands dirty. Find where the needs are. Knowing that we have this amazing ability to do something about them. And then, secondly, I think what we've got to do is we've got to take real time to pray for things outside of our own lives.

We've got to get into the habit in our own personal prayers of carving out time in our prayer life to pray for the world around us. For the people God has put in our lives.

[33 : 07] As individuals and as groups. We've got to treat prayer as the amazing power it is. Not just tack it on the end of our growth groups for five minutes to tick a box.

Or pray for, you know, three minutes in the morning just so that we have a good day. But realize we've been given prayer for so much more than that. And so, use it strategically.

Meet together with other Christians and pray through things that need prayer. And when you do, when we get into that habit, and I'm not in that habit. I admit it.

I need to do this more. We need to do this more as a church. Because when we do and we start to use prayer for what it's been given, I think we're going to see amazing things. We're going to see mountains start to move that we never thought possible.

And we need to do that. We need to do that. Because let me tell you. Jesus hasn't changed since then. And just as then, he's not going to tolerate a church who are not fulfilling their priestly purpose in this world.

[34 : 16] Of connecting people with the power of God. He's not going to do much in and for churches who are primarily just absorbed with our own lives and our own comforts.

And yet that, I must say, is a chronic problem with the modern church in the consumer culture that we live in. It's become all about what the church can do for me. Let's be honest. It's all about.

And if you go to many churches, their whole service is just constructed around making you feel good as the consumer. And so our brains, they fall for that.

And we go to church to get something. And in the back of our minds, we choose what to be involved in based on what it can do for me.

And I know this. You know how I know this? You know what the proof is? Dismal attendance at prayer meetings. Or social action outreaches.

[35 : 31] Or anything that is outward focused. Why consistently, when we run those things, do no more than a quarter of our church membership come? I'll tell you why. Because of the calculation we all instinctively do in our heads when it comes to church events, which goes, will this benefit me?

And if we can't see how this thing is going to benefit us, we don't go. What about tonight, when Rod Thomas, our missionary partner, comes to us?

Are we going to do that same calculation and go, well, you know, coming out at night, is it going to benefit me? Am I going to get something from it? No, I'd rather not. But what about learning to think, is this going to benefit Rod?

Is it going to encourage him to see a crowd of people who are interested in the ministry that he's doing in Japan? Is it going to encourage him for his next season of ministry? But do we think that way? This is, you know, the way that the modern church and our consumer brains function is not how the early church functioned.

The early church functioned and was far more effective in the world because of it. Because people came to church and they got involved, not because of what it could do for them, but because of what through the church they could do for the world around them.

[36 : 47] And maybe, as we look around in the modern church and maybe at ourselves, and I put myself in there as well, maybe just like the people at the temple, we've also repurposed the church to suit what we wanted to do, rather than what God has put us here to do.

And I think that's worth some serious thought, don't you? Let's pray. Oh Lord Jesus, you have made it very clear that you've called us to do amazing things, and you've given us the power to do amazing things.

And yet, Lord, we confess, I confess, that we are so easily self-absorbed, and we so easily use the power that you've given us just for our own needs and our own comforts.

Help us, Lord, to take this rebuke on board that you give us in your word. Help us to be excited that we can move mountains through this amazing power that you've given us by dying for our sins and opening up the way to God.

Lord, help us to realize that every day we can live in the world with God's power flowing through us to the world around us, and help us to be those conduits, like your saints in history were in the world, and how much they did in the world, how much difference they made.

[38 : 26] Lord, may we make a difference again. Lord, help us to take this on board. Help us not to forget it, but to put it into practice. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We're going to celebrate communion now, and I think it's exactly what we need to do. Because when we consider what God calls us to be in this world, and how far short we still fall, we also need to remember that Jesus came because we fail.

Jesus came to take our failures and our inadequacies on himself, and to give us his life. To take our sins and failures on himself, and to give us his life, so that his life can once again flow through our veins.

And as we remember what he did for us on the cross, that's what happens. As we take communion, again, Jesus' blood cannot just wash us clean of our failings, but as we receive that grace again, we also get new power to serve him.

And that is exciting. And so one of the ways, or we've just learned, that we get to serve God and do what he wants us to do in this world, is through real, committed, intentional prayer.

[39 : 51] And so that's what I want us to do now. I want us to pray together, with a responsive prayer, from our prayer book. And the prayer book is great, because the prayer book has been constructed by saints of old, who are helping us to know how to pray well, for our world, and for ourselves, and for our church, and for being effective in this world.

So let's pray some of those prayers now, as we prepare to receive God's promises once again in communion. So the words will appear on the screen, it's responsive, I'm going to pray, and you're going to respond with a short line.

But let's mean what we pray now. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[41 : 44] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen.