



THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE

Part 88 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Tim Smith | Luke 21:29-38 | August 21, 2011

Luke 21:29–38

²⁹ And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

³⁷ And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. ³⁸ And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

INTRODUCTION

Pastor Mark Driscoll:

Well, I have the great honor today of introducing you to one of my favorite preachers, and so my family and I just get the privilege of attending Mars Hill today to listen to one of the best leaders we've had in the history of the church. His name is Pastor Tim Smith. And I just wanted to tell you about him a little bit, on behalf of the elders.

Pastor Tim and I first met about twelve years ago, right around, actually, this time in a conference that I was teaching—I think it was outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico, of all places, where we, by God's grace, now have a campus. And at that time, Mars Hill was really small and we were flat broke and we were homeless; we had lost our building. And we really had nothing to offer but a lot of hard work. And this skinny, redheaded kid with a ZZ Top beard came up and said hi and started visiting, and I really, really liked him.

He was from Portland, and then ultimately was working in Missouri, and so obviously he wanted to leave Missouri. And so he asked if we had any needs at Mars Hill. I said, "We have every need at Mars Hill." We were just a few hundred indie rockers committed to poverty and anarchy at that point. It's really hard to build something off that. So Tim had a wife and had never been to rehab and I thought, "He might be really helpful," because he's unlike the other people we already have. He could be a whole new kind of person for us.

So I told him, you know, "We'd love to have you. What's your thing?" And he said he was kind of a worship leader, musician type. And at that point we had some great musicians, but nobody to really lead or organize them. And I said, "Well, you're welcome to come to Seattle, but we've got no money, we can't hire anyone, we're absolutely homeless, and we're flat broke." And Tim said, "I just feel like I'm supposed to do that." And his lovely wife, Beth, was willing to join him in that. So they moved all the way to Seattle. They got jobs. For the first months they actually lived with Grace and me in a room we gave them in our basement, and just grew to really love and appreciate them.

And at the time, Tim was a very raw leader, a very, very gifted leader. And at that time, he and Jamie and I, Pastor Jamie, your executive pastor, we really were putting together the plans for the future of Mars Hill. And I would say that those two men, more than any other men in the history of the church, have been responsible, by the grace of God, to really get us to the place that we are today. And they both started as unpaid volunteers, they both worked jobs, they both came on as interns raising support. They then became deacons, and then they graduated up to elders and the highest levels of leadership in the church.

Pastor Tim is a very dear friend of mine, as well as of many of the other elders. We respect him tremendously. He is one of the greatest leaders that Mars Hill has ever produced, and we just really appreciate the grace of God that comes through him to us. For those of you who know him, he was the senior worship leader here at Mars Hill for many, many years, and he actually led worship for us here at Qwest Field last Easter for some almost twenty thousand people. He's that gifted of a leader.

There are a lot of things that Tim could do; he gets job offers all the time because he's so incredibly gifted and well known internationally. But God has laid it on his heart to start Mars Hill Church Portland. And so we have prayed over that, and we agree with that, and we believe that's exactly what God is calling him to.

So today he is going to preach from the Gospel of Luke and continue our series. He is going to share with you the vision for Mars Hill Portland. And it's a bittersweet day for me, really it is. It's saying goodbye to a brother, a really wonderful man of God; somebody that we wish we could hang out with forever. And we'll see him, it's just Portland. But until the kingdom of God, he's just not going to be around as much. And one of the things that happens a lot in the book of Acts is God calls out the best men to go into the hardest jobs, and that's exactly what he's doing with Pastor Tim in sending him and his family to Portland.

So I wanted to introduce him. The Bible says to honor those men who are honorable; he's an honorable man. He is a man who has given twelve years of his life to us, and today he's going to preach the Word of God to us. And at the end we're going to collect a special offering. And if you didn't come prepared to give, you certainly can online in the weeks and months to come.

Be in prayer for him and his family and what God has opened up as an opportunity. Be in prayer for Mars Hill Church Portland as they push toward a January launch with the forthcoming *Real Marriage* book and campaign that Grace and I did. And also, do give generously. It's a wonderful opportunity to give to a man who came here asking for nothing and has given us twelve years of his life to actually encourage him and to come alongside of him. And so the Driscoll family is really excited about this offering and opportunity, and I wanted you to be aware of it as well, as you go ahead and welcome my good friend and brother, Pastor Tim Smith. *[Applauding]*

MARS HILL PORTLAND

Pastor Tim Smith:

Well, it's really good to be with you here today. I had no idea what was in store when I drove into Pastor Mark's driveway after just meeting him at that conference before, twelve years ago. I could have had no idea what God would do. And I praise him for it. It's been an amazing movement to be a part of, and it's just living proof that God works, God builds his church in a way that no one else can.

I'm really excited about what God is doing already in Portland, and I want to share with you a little bit of that before we get into Luke. In every way, we've felt like God has gone before us. Jesus promised that he would build his church, and he is true to his promise in Portland, has been continuing to do that.

From the very beginning, as I started to think and pray about what a church would look like in Portland, I felt convicted that we needed to start with what we call the ground war; that's people meeting in homes, doing life together, trying to figure out what it means to be disciples of Jesus. And so in January, I devoted my attention to that. I wanted my daughters to be able to finish out the school year up here, and so we didn't move until more recently. And so I was driving back and forth, kind of a modern—kind of automobile evangelist of some sort; maybe that's the modern version of the circuit rider, I don't know what.

But by God's grace, a number of folks that had led Community Groups here at Mars Hill Church, in and around Seattle, had relocated to Portland, as happens a lot between Seattle and Portland. We got off to a great start. By God's grace, there are eight groups so far meeting all around the greater Portland area. That should be twelve by the end of September, and we're hoping for twenty to maybe even as many as thirty groups by the time we officially launch in January.

We also started a monthly series of gatherings, talking about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, taking an attribute of discipleship a month and going through that. And it's been great to see that grow. There are over a couple hundred folks that have gathered together monthly in our four gatherings. And every time I ask, "How many people have been to one of the previous events?" And it's always half or more say no they haven't. So I'm not exactly sure how many people have come, I'm not sure how many will stick, but by any stretch of church-planting imagination, it's a very encouraging start. We're very excited about that.

We're going to go weekly in the fall and go through the whole *Doctrine* series, leading up to our official launch in January with the new series on marriage. And we're looking forward to that.

JESUS BUILDS HIS CHURCH

In the meantime, you can pray for us. One thing, just a praise before we get in there, from the very beginning I was praying for a very specific kind of building. I was asking that God would provide a cool, old church building tucked away in a neighborhood that would seat four to six hundred folks. When I put that out to real estate agents and brokers and such, I was mostly met with laughter because those places don't really exist; they're not really available right now in Portland. And the church buildings that are seat maybe one hundred, and I think God's going to do something more than that. So we were holding out for that, looking at all kinds of warehouses.

Then God provided what was beyond anything I could have asked for that. It's a building in southeast Portland that is old; it was built in 1906. It's in great shape for being over a hundred years old. If you pack people in, it will seat over eight hundred and it's very cool. You can see what it looks like. We call it "The Castle" for obvious reasons. It actually, in that left kind of tower there, there's a working bell. We're going to have to have a bell-ringing ministry of some sort. It's about as close as we'll get to a handbell choir, I think. But it's a beautiful, old building.

Our intention was to lease the space; the owners wanted to sell. And what they were selling the building for was—it's like a nice house in Seattle. It's really—I mean, we're on track to be able to have a great, old space. You can see the inside of what it looks like. It's beautiful. We're on track to have a space that will seat close to eight hundred folks, for probably the lowest monthly facility cost of any church in Mars Hill. So we praise God for that. You can partner with us—yeah, amen! *[Applauding]* Jesus is true to his promise. He builds his church. It's an amazing thing to be a part of.

You can partner with us, just briefly, in a number of different ways. You can pray for us. First, you can pray for my family and me. Here we have a picture of my family. My wife and I are about to celebrate our fourteenth wedding anniversary. These are my three daughters; we call them the Princess Posse. That's Trinity, the oldest, who's nine; Allison, who just turned six; and Emma, who just turned eight. You can pray for our family. It's been hard to uproot. Portland may be our home, it may be where we came from, but we became parents here, I became a pastor, a preacher, a worship leader here. This feels like home, our deepest relationships are here and it's hard to leave that. So you can pray for my family and me.

You can pray for our leaders. God has actually already raised up a great pastor and partner with me in this ministry. Ryan Mount is coming from the West Seattle Campus; it's really a team effort. I went to Bubba and I said, "Bubba, I need someone like you." And Bubba said, "How about Ryan Mount?" And it worked out. And so Ryan became an elder at West Seattle in April. And about a week later, moved to Portland. He hadn't actually really visited the city before we started talking about planting this church, so Ryan has just as much uprooted himself and moved himself there, and is partnering with me as my executive pastor, handling all things related to Excel. And so you can pray for him and me as we're leading off in this.

You can pray for our Community Group leaders, that more will be raised up. You can also pray for a Biblical Living pastor. Ryan and I are both praying for a third member of this core team that will partner with us, leading the charge for Community, for Redemption Groups, for counseling and that kind of thing. So you can pray for that.

You can just pray for the mission, that disciples will be made, that churches will be planted. Our vision is not simply for a church in the city of Portland; it's for churches in the city of Portland that would spread and reach folks who need the gospel of Jesus Christ all throughout the great state of Oregon. And by God's grace, that will happen. So pray for that mission.

And then also, as Pastor Mark said, you can partner with us by contributing. Thank you for your support. It's an amazing thing to be a part of.

THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE

We're going to transition now. If you have your Bible, you can open up to Luke 21. And we're going to transition briefly to a little video of Pastor Mark standing on the Mount of Olives, reading this text of Scripture, and setting up a little of the background for where this takes place geographically. And then we'll dig right in together.

Shalom. Pastor Mark Driscoll here in Jerusalem, standing on the Mount of Olives. I'll give you a bit of geography. Behind me is a graveyard. To the left is the old City of David. And then, of course, there is the entirety of the city of Jerusalem. The prominence, tragically, of that horrendous beast, the Dome of the Rock, as well as the Wailing Wall, a number of churches and mosques and synagogues scattered throughout the landscape.

Zechariah 14 tells us that Jesus' feet, upon his return, will land on this mountain, splitting it from east to west, carving out an enormous valley upon which the New Jerusalem can come down out of heaven as the residence of God's people. We felt this was a good place to read to you the words of Jesus.

"And he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'"

Please pray with me. Father, we ask now that as we open your Word, that you would open our minds, that you would send your Spirit to fill us and give us understanding as to what you're saying to us specifically. Help us to see your kingdom and your desire to advance your kingdom in us, and that we would have a sense of urgency and our lives would reflect the certainty that you will return. Please teach us now. Amen.

Well, this is actually week eighty-eight in our series going through the Gospel of Luke. We've been in this book almost two years, and I believe we're going to wrap it up with an even one hundred sermons right before Thanksgiving.

And this is nearing the end of the story. And as such, Jesus knows that the end is near, as well. And knowing that, Jesus is razor sharp with intensity on his mission, on what he's called to do. There is no distraction in his life. He's not messing around; he's not just telling jokes and hanging out with the guys. He is razor focused on the work that the Father has given him to do. And so his words are taking on even more intensity.

He's just concluded here, in this text, a sermon that he's been giving in the temple, teaching his disciples and those who would follow him about things that will come, signs that his kingdom is coming. And what he's going to do today is give us a strong challenge to wake up, to be alert, and to live our lives every day, every moment, everything that we have been entrusted with to his glory, for the sake of his ever-advancing kingdom, and how he wants to work that out through us; that we would have a sense of urgency that infuses everything that we do, and everything that we are because Jesus is coming back.

And so as we do this, I just want to ask you a couple questions that should frame this. I want you to be thinking, where is your greatest hope? And it's

easy to have kind of the Christian answer, “Well, of course it’s Jesus.” But I’m saying, what is the hope that occupies your thoughts, your mind consistently, pervasively? What consumes your thoughts? What are the cares of this world that weigh on your mind? What are the pleasures that this world has to offer that you find yourself looking forward to in the forefront of your imagination?

THE PARABLE

Jesus is going to call us out of simply being distracted by these things, and he’s going to call us to see things from his perspective, from the perspective of the kingdom of God. It’s going to be a real challenge. So let’s dig right into it. It starts in verse 29 with a parable.

A parable is simply a story with a point. Jesus likes to talk in stories like this because instead of just preaching the answers, when he teaches the story it draws us in. He wants to draw us in. He wants to cause us to think. He wants to provoke us. He wants us to go on a journey with him. And so he begins with this story.

“And he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near.’” This fig tree is not an image that we’re necessarily familiar with. The fig tree grew everywhere where Jesus was, and the image is that the fig tree was completely barren for pretty much all the year until summer was coming, and then it would start to sprout some leaves. So the leaves were a sure sign that summer was coming. This might be a little bit hard for us in the Northwest to comprehend because there is no sure sign that summer is coming. But it’s a good metaphor nonetheless.

He says, “As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” “These things” is referring to everything he’s been promising since verse 5 in this chapter 21. He’s promising things like the destruction of the temple, wars and persecutions, destruction of the city of Jerusalem, and then ultimately at the end of things, Jesus’ Second Coming, when he returns and he makes all things new. That great and glorious day.

So he’s saying when you see all these things that he’s promising taking place, you’ll know that the kingdom of God is near. The kingdom of God is a concept that people love to debate about and have all manner of controversy surrounding, but in its simplest form, the kingdom of God simply means—a kingdom is just the reign of a king. When we talk about the kingdom of God, we talk about the reign of the king, specifically King Jesus.

We see in Scripture that the kingdom of God, that that reign of that king, it’s already, it’s not yet, and it’s ever advancing. It’s already in that Jesus said that he ushered in the kingdom; he’s made the kingdom known in himself. It started; it starts off small with just a few followers.

And then it’s not yet because it won’t be fulfilled until he returns again. At that point, everything will be made new. The heavens and the earth as we know it will all pass away. They will be remade perfectly without sin and destruction and death and despair. And all those who worship Jesus will be with him forever in eternity, and all those who do not will be separated from him for all eternity.

So it’s already in that it starts with Jesus. It’s not yet in that it won’t be completed until he comes back. But in the meantime, it’s always advancing, it’s always moving forward. And this story, if it sounds abstract, you know, just think of some of the stories of kingdoms that we have in our culture.

I’m a bit of a sci-fi and fantasy nerd, so I think of Narnia, I think of *The Lord of the Rings*, I think of Middle Earth, right? Think about if you’ve seen those movies, if you’ve read those books, think about Aragorn. It’s a guy with a heritage who’s royalty but nobody knows it. And he kind of hides out in the shadows, and only a few people recognize who he is, and those who do instantly follow him because they see he’s the king. And his followers grow and grow until the day when he’s crowned and he becomes the ruler of the kingdoms of men for all Middle Earth, right? I’m a nerd. I love those stories. We see these stories all over. This is what it’s like.

Jesus is the king, he showed up, he began the kingdom; his kingdom is moving forward until the great day when he comes and remakes everything. And in the meantime, his kingdom advances through us, the members of his kingdom, through disciples of Jesus Christ.

So Jesus is simply saying, “When you see these signs, know that the kingdom of God is near.” And it’s always getting nearer. Every moment it’s getting closer. Every moment it’s advancing because Jesus has promised to build his church, to build and advance his kingdom.

And we don’t sit around and obsess about the exact day. Pastor Mark said it well in a previous sermon here. He said, you know, we’re more on the welcoming committee than the planning committee when it comes to Jesus’ return. We don’t sit around and obsess about the exact day that he will come. Scripture promises that if we do, we’ll always be wrong, so there’s not a lot of use in it, even though that doesn’t seem to stop people.

THE PROMISE

But we long for that day. We eagerly anticipate that day. We want to see Jesus. So this is his promise, is that the kingdom is coming. He moves on here in the next verses and he makes a promise more specifically of how he’ll come. He says, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

This verse 32 is actually one of the more debated verses in all of the Gospel of Luke. And it—you know, we come to a place where it doesn’t—we’re not necessarily sure exactly what Jesus means. So how do we respond to that? I would say as Christians first and foremost, our foundational presupposition is that, just like Paul said to his young disciple Timothy in the book of 2 Timothy, “All Scripture is literally breathed out by God.” It’s profitable. It’s trustworthy. It’s useful.

So we come from the basic posture that whatever we see in Scripture, we believe that it’s true. And if there’s an issue with it, it’s oftentimes more of an

issue of our ability to understand, than it is in the words that were spoken. We should expect sometimes that the sovereign Lord of the universe would not necessarily make sense always to his creation. And that doesn't dissuade us from our trust in him.

And so people have debated many ways about what this means. I see a few different possibilities. I'm not exactly sure. I'm not sure anyone's exactly sure. One possible meaning is that when he says, "All has taken place," he's referring to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, in which case he's saying, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until the temple has been destroyed, until Jerusalem has been destroyed," in which case he would be accurately predicting that because the people who he's talking to would see that.

Another possible meaning of that deals with the word "generation," and it might mean that it's—some people think it means a kind of people. So he's saying, "Truly, I say to you, this generation—" which might mean all disciples, all those who will believe, or maybe even all Jews, all the nation of Israel. He's saying there will still be Christians until all these things take place. That's another possible thing that he may have meant.

Another one is that he's talking about a future generation. That when he says, "This generation will not pass," he might be saying the generation that will see all these things will endure until they've all been completed.

Another one—I called up my friend Gerry Breshears, who's a fellow resident of Portland, has written a number of books with Pastor Mark, and he had an interesting take, which is that every other place in all of the gospels, when Jesus says "this generation," he's talking about sinful, wicked, rebellious people who are pushing back against the reign of Jesus, ushering in the kingdom of God. And so he could be saying, "Truly, I say to you, evil and rebellion will not pass away, but I will come back."

I'm not exactly sure what he's saying. You can't be dogmatic about a passage like this, and there are many more ideas about what it could mean than I've shared with you, but here's the bottom line: Jesus' words are trustworthy. The heart of this promise is that he will come back. We've seen everything that he's promised previously in this chapter. We've seen everything happen exactly as he said it would except for Jesus returning again.

And what he's saying is, "My promise is sure." In fact, he's saying these words, these promises—he says heaven and earth will pass away before they do. He says creation is less permanent than the promises he has just given. And so our heart behind this is to say, "Jesus, you have been 100 percent faithful in everything that I have seen and true to your word, and so I don't know exactly what you mean in the midst of all this, but I trust that you're right, I trust that you meant what you said, and I know you're coming back. And nobody knows exactly the day." That's the heart of this, that's our heart in it.

THE CHALLENGE

Jesus is coming back. And that should give us a deep and a profound sense of urgency. It should affect every aspect of how we live. So to call us in this way, he begins with the parable, he gives us a promise that his word his sure, that his predictions will come, that Jesus will come again. And then we move on into verse 34. He turns the intensity up here and gives us a very strong challenge. Here's what he says, "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap."

Here's what he says. This word for "dissipation" is very interesting. It's literally the Greek word for "hangover." It's literally the Greek word for the foggy headache you have while the effects of alcohol dissipate in your system. He says, literally, "I'm coming back. Don't miss it because you're hungover." It's kind of funny, but it's also kind of not. He says, "Don't be hungover. Don't be drunk."

He says, "Don't be weighed down with the cares of this life, that that day would come upon you suddenly like a trap." The image here is of a snare that snaps shut and catches its prey, and that animal waits, caught for certain destruction. That's the image here.

He goes on to say, "For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth." He's saying, "I will come back, and that means every person, every human being who has been on the face of the earth past, present, and future, will face one of two realities: either they will die and see Jesus face to face as judge, or Jesus will return in their lifetime and they will see him face to face as judge."

He says it's certain. He says, "Heaven and earth and creation itself are less certain than that promise." It will happen. It is the reality that everyone lives in, whether you acknowledge it or not.

And so he says again, "But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." In the previous sermon, Pastor Mark concluded his sermon by giving us a challenge. He said we must live in the tension between readiness for Jesus' return, and planning for generations to come. I think that's absolutely a tension that we all strive for.

But as I've thought about that specifically this week, and as I've been dwelling on this text, I don't think there's very many of us that actually go to those distant extremes. I don't know many of you who sit around obsessing over the exact day that Jesus will return. There might be a few of you, and you're very weird. Likewise, on the other end, I know we're all trying to get our plans together, but I don't really know that many of you who are on the other end of the spectrum, completely obsessing over your future generations to come.

Honestly, I think where many of us live, and where Jesus is speaking straight to us here, is that most of us live as if whatever was right in front of our face is the only reality in all eternity. I think most of us are weighed down with the cares of this life, so we're thinking about the details, the next project to complete, the next milestone to achieve. Or we're living for the pleasures that this world and this life have to offer. That we're just hanging on 'til the next weekend, 'til the next vacation, 'til the next show that we're going to go see, you know, next Thursday night.

I think many of us live simply in the present, not seeing what is much beyond what is right in front of us. I think when we think about what dominates our thoughts, I think they are weighed down, they're consumed with the cares of this life. They are driven by the pleasures that this world has to offer. Short term. And I can relate to this intimately. I believe that we're all in that place because I know how much I'm in that place.

I have been consumed with details and cares of this life in recent months. I was consumed with the details of getting things together for our big Seattle-area Easter service. And then I became consumed with getting my house ready to put on the market to sell, and I entered the strange and perverse world of HGTV. It's like my whole life became like one of those sell-your-house type shows. And we were dealing with stagers and it kind of scared my daughters. They started referring to her as the evil stager lady who made them put away some of their animals and clothes and get rid of things. And I became consumed with that. Then I was consumed with packing up my house. Then I was consumed with moving. Then I was consumed with unpacking my house. I was consumed with negotiating this great building that God provided for us in Portland.

None of those things in themselves are bad; they're all good things. I felt like God was calling me to move. I think it was the right thing to do. We're excited about it. And yet, when you're consumed, when you're weighed down by the cares of this life, they just increase upon one another and build to an increasingly heavy weight. And for me, because I'm so driven to just kind of get stuff done, I tend to do that on my own, and when confronted with kind of a wall, I just put my head down and I just push harder and I take more weight onto myself until the weight is enough to break your back.

And here's what happens when we do this. When we are consumed by the details of our life, all these good things actually become a perverse way of building our own kingdom in direct opposition to God. When we take all responsibility and obsess on every detail of what's right in front of us, we do so, if we're honest, so that we can work hard, so that we can produce the results, so that God will be pleased with us. We're creating a parallel means of justification outside what Jesus has done for us. And in doing so, we work and we build to advance and to structure our personal kingdom, that then sets itself up in opposition to the kingdom of God.

And the danger, when we do this, is that we just continue to turn in on ourselves, that hope gets kind of stripped out of our hearts. Everything becomes kind of dark. We're certainly not enjoyable in any way, shape, or form to be around because all of a sudden you start to see everything, even people you love, even your spouse and your kids, they're kind of challenging your kingdom. And this is where I was about a month ago, maybe more recently.

What the real danger is, and what Jesus is calling us out on here, is he's saying, "Look, when you are weighed down by the cares of this life, we run the real and the present danger of missing Jesus." Jesus could have come back in the flesh a couple months ago, and I would have missed him because I would have had my nose so far in Craigslist, trying to find a rental house for my family. Craigslist is not worth missing Jesus. We run the risk of missing him, literally, as he returns. We run the risk of missing him, figuratively, because he is working in and all around us.

And when we simply build our kingdom and obsess over all the details of what's right in front of our face, not seeing anything beyond that, we miss what he wants to do in us. Because friends, his kingdom moves forward, first and foremost, in our hearts, as we are changed to be more like the King. Good King Jesus moves his kingdom forward by making us more like the King; that's how it moves, so then we can proclaim that kingdom to others as we are changed. I don't want you to miss it because of the stuff, because of simply being weighed down by the cares of this life.

THE EXAMPLE

Jesus shows exactly what it means to live in light of the Second Coming, to live in light of the kingdom. In verse 37 it says, "And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him."

Let me ask you this. If you knew, as Jesus did, if you knew that you only had days to live, what would you do? Who would you spend the time with? Would you be hanging out with your friends? Would you have a party? What would you do? Would you have some great meals? If you could do anything. And Jesus does some of this; he has a great meal called the Last Supper. And he does hang out with some of his dearest friends. But first and foremost, Jesus is withdrawing from all the pressures around him so he can make sure that he is about his Father's business.

It was his regular custom to withdraw into quiet and lonely places, particularly on the Mount of Olives when he was in Jerusalem. He withdraws from all the requests from the never-ending flood of folks coming to ask him to teach them and to heal them and to serve them. And he did that for many. But he would always withdraw to reset his priorities so that his priorities, so that his vision, so that his mission, so that his kingdom would be in sync with his Heavenly Father's. And that's what he's doing here.

Instead of going out and doing what could be anything that he could do, instead he's withdrawing to the exact place where he knows he will be betrayed in just moments. He withdraws to a place where he will be betrayed, knowing that he will suffer and that he will die. And he knows that he has to draw away to stay on that mission, because everything else could distract him from that.

I think he might also be even anticipating his ascension because he actually ascends back to the Father there on the Mount of Olives, after he rises from the dead. I think he could also be even anticipating his return, as the book of Zechariah promises. When he returns he will set his feet right there on the Mount of Olives. He may have been mediating on that to give him hope of the promises of what would surely come.

Jesus is our great example of what it means to, despite pressure, despite everything crushing in on him, to withdraw and to make sure he's about his Father's business, the mission that the Father gave him, which he knows was to suffer and to die for sin. And so as I've meditated on this passage, as I've seen Jesus' example, the good news is that Jesus doesn't just give us an example and tell us to try harder. Through him we have new life, and he draws us to himself.

There are four things that really stuck out to me from this text that we do to push back against simply being weighed down and settling for the cares of this life and the fleeting pleasures that the world has to offer.

1. PRAY

First of all, we see that Jesus withdrew to pray, and he challenges us to do the same thing. He says, “Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all the things that are going to take place.” And I want to camp here for a few minutes because, Mars Hill, I’m not sure we’re the best praying church. All I can say for sure is I’m not the best praying pastor or Christian.

I think at Mars Hill we are so zealous and driven to see things get done. We’re so eager, we want so much for the kingdom of God to advance through us, and to be able to be used by him that our strength—I think that’s admirable, but I think at times, as always can be the case, our strength can become our weakness. And we can start to work in our own strength, which simply leaves us exhausted. And oftentimes, we end up building our own kingdom even in the name of the good King Jesus, but in reality it’s a counterfeit, that’s only thinly disguised, as our own, for our own glory, according to our own plan, according to our own desires.

I don’t think that prayer necessarily solves all of that, but I think withdrawing to pray is one of the key things. And we see it so consistently in Jesus’ life. Jesus says in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” This means that nothing that is worth doing can happen apart from the work of Jesus, in and through us. And I think in prayer, we withdraw from the pressures, we withdraw from the demands, we withdraw from the cares of this life temporarily, and take them to our Heavenly Father who knows and who loves and cares, and to Jesus who said, “Put your burden on me because my burden’s light. Let’s walk together.”

I think prayer, at least in my life, as I’ve been convicted, it’s just a declaration of war on this self-centered, short-term, whatever’s-in-front-of-my-face kind of living. Living for my own kingdom. I’ve been journaling about prayer, which is kind of funny because that’s what people do who are convicted about prayer but don’t know what to do about it. They read books and they journal about prayer. I’m learning more how to pray, but it’s a slow process. But I’ve been making a list because I think prayer declares war on so many things we struggle with. And this is part of that list.

Prayer is a declaration of war on self-sufficiency, as we become more and more dependent on God. It’s war on independence because you have to admit that you can’t do it alone. It’s war on self-importance as you praise something greater. It’s a declaration of war on anxiety as you trust that God will provide. It’s a war on the temporary pleasures that the world has to offer around us, as we praise the Giver of all gifts above his gifts as an end in themselves. It’s a declaration of war on the frantic pace of life that all of us fall into as we take time to be still and to think and to listen and to try to hear from God and what he has for us. It’s a declaration of war on justification by results as you have to acknowledge that it’s God who works in you. It’s a declaration of war on cynicism and unbelief as we step out in faith that he hears and answers.

Apart from prayer, I am convinced—I know at least it’s true in my life—I’m convinced that apart from prayer, we live life as if whatever seems most urgent and whatever is right in front of our face is the best and most important thing in all eternity and in all the universe. In prayer, when we take minutes to withdraw and to be still and to listen, we get remade in the image of Jesus. In prayer, our priorities get bent to his, our mission gets realigned to his and we get convicted about where we’re building our own kingdom and we get changed to be part of his.

There is no movement that I have ever read anything about where God moves significantly and many people become Christians—I’ve never read about any movement throughout all time that didn’t have a strong foundation before they saw any effects of God moving, that they were dedicating themselves to pray. Friends, if we want to live according to the kingdom of God, and we want to see the kingdom of God advance in us, and we want to see our cities changed, cities like Albuquerque and Portland and Seattle and Orange County, we must be people who pray, who get realigned and remade according to the Father’s mission, according to the kingdom of God, according to the great King, King Jesus. So we pray.

2. WORSHIP

We also worship; we worship the Giver, rather than his gifts. The world worships and serves created things without acknowledging the Creator, and we fall into that. Romans 1 says, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is supposed to be praised.” And so we end up looking to the good gifts that he offers in food, in drink, in sexuality, and we start looking to these things, these good things, as God things, as things that will fulfill us, as things that will remove the weight of the cares of this world that only God can.

And I’m not preaching to you for one second that sexuality, food, and drink are bad, but God has given these gifts for us to enjoy according to his glory, and according to rules that he has laid down. So we enjoy wine, beer, whatever, but we don’t get drunk. We enjoy sexuality, but we enjoy it in the context of godly marriage. We enjoy food, not to excess and gluttony, but as a foretaste of the wedding supper of the Lamb when we will see Jesus face to face. So we do things that are similar to what everyone else does in the world around us, but we do them very differently because we serve a different King who’s building a different kind of kingdom through us.

In Portland the culture’s all about food and drink and sex as an end in itself, and it produces some outstanding coffee and restaurants. But these things are established and refined as if they were the greatest things that the world could ever contain, the best of all possible worlds. They’re worshiped as ends in themselves. And for those of us who know Jesus, that’s never how we’re supposed to treat his gifts. We worship the Giver, we praise him for his gifts, and we enjoy his gifts to his glory.

3. STEWARD

We also steward everything for the kingdom. The illusion is that we have stuff, and God wants some of it back, so if we’re good Christians we’ll give

some of it back and do the right thing with the rest of it. The reality is that we have nothing. All we have, all we think we have is simply God's that has been entrusted to us temporarily for the purpose of advancing his kingdom in and through us.

So that means all of our time, all our abilities, every dollar that we have, every relationship that we find ourselves in is a precious resource to be stewarded for the glory of God and for the advancing of his kingdom. There should be a sense of urgency with that in that there's not a moment to lose, there's not a dollar to waste.

I think of one of my favorite songs that we sing here at Mars Hill. It's an old redone hymn called "My God, My Father." And there are a couple lines in there that say, "If thou should call me to resign what most I prize, never was mine, I only yield thee what is thine." We only have what has been entrusted to us by God, and it's not ours. And at any point in time, he can use it for how he wants to.

This has a powerful implication, even beyond our dollars and our time. It goes to the essence of who we are and how we see our identity. And I want to challenge you today that you are not your gifts. God didn't put you on the face of the earth to be an artist. God put you on the face of the earth to be an image-bearing, God-glorifying disciple of Jesus, sent on his mission to make more disciples, who may have been entrusted with certain artistic abilities given to you solely for the purpose of advancing his kingdom through you.

Everything you've been given is for that. Every gift, every dollar, every moment, every relationship, every ability, every role. You're not just a mother; you're an image-bearing, God-glorifying disciple of Jesus, being sent on his mission to make more disciples, who's been entrusted with little kids in your family to make disciples of, according to his mission. You're not your gifts. You're not your roles. Everything is to be stewarded for his kingdom as it moves forward.

4. ANTICIPATE

And in that lastly, we anticipate. We eagerly anticipate his return with a sense of urgency. Mars Hill, I want this for you. God is impressing this on me. And I want you to feel it as well, in that we do not know the day that Jesus will return. No one does. But his challenge to us here today is that we would live every single day as if it were that last day.

If Jesus came back, what would you have to show for it? I fear that so often I, and so many of you are living as if we had all the time in the world and it doesn't really matter. We'll get our finances together next week. We'll reconcile this relationship next year. The time is short. I have no idea when Jesus is coming back, but I know the time is short, and I know every moment gets closer to it, and every moment he wants to work in and through us, and we're asleep so much of the time. Wake up! Wake up to his kingdom and what he wants to work through you.

I got a reminder of this right before I came up here. There's a guy, just twenty-two years old, just graduated from UW, was serving faithfully at the University District Campus. Just graduated, moved back to Portland, which is where he's from, he's been serving faithfully, been a huge help to us with our audio, just kind of mixing our sound and such so far. Twenty-two, looking for an engineering job, just got engaged, is planning to get married in just a few short month's time. He missed our last event a couple weeks ago because he kind of threw his back out. But he went to the doctor and he's trying to figure out what's wrong with his back. It wasn't anything in his back.

It was kind of a pain in his hip and they start doing more tests and they realize that he has this—I can't remember what it's called, but it's this crazy, rare form of young adult cancer that's invaded the bone in his hip. And even more so, before they could even get to him, before they could even diagnose it, it's already transformed and metastasized, as they call it. And it's in his lungs. It's not good. I don't know what the prognosis is exactly; we're going to get some time together when we get back. Now he's faced with that reality of, "How many days do I have?" He's only twenty-two. "Should I still get married if death may be a real part of my future?"

DON'T MISS JESUS

Friends, I would tell you, not out of guilt but out of the reality of the impending kingdom of God, of the Second Coming of Jesus, it is only an illusion to believe you are in any different circumstance. Don't fall for it. Because if you fall for it, you may just miss Jesus. Don't miss Jesus.

The story goes on from here, and just a few days after this, Jesus is in the garden again. He's praying, he's agonizing over what the Father has to do. He knows that his betrayal and torture are simply minutes away. Some of his disciples are with him. He comes and he gives them the same challenge that he gives to us. He says, "Watch and pray that you wouldn't fall into temptation." Jesus is a few feet away, withdrawing from them, agonizing over what God the Father has called him to do, so much so that blood is coming out, that he's literally sweating blood.

And he comes back on more than one occasion and finds his disciples asleep, because even though he's predicted time and time again that he would die, that he would rise again in three days, his disciples didn't get it. They missed Jesus. And so sitting there that night, all they can think of is the cares of this world, that they're kind of sleepy, and they've had a long day. We are in the same boat. Shortly thereafter, Peter, weighed down with the fears of this world, you know, under pressure of a teenage girl around a campfire, denies that he ever even knew Jesus, on three occasions, because he's scared of what others might think.

I know we can all relate to this. I know I can relate to this. And as I've already shared, it's been a season of deep and profound change and challenge for me. But here's where it went wrong for me and what I realized a few weeks ago. When we simply obsess over what's right in front of us, when we obsess about the details, when we let ourselves be weighed down by the cares of this life—I know I found myself so obsessed, trying so hard, working so hard, and what I end up doing is putting all my effort into simply remedying these circumstances. It's like, "This is painful, this is lame, let's fix it."

When we withdraw, when we withdraw in prayer and ask God to change our heart to be about his mission and kingdom and business, when we steward our resources toward that end, when we worship the Giver instead of just his gifts, anticipating Jesus' return, we see what God wants to work in the midst of circumstances. What I realized was I was spending most of my effort just trying to get out of the circumstances, and I missed Jesus, I missed what he's trying to teach me in the midst of that. I missed the ways that he wants his kingdom to advance in me.

I'm much more comfortable talking about the kingdom advancing, you know, taking over the city of Portland through our awesome new castle building. Instead, what I hear as I withdraw in prayer is that no, that that kingdom actually starts with my heart, with taking some time back from my continuous effort to justify myself in my terms for my glory for my kingdom because God wants to do something else in me and he wants to soften my heart. That I needlessly, constantly take more and more weight on myself, resulting in darkness and despair. I know I'm not alone in this.

The good news is there's grace. And it's not just a cheap grace where Jesus says, "It's all good, you're fine, we're cool." That's the grace that we offer each other so much of the time. No, Jesus' grace is different. And just as Peter denied him three times, he comes to Peter again, after he raises from the dead, and he asks him, "Do you love me? If so, feed my sheep," on three different occasions restoring him. It's not a cheap grace; it's a grace that transforms him and calls him to mission.

Friends, Jesus stands before you today. Don't let yourself think he's not talking to you. He's talking in the temple to disciples, people who are trying to follow him, just like you are, trying to figure it out. Don't let yourself for an instant say he's talking to anybody else. He's talking to you. And what he's challenging you to do is to be about his kingdom and his mission, to live your life as if he were really coming back.

Do we really even believe that? And if so, what effect would it have on our life? So I challenge you to this. We don't just have Jesus standing before us saying, "I did it. Try harder." We have Jesus, who gives us new life, new heart. As we draw near to him, he changes us from the inside out. He gives us a new vision, new priorities. So friends, my question is simply this in closing: What are you consumed with? What is weighing you down? How are you resisting the kingdom of God advancing in you? What ways are you building your own kingdom to push back against his? Jesus stands before us saying, "I'm real. I am true. I am full of grace. I am returning. Do not miss me." If you would just reach out for him to that end. Friends, do not miss Jesus.

Father, that's our prayer. We want to see you. We want to know what you are doing, what you want to do in and around and through us. We ask that you would open our eyes, that you would wake us up, that we would watch, that we would pray, that we would worship, that we would steward everything that you've given us, and that we would eagerly, urgently desire you to return, and that we would be about your business and your kingdom and your mission for your glory, with every moment that we have until the great day when we see you face to face. Amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.