

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 21. We've been making our way through this Gospel for a long time now. But we've come to the final days before Jesus's death and resurrection. And remember, Jesus knows exactly what is going to happen to him. In Matthew 20:18-19, Jesus told his disciples, *"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day"* (Matthew 20:18-19).

Well, in Matthew 21, Jesus entered Jerusalem. And in our passage today, the final confrontation with the chief priests and the scribes begins. Now, many of us aren't surprised to read that the chief priests and the scribes condemned Jesus to death. We've heard that many times before. In fact, when we read the Gospels, and we encounter the chief priests and the scribes, along with the other religious leaders of the 1st century: the elders, the Pharisees, and so on, we know they stand opposed to Jesus. If Matthew was a movie, every time these guys appeared on the screen, we'd expect the ominous bad guy music to start playing. But as I prepared for this message, it hit me in a fresh way that this is actually very surprising, even shocking.

Because if we lived in 1st century Israel, the chief priests and the scribes, the elders and the Pharisees: These guys would have been our religious role models! Heroes of the faith! The people we would least expect to make such a tragic mistake! Think about it. These were the men responsible for overseeing all the ministry at the temple, these were the experts in God's law, and these were leaders of God's people. In our day, these would be the pastors, the seminary professors, and the most widely recognized church leaders. And they condemned Jesus to death. Why? How did that happen? Where did they go so terribly wrong?

As a pastor, that question started to haunt me as I studied this passage. And as followers of Jesus, it should haunt us all. These religious leaders show us that it is possible to be deeply invested in ministry, studying of Scripture, serving God's people, and to end up rejecting God's Son. Which should lead us to ask: How did that happen? Because if it could happen to them, it could happen to us. But if we can see where they went wrong, we can avoid making the same mistake.

Here's what we learn as we look at the verses before us today. These religious leaders are on the cusp of crucifying Jesus because: They are not honestly seeking the truth, they are not willing to admit they are wrong, and they are not living for the glory of God but for their own selfish gain. These are perilous pitfalls to watch out for. So, this morning, as we walk through this passage, I want to invite you to answer these questions:

- Are you honestly seeking the truth?
- Are you willing to admit you are wrong?
- Are you living for the glory of God or for your own selfish gain?

Let's take those one at a time. First...

1. Are you honestly seeking the truth?

Let's pick it up in verse 23: *And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"* (Matthew 21:23).

It's been quite a week so far in Jerusalem. On Sunday, Jesus entered the city on the back of a

donkey, surrounded by people praising his name. On Monday, he entered the temple and cast out the money changers and people selling animals, flipping over their tables and driving them away because of their greed. Then, he welcomed people into the temple whose access was restricted—the blind and the lame—healing them all. Now it's Tuesday, he's teaching in the temple, declaring the word of God to the people of God. He's acting like he owns the place! Like the city is his. Like the temple is his. And the chief priests and the elders of the people ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" On the surface, that's a great question! If they were saying, "Wow, Jesus! You have this great following, and you've taken it upon yourself to restore order to the temple, and you're blessing people through your healing and your teaching..." "Who are you? Where did this authority come from? We really want to know!"

Jesus might have turned to Peter and said, "Tell them!" And Peter could have declared once again, "This is the Christ... the Son of the living God!" But they don't really want to know. This is not an honest question. And Jesus knows it. Which is why he responds the way he does. Verse 24-25: *Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"* (Matthew 21:24-25).

Jesus is saying, "Before I tell you about my ministry, why don't you tell me about the ministry of John the Baptist." "Was it from heaven—from God—and therefore faithful and true? Or was it manmade, and therefore deceptive and false?" Why does Jesus ask this question? Because John spoke boldly about Jesus's authority. John knew Jesus was the Son of God. That's why he said Jesus was so great and so mighty, that he (John) wasn't even worthy to stoop down and loosen the strap of Jesus's sandal. So, if John's ministry was faithful and true, the chief priests and elders have their answer about Jesus's ministry—his authority is a divine authority. But they don't believe that. They made up their mind about John, and they rejected him. And they've made up their mind about Jesus too. Which is why very soon, they will crucify him.

So, they huddle up... And verses 25-27 tell us, *they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet."* So they answered Jesus, *"We do not know"* (Matthew 21:25-27). They're not interested in an honest exchange. So, Jesus doesn't engage. And he said to them, *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"* (Matthew 21:27).

Now, here's what we should ask ourselves: When we have questions for Jesus, are they honest questions? If the answer is yes, then there is great hope. Because when we bring our questions, our uncertainties, and even our doubts to Jesus, he will help us. When Thomas expressed his doubts, Jesus didn't shame him, he showed him the truth! When Jude speaks about those who doubt, he says, "have mercy on them!" Why? Because that's Jesus's posture toward his doubting disciples. So, friend, if you have an honest question today, maybe something you've never shared, bring it to Jesus. He can handle your question! And he will help you. And he may help you through another believer, who has mercy on you, who listens to you, speaks the truth to you, and prays for you.

There's no reason to hide our doubts or to bury our questions if we are honestly seeking the truth. But if we're not, if our questions are nothing more than excuses for unbelief because we've already decided to reject Christ, then we are making the same mistake of these chief

priests and elders. I worry about this when I hear people talk about deconstructing their faith. This has become increasingly common in recent years, even celebrated. And by “deconstruction,” some people simply mean taking an honest look at their faith, all its parts and components down to its foundations, to ensure they really believe what they say they believe.

I can see the value of that exercise. It sounds like a home inspection, an honest desire to make sure everything is in good working order. But other people talk about “deconstruction,” and what they really mean is demolition. They want to tear the whole house down. And they do this under the guise of asking questions. But the reality is, they have already made up their mind about Jesus, and they are looking for reasons to reject him. That’s the tragic mistake these religious leaders made. Don’t let it be your story. Do you have questions about Jesus? We all do! There’s nothing wrong with that. But ask yourself, “Am I honestly seeking the truth?” And if you are, you will be teachable, even open to correction. So, also ask yourself, “Am I willing to admit I am wrong?”

2. Are you willing to admit you are wrong?

It’s hard to admit we’re wrong. A few years ago, we got a letter in the mail with a traffic ticket inside. I opened the letter, saw the fine, and that it was the result of a red-light violation. One of those cameras caught us. Then I saw whose car it was. Kristen’s! And I immediately gave her a lecture on driving more carefully, expressing my frustration that her mistake had cost us this money. But then I noticed there was a website where you could watch the video from the traffic camera, which I did, and saw who was driving. It was not Kristen. It was me. Which was hard to admit.

It’s hard to admit we are wrong. And these religious leaders are finding it impossible, which Jesus draws out in this little parable. Look at verse 28. Jesus says, *“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but did not go”* (Matthew 21:28-30). Then Jesus asks, *“Which of the two did the will of his father?”* The answer is obvious. *They said, “The first”* (Matthew 21:31). And maybe they wondered, why is Jesus asking us about this? Well... *Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him”* (Matthew 21:31-32).

These religious leaders didn’t want to talk about John the Baptist anymore, but Jesus isn’t dropping the subject. He’s telling them, John came to call people to repentance, to turn away from sin and to walk in the way of righteousness, but you were unresponsive. You’re like the first son in the parable, who tells his father, “Yes, I will obey,” but doesn’t do anything. You say you live to honor God, you say you serve him in this temple, yet you don’t do what he says. But great sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, people who clearly said “No!” to God at one point, listened to John and repented. Therefore, they have entered the kingdom while you remain outside. And even though you saw the truth of John’s ministry, and the impact of John’s ministry on others, you did not change your mind and believe. You won’t admit that you were wrong. What’s their problem? It’s pride. They are self-righteous. They don’t see any sin to confess, any reason to repent, and this is driving them away from the Lord.

Church, pride is deadly. And one of the sure signs that pride has gotten a hold of your heart is

that you find it impossible to admit when you're wrong. You don't see any sin to confess. Any reason to repent. That's for other people—but not for you. That attitude will keep you out of the kingdom. You see, the way out of any sin, whether it's so flagrant that everyone sees it, or so subtle you can barely see it yourself, the way out of any sin is to admit it, ask Christ to cleanse it, and to turn away from it! That's repentance. And it's not a one-time thing.

Martin Luther once said that the whole Christian life is one of repentance. We are constantly discovering ways we have failed to meet God's standards, even as his people. The question is, what do we do when that happens? If we repent, we will find cleansing grace and transforming power in Christ. If we refuse, we will remain far from him. And that was the tragic mistake of these religious leaders. They were not honestly seeking the truth. They were unwilling to admit they were wrong. And why were they so hard-hearted? Because the reality is, they were not living for the glory of God but for their own selfish gain. So here's our third question...

3. Are you living for the glory of God or for your own selfish gain?

Here's the ultimate, underlying issue: the religious leaders who rejected Christ did so because they were not living for God but for themselves. Look at verse 33. Jesus said to them, "*Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country*" (Matthew 21:33).

There once was a master who planted a vineyard and did everything necessary to see it thrive. He put up a fence to keep out wild animals. He dug a wine press to prepare for the harvest. He built a tower to watch for wildfires and intruders. And then he entrusted the work to several tenants. But they were not faithful. Verses 34-36: "*When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them*" (Matthew 21:34-36).

Many of Jesus's parables are like dreams. They are set in familiar places, but they include strange and unexpected things. And the violence of these tenants is over-the-top. There wasn't an epidemic of murderous vineyard tenants in Jesus's day, but he's using this strange story to point to a tragic reality. In his Word, God often uses a vineyard as a picture for his people. And throughout history God sent servants to his people, servants they should have welcomed with joy, but servants whom they rejected and despised. This parable talks about servants who are beaten, killed, and stoned. Well, in the Old Testament we read how the prophet Jeremiah was beaten on multiple occasions, how the prophet Zechariah was stoned to death in the court of the house of the Lord, and how this persecution did not come at the hands of enemy nations but from leaders among God's own people.

In this parable, Jesus is recounting that history. And predicting something even worse. Verses 37-39: "*Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him*" (Matthew 21:37-39). Remember, in Matthew 20, Jesus told the disciples that the religious leaders would kill him. Well, now he tells those leaders themselves what they are about to do. They are about to kill God's son. And notice why! Notice what these tenants say. "*Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.*" Let's get rid of him, so we can have this vineyard and all its fruit for ourselves. They're not living for the master, and they are violently rejecting his son, for their own selfish

gain. This was the ultimate mistake of the religious leaders in Jesus's day. As John puts it in his Gospel, "They loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." They were not actually interested in serving God, their master. They were living for themselves, looking out for their own power and position, their own interests and influence, and when Jesus threatened that, they killed him.

We have got to watch out for this. We've got to honestly ask ourselves, "What am I living for?" Better, "Who am I living for? Is my ultimate aim in life to gain something for myself, or is it to give glory to God?" If we are living for ourselves, even though we may be involved in all kinds of religious activity, we are heading down the same destructive path as these chief priests, elders, and Pharisees. Well, these religious leaders don't see themselves in this story. Which is why they respond the way they do in verse 41 after Jesus asks them, *"When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons"* (Matthew 21:40-41).

They think this is actually about vineyard tenants. But Jesus will show them, "No, it's about you." *Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"* (Matthew 21:42). Jesus references Psalm 118 which talks about a rejected stone receiving the place of greatest prominence. And that's him. These leaders are rejecting him, but he will soon become the risen king. *"Therefore,"* in verses 43-44 Jesus says, *"I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him"* (Matthew 21:43-44). Now they get it. Jesus is talking about them. And he's warning them that their influence is going to be taken away from them, because they are tripping over Christ, the cornerstone. And this will end very badly for them.

At this point, once again, they should have repented! But they're offended and hardened in their resolve to destroy him. Verses 45-46: *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet* (Matthew 21:45-46).

Conclusion

This is a painful scene in Matthew. The religious leaders are rejecting Jesus. Why? What happened? How could they make such a terrible mistake? Well, they have stopped honestly seeking the truth. They are so set in their ways that they will not admit they are wrong. And they're not living for the glory of God, but for their own selfish gain. They will crucify Jesus, but he will rise!

But here's the tragedy. When he rises, he will crush them. Unless they repent, they will perish. We don't want that to be our story. The danger that destroyed these religious leaders can take us down as well. So, let's stand guard, let's resist, and let's pursue a different path. Let's bring our questions to Jesus honestly, asking for him to send us his light, and his truth. Let's admit when we are wrong, confessing our sins, knowing he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us. And let's seek to live for the glory of God in all we do, and not for our own selfish gain.