

# Conflict in the Temple and the Parable of the Two Sons

📖 Matthew 21:21-32

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We are studying the final week of Jesus. As far as a chronology is concerned, Jesus arrived in Bethany on Saturday and had dinner with the recently raised Lazarus along with Mary and Martha serving. Mary anointed Him with a very costly perfume which Judas condemned but Jesus defended. On Sunday the news of His arrival at Bethany spread. He came to the temple in Jerusalem briefly and after looking around at everything He returned to Bethany because it was already late. Monday is the Triumphal Entry. He entered Jerusalem on an unbroken colt with its mother alongside in a procession that chanted the Messianic Greeting, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." However, the majority of the people said, "Who is this?" He then entered the Sheep Gate as the Lamb of God on the very day the lambs were chosen for sacrifice. On Tuesday He travelled to Jerusalem, became hungry along the way and when He approached a fig tree that showed outward promise but had no fruit He cursed the fig tree. He then entered the temple and cleansed it.

Last time we discussed Matthew 21:12-22 which records the two events of the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple in reverse order of their actual occurrence recorded in the parallel of Mark 11:12-24. Matthew reversed the order for thematic purposes, a common feature in the Synoptic Gospels. In 21:12 Matthew reports that Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling. His use of the verb "drove out" signifies that Jesus was taking control of the temple. Malachi 3:1 had predicted that the Messiah would come quickly to His temple but the leadership were not receiving Him and so only a foreshadowing of the ultimate cleansing of the temple is seen here. The cleansing involved overturning the tables of those who were changing people's currency into temple currency at a high rate of exchange so that they could then use temple currency to buy temple animals at an exorbitant price. He also turned over the seats of those who were selling the doves to the poorer pilgrims. In 21:13 Jesus quoted Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 to state that while the purpose of the Temple was to be a house of prayer they had turned it into a robbers' cave. In 21:14 the blind and the lame who did not have access into the inner courts came to Him and He healed them so that they would have access. But, in 21:15, when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the 12-year old boys who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant. The stark contrast of 12-year old boys identifying Him correctly as the Son of David and the leadership not able to identify

Him is a testimony to the leadership's strong willed rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. In 21:16, they said to Him, "Do You hear what these children are saying?" implying there was something wrong with His permitting them to refer to Him as the Son of David. Jesus answered frankly, "Yes, I hear it." He then quoted Ps 8:2 for support. Ps 8:2 describes infants and nursing babes praising Him for the restored conditions in the Messianic Kingdom. If nursing babies could praise Him *then* certainly 12-year old boys could praise Him *now*. In this He did not deny but affirmed that He was indeed the Messiah, the Son of David. After these things 21:17 reports that He left them, this is a rejection of the leadership and He also went out of the city, a physical movement to Bethany. The reason He departs each day to spend the night in Bethany is to stay outside of the jurisdiction of the chief priests and scribes who might arrest and kill Him before Passover.

Why does Matthew record the cleansing of the Temple? First, to show that Jesus had a zeal for His Father's House and that if they would receive Him then He would take total control not only of the Temple but of Jerusalem and the whole world. Second, to show that His miracles were such a clear attestation to His Messiahship that even 12-year old boys recognized Him, yet the leadership did not recognize Him, and therefore He did not recognize them and the kingdom would not come.

In 21:18 we have the account of the cursing of the fig tree. Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem and along the way He became hungry. In 21:19 He saw a fig tree that showed outward promise since this tree already had leaves and figs set before the leaves. Yet when He came to it He found nothing but leaves on it. He therefore cursed it saying, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." Why did He do this to the poor fig tree? He did it to symbolize that generation of Israel. That generation showed outward promise but when He came to them there was no fruit in keeping with repentance. Therefore, that generation was cursed, that generation would not see the kingdom. There is no comment here to the effect that individuals from that generation would be raised to enter into the kingdom when it does come or that a future generation of Israel will not only show outward promise but will bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance, but surely that is the case. The kingdom was taken away from that generation but it will be given to a future generation and all who respond in the meantime will be raised to enter that kingdom. In 21:20, upon seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?" In 21:21 Jesus took this as an opportunity to explain that He had done this miracle by exercising faith toward His Father. In fact, His miracles were done in three different ways as far as we know; some were done in dependence upon the Spirit, others were done directly out of His divine nature at the discretion of the Father and still others, as this one, were done by exercising faith mixed with prayer. In 21:22 He applies this way of doing miracles to the apostles in their future ministries, saying, "And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." The apostles would need to do authenticating miracles to demonstrate that they were the true messengers of God writing Holy Scripture. In order to do these authenticating miracles they would have to mix faith with prayer as Jesus had. This is not the first time Jesus had taught them this important lesson. He had taught it to them before when they could not cast certain demons out. On that occasion Jesus said, "Ye of little faith." On this occasion He said, mix faith with prayer, that is how you will do miracles that authenticate

you as My messengers in the future. These miracles are described in the Book of Acts. They were trusting and praying, they had no power in themselves. God did the miracles through them as they trusted and prayed.

Why does Matthew record the cursing of the fig tree? First, to show that Jesus cursed that generation of Israel for their failure to recognize Him. Second, to show that the way for the apostles to do miracles to authenticate their ministries in His absence was to mix faith with prayer.

We come today to Matthew 21:23-27 where the chief priests and elders confront Jesus when He enters the Temple and try to trap Him and then to three parables that grow out of this confrontation; Matthew 21:28-32, the parable of the two sons; Matthew 21:33-46, the parable of the landowner; and Matthew 22:1-14, the parable of the wedding feast. All three of these parables are linked back to the confrontation in 21:23-27. Constable says, "Matthew uses this confrontation over Jesus' authority to introduce three parables...All three parables deal with these religious leaders." This is an important observation in correctly interpreting the parables because often these parables have been treated as isolated from the context and consequently portions have been applied to the Church and consequences at the judgment seat such as being cast into outer darkness which really apply to the consequences for that generation of Israel's leaders when the kingdom comes. But because they've been read out of context some of these parables have created a lot of confusion and angst for Christians and what to expect at the judgment seat of Christ. Therefore, I've been spending a significant amount of my study trying to understand all three of these parables in light of the confrontation with the leadership and in light of their beliefs about the requirement for entrance into the kingdom. I'd point out in advance down in 21:45 that the religious leaders understood that Jesus was speaking of them. So these things don't have anything to do with the Church and that is a dangerous way to go. They have to do with the leadership of that generation that rejected the Messiah. So the important things to note now are that all three parables relate to the leadership of that generation, the first might be classified as their willful rejection of Messiah, the second as their sin of crucifying the Messiah and the third as the near and far consequences of their sin of crucifying the Messiah, namely, the destruction of Jerusalem and their exclusion from the kingdom when it comes.

So with that introduction and foretaste, we come to 21:23. This was Wednesday, the day after He had cleansed the Temple and this confrontation and the three parables that follow were all spoken on the same day in the same setting, in the Temple. And in fact it was still Wednesday all the way through the Discourse on Kingdom Coming in Matt 24-25. Let's pick up in 21:23, **When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"** There are several points to observe. First, the question is one of **authority**, but the issue is one of finding some basis to accuse Him. In reality they don't want to discover the source of His authority. They want Him to openly claim that the Father gave Him His authority so they can charge Him with blasphemy and kill Him. So their motives are false. Second, it is evident from the **chief priests and the elders** immediately approaching Him **when He entered the temple** that they had met in secret after the previous

day's events and conspired this attack. Edersheim says, "...from the circumstance that they so met Christ immediately on His entry into the Temple we can scarcely doubt that a meeting...of the authorities had been held to concern measures against the growing danger." The religious leadership viewed Jesus as a "growing danger." He was still growing in popularity with people and consequently these people were not following the religious leadership. Thus, when He entered the Temple they took immediate steps to snuff out the danger. Third, there were a plurality of things that Jesus had done that prompted this approach. They ask, "**By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?**" Since He had been doing **these things** the day before then they certainly refer to the events surrounding His cleansing of the temple. I would suggest there are at least three things they are questioning. First, in 21:12 He had cleansed the temple. The religious leaders took issue with this because Rome had authority over the temple and Rome had given authority to the chief priests. Constable says, "The chief priests were high officials in the temple. At this time in Israel's history the Roman authorities appointed these leaders (cf. 2:4). They constituted part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council in Judaism. The elders were evidently non-priests who represented leading families in Israel. They also had representation on the Sanhedrin."<sup>1</sup> Because Jesus was not a member of the Sanhedrin they asked, "**By what authority are** You coming in here and wrecking the temple. Second, in 21:14 He had healed the blind and lame. They took issue with this because they rejected that He was the Messiah. They did not want the people following Him. They were not willing to leave their tradition and positions of power and believe in Him. Because they could not deny that He was doing the miracles they had claimed in Matthew 12 that He was doing these miracles by the Beelzebul. Third, in 21:23 He was teaching in the temple. The religious leaders took issue with this because in rabbinic Judaism authoritative teaching required quoting previous authorities but Jesus did not appeal to prior rabbi's teaching. His teaching had not been approved by the rabbinic schools and it was not in line with the accepted rabbinic teachings. Therefore, for these three things; cleansing the temple without authority from Rome, healing the blind and the lame and teaching without rabbinic authority, they questioned Him saying, "**By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?**" Hagner rightly said, "The real issue in the passage concerns not information about the authority of Jesus but the unbelief and unreceptivity of the Jewish leadership. The latter knew well enough that Jesus would have claimed divine authority for his doings in the temple area. Their question thus reflects not an inquisitive openness but an already established rejection of Jesus and the attempt to gain evidence that could later be used against him."<sup>2</sup>

In response, in 21:24 **Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things."** Jesus knew they were trying to catch Him in a trap to arrest and charge Him with blasphemy before the time. Some have thought that He was avoiding the question but it was common for rabbis to engage in debate by answering a question with a question. Constable said, "Jesus responded to their question with one of His own. This was common rabbinic debate technique."<sup>3</sup>

His question is in 21:25, "**The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?**" **And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did**

**you not believe him? 26But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet."** The religious leadership were no match for Jesus. They could not accept the consequences of either answer. On one hand, if they said that John's baptism was **from heaven** then they should have believed him and submitted to his baptism by confessing their sins and bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance. But to do that they would have had to believe in Jesus too since John prepared the way for Jesus who came in the same authority. This is something they were unwilling to do. Wiersbe said, "John had prepared the way for Jesus. Had the rulers received John's ministry, they would have received Jesus. Instead, the leaders permitted Herod to arrest John and then to kill him. If they would not accept the authority of John, they would not accept the authority of Jesus; for both John and Jesus were sent by God."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, if they said that John's baptism was **from men** then that would make them unpopular with the people since they all regarded **John as a prophet**. The kind of rejection they would face would not be gratifying or politically expedient. Pentecost sums it up well, "If they replied that John received his authority from heaven, they would be asked why they had not submitted to John's message and brought forth the fruits of repentance he demanded. They should then have received the King whom he introduced. If on the other hand they denied the divine authority behind John's ministry, they would jeopardize their influence with the people, for the people acknowledged John to be a prophet from God."<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, in 21:27 they answered **Jesus** saying, "**We do not know.**" **He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."** The point is clear, they were not seeking a real answer, they knew Jesus claimed divine authority. They were only looking for an occasion to arrest Him.

In 21:28 we come to the first of three parables aimed at the religious leaders. Toussaint was so insistent on this that he went so far as to say, "The understanding of these parables is impossible unless they are read in the light of the context of Matthew 21:23-27."<sup>6</sup> The first of these three is the parable of two sons. By way of introduction, recall two things about parables. First, Jesus first began to teach in parables in Matthew 13 after the religious leadership firmly rejected Him claiming that He had done His miracles by Beelzebul. At that point they conspired how to kill Him. It was only a matter of Jesus preparing His disciples for the interadvent age and preparing for His death and resurrection to be qualified to build His church during that interadvent age. When His disciples heard Him teach in parables for the first time they asked Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" And Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." In other words, parables were meant to reveal further truth about the kingdom to those who followed Him while at the same time concealing further truth about the kingdom to those who rejected Him. For this reason, their meaning is hidden from those who are in willful rejection. They can hear the truth of the kingdom in parables but they cannot understand the truths. Second, a parable is not a true story but it is true to life and it is cast alongside a spiritual truth in order to illustrate. It has one major point of comparison, one major lesson, unlike an allegory which has many points of comparison and teaches many lessons. So the major interpretive issue with parables is finding that one lesson.

Now it's my contention, as I prefaced earlier, that the first parable teaches the religious leaderships willful rejection of Messiah. I say *willful* because they did not lack information and they did not lack evidence, they did not lack ability to believe, they were simply willful in their defiance against God and hence their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. The parable clearly illustrates this willful rejection.

In 21:28 Jesus said, **But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' 29And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get 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 prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him."** The main point of the comparison is between how the two sons responded to their father. The first son said he would not obey but later regretted it and did. The second son said he would obey but did not. Even when the second son saw the first son obeying he did not feel remorse so as to obey. When Jesus asked them which had done the will of the father the religious leaders answered correctly, "The first." Little did they know they were incriminating themselves.

Jesus then identified the first son as **tax collectors and prostitutes**. These were the most despised Jews in society. They were the only segment of Jewish society that were viewed as beyond the pale of the kingdom. Yet Jesus says they **will get into the kingdom of God before you**. The verb in the expression is poorly translated. There are two better alternatives. First, the verb **προαγω** could mean "enter instead of." In other words, the most despised of Jewish society were entering the kingdom of God instead of those most expected to enter. Second, the verb **προαγω** could be translated as "are leading you into the kingdom of God." In other words, the most despised element in Jewish society were actually leading the way with respect to the Father's will. Though they did not follow this view seems better to me. Verse 32 says the Father's will was that they believe John. To believe John was critical since it was John who pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The tax collectors were leading the way in believing John and the one John pointed to, Jesus, and thereby would enter the kingdom.

As for the second son, Jesus identified him as the religious leaders. They were the most prominent and prestigious Jews in society. They were viewed as automatically qualified to enter the kingdom because they descended from Abraham and pursued righteousness, claiming to do the will of the Father. Yet they did not believe John. And even when they saw tax collectors and prostitutes believing John, coming to him for baptism at the Jordan, confessing their sins and bringing forth fruit in keeping with righteousness, evidence of radically changed lives, they did not follow their lead. They should have. But they would not admit they had sin. This hypocrisy manifested itself in willful disobedience against the Father's will.

Note that both are called sons. The nation Israel as a whole was considered God's Son in the OT. But within the nation there was always a believing element. This element became known as the remnant. They were the true sons within the nation. The unbelieving element was known as the non-remnant. They were not true sons. If they had followed the lead of the dregs of society then the remnant would have come to be the equivalent of the entire nation, they would have issued the Messianic greeting and the King would have established His kingdom. As it was this could not happen. The kingdom's arrival requires a nation responding positively to Him, not merely a remnant.

Pentecost said, "When John had come appealing to them for repentance, they had professed to repent but had not, for they had not produced fruits of righteousness. Tax collectors and others of similar character were changed and brought forth fruits of righteousness (cf. Luke 5:27-29; 7:36-50). Christ demonstrated that He was willing to accept sinners, but the leaders would not admit that they were sinners; and they therefore refused to come to Him for salvation."<sup>7</sup>

This is a very grave condemnation of the religious leaders but there is more to come. This week let's summarize and give some applications from the text. The first section is 21:23-27, the confrontation between the religious leaders and Jesus. In 21:23 Jesus entered the temple on Wednesday and as He was teaching the religious leaders came to Him and questioned Him about the source of His authority for doing three things; cleansing the temple, healing the lame and blind and teaching. In 21:24 Jesus initiated a debate responding to their question with a question of His own which if they answered He would answer them. In 21:25 His question was whether the baptism of John was sourced in heaven or men. They began reasoning among themselves, and recognizing that they were trapped said to one another, "If we say "From heaven," then He will say "Then why did you not believe John?" But in 21:26, if we say "From men," we fear the response of the people because they all regard John as a prophet of God! So with their hands tied in 21:27 they answered Him saying, "We do not know." Jesus then said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

**Why is this section in the text?** To show how evil the religious leadership had become. They are as bad as Satan who tried to trap Jesus. But their plot to trap Jesus ended up entangling them in their own web. That is what sin does, it entangles, they were entangled and they went to destruction.

This confrontation led to 21:28-32, the parable of the two sons. In 21:28 Jesus said, "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' In 21:29 he answered, 'I will not,' but later regretted it and went to work. In 21:30 the man came to the second son and said the same thing; and he said, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go work. In 21:31 Jesus said, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They answered correctly, "The first." Jesus then applied the parable saying the first son signified the dregs of Jewish society. In the minds of Jewish orthodoxy, they were outside the pale of the kingdom. But they were actually leading the way into the kingdom by believing John and his message. They recognized he came in the way of righteousness and came to him to be baptized, confessing their sins and bringing forth the changed

lives bearing fruit in keeping with repentance. The second son signified these religious leaders. They thought they were automatically in the kingdom, but they were not believing John. And even when they saw the changed lives of the Jewish prostitutes and harlots they did not feel remorse so as to believe him.

Why is this included in Matthew's argument? To show the gravity of the religious leader's unbelief! They had more information and clarity than any generation in the history of the world and yet they would not believe. Even Sodom and Gomorrah would qualify to stand up and witness against them at the judgment. They made a grave decision and the consequences will be devastating.

What can we learn? First, some people think that they have a valid question against God or Jesus. That is what the religious leaders thought. People today continue to think that if they were able to propose this question they would prove He is a phony. In reality if they asked Him their question He would have a question of His own and it would put them in a straightjacket. It is significant to note that they would not even be able to answer one question without incriminating themselves. This shows it is futile to question the God of the universe with this condescending attitude. Second, a sense of self-righteous works blinds one to the need of faith. The religious leaders were impressed with their self-righteousness works and it blinded them to the requirement of faith. People today who think they are "good people" are blind to their need. We can try to surface that need as Jesus did with the rich young ruler and others, but they must come to a realization that they are not "good people" and need to have faith in Christ. Third, a sense of sin enables one to see the need of faith. The tax collectors and prostitutes understood that they were sinners and it enlivened their need to have faith. If someone senses that they are a sinner all they need to know is the object in which to place their faith, Jesus Christ. He is willing to save anyone. He was even willing to save these religious leaders, if they would see their need and have faith in Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 21:23.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 21:23.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 21:24.

<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 77.

<sup>5</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 383.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 247.

<sup>7</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 384.