

Matthew 21:23-22:14

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[0 : 00] Well, I love these smaller Sundays, I must say, and I often feel that we should adjourn to the fireside room and have an interactive sermon. But I'm looking at you, you all look very comfortable, and I think it would take some crowbars to get you to move.

So we're going to stay here, if that's all right. And turn over, please, to Matthew 21, 22 that Jane read for us in a very sad week this week. Particularly for our Iranian community, and our condolences go to Sia and others in this congregation who belong to the Iranian community and the terrible tragedy of the shooting down of that flight.

And one of those things that we can only offer our prayers to God and help to each other. And I say that because this passage and the passages that follow are full of murder and violence, and it has always been so.

We're going to try and get all our way to Matthew 28, finish the gospel by Easter. And this section, chapters 21 to 25, is all in and around Jerusalem, mostly in the temple itself.

And in today's passage, did you notice that Jesus is confronted by the very people who are plotting successfully for his murder? And they are furious with Jesus.

[1 : 59] You see verse 23. And they say to him, look at the question, by what authority are you doing these things?

And who gave you this authority? It's a very contemporary feel, isn't it? Very contemporary, you know, everything comes down to power. And right from the start of Jesus' ministry, this is the one thing that attracts, astonishes and repels people from Jesus, that he both teaches and lives with such humility, but he acts and he teaches with all the authority of God.

He even says, I have authority on earth to forgive sins. And instead of giving them a direct answer, Jesus has a question for them, verse 25.

If you look down, he says, the baptism of John, John the Baptist, where did it come from? From heaven or man? Did it come from God or from man? And they can't give a real answer because they're slaves of the opinion of the crowd, verse 27.

So Jesus says, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. And then he does. And he does very cleverly and wonderfully in three parables, all of which reveal his authority and how his authority works.

[3 : 20] Now, here's a question for us this morning. Why doesn't Jesus just give them the straight goods? Why doesn't he just say to them, look, I am the son of God, come to earth from all eternity. I've come from the father's side to save you from your sins and the temple points to me.

Two answers. One, they would have strung him up right there. And he has another week to go before he enters into his crucifixion.

And he's got a lot of preparing of his disciples to do. But there's a second reason. Here is Jesus faced with his murderers. And Jesus is giving them every chance he possibly can to turn back to God.

The very fact that we have these chapters and these three parables particularly is an expression of the kindness and patience of God to them.

Because their view of authority comes with entitlement. But Jesus uses his authority in the opposite direction for the good of others. And here in these parables and through this section, we have some of the hardest words in the Bible.

[4 : 30] But they come from the deep desire of Jesus. Not for their death and judgment. But so that they might turn from their wickedness and live.

Just flick over to 23 for a second. Matthew 23, 37. You can hear the heartbreak in these words of Jesus. Familiar words.

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. And you would not. So if we go back to these three parables, what Jesus is trying to do is he's trying to win them.

And he does that, does that by showing them what lies underneath their hostility to him. And what lies underneath their hostility to him and many people's hostility to Jesus today is a deep, noxious disease, which is a particular affliction for the religious.

[5 : 35] And it is the attitude of entitlement. Entitlement is made up of three things. It whispers three things into our ears.

It says this, I'm exempt from responsibility. Others will do it. I'm above the rules. I don't have to do what others do. Secondly, it whispers into our ears.

I'm owed special treatment. I am special. I'm exceptional. I deserve to be treated better. So if someone cuts me off in traffic, I become irrationally angry and I feel justified in it.

I'm using I as a real illustration of me there, just in case you're wondering. Number three, I deserve happiness. My happiness is the most important thing.

So I feel a bit put on by my commitments. And I easily cancel and bail if it's inconvenient to me because my highest good is my happiness. And gradually my horizons narrow to what makes me happy.

[6 : 39] And entitlement is corrosive in our own lives. It's corrosive in families and amongst friends. It's corrosive in the city. And at its root, it is spiritually lethal.

So cultural sociologists like James Davis and Hunter say to us that this attitude wonderfully explains our cultural moment.

And like all experts, they always use a word from a different language. They use the French word, resentment, which comes from Nietzsche. It includes resentment, but it combines anger and envy and hatred and revenge.

And it forms the basis of our political psychology. I quote from Hunter. He says, And the root of this is the sense of entitlement a group holds.

Over time, the perceived injustice becomes central to that person and the group's identity. I think that's quite brilliant. And it explains almost every political debate that we have today.

[7 : 56] We've cultivated the sense of victimhood against real and imagined injustices. We magnify the wrongs done to us. We take umbrage at every slight than we are so quickly outraged.

And we mobilise and we form solidarity against the threat, whatever we see it to be. So the terrible bushfires in Australia that have happened over the last few weeks, which have killed 28 people, are now being used for political capital on both sides of the political spectrum for grandstanding and outrage.

But entitlement is so spiritually treacherous to us, precisely because it disguises itself so well in our hearts. It's so easy to see it in others.

And I'm not going to say what I think at this point. But it's almost impossible to diagnose in ourselves. And it's a progressive disease that strikes at every age.

And it blinds us to the power and the love of Jesus Christ. And it poisons our hearts so that we hate the fact that we are not Jesus equals.

[9 : 03] That's why Jesus tells the three parables. And what he does is, layer by layer, he diagnoses and exposes this disease of spiritual entitlement. So that the leaders of Israel who are there, and we today who read this and can hear, that we might live.

He's trying to teach us how to receive his love and his power. And he tells us that if we refuse, we put ourselves outside the kingdom of God. And each of the parables have the same shape.

In each parable, the main character is a father who has a purpose. And then there's a strange and bizarre response to the father. And then after each parable, Jesus explains what's going on.

So let's look at the three parables together and see if we can get at this. Is that all right? Just nod, please. Great. Thank you. Nudge the person next to you.

Are you awake? Are you asleep? Do you want to be asleep? Okay. Parable number one. Chapter 21, verses 28 to 32. Very familiar.

[10 : 13] Jesus has two questions for the leaders. Notice through this section, all Jesus' questions. So verse 28, he says, what do you think? And he tells a simple parable about a father with two sons.

I have two sons, and they're very like this. He asks the first son to go and work today. The son says, no. He changes his mind and goes and does it.

He says to the second son, same thing. And the second son says, absolutely, I'll go and does nothing. Second question, verse 31. Which of the two did the will of the father?

Verse 31. Verse 31. Now, Jesus is still talking here about John the Baptist.

And God the Father made himself very clear through the preaching of John the Baptist. Remember John's message, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And everyone went out to hear him, even the leaders from Jerusalem.

[11:14] And John said, here is God's big announcement. The kingdom of God is right here. Confess your sins and be baptized in the River Jordan. And many, many, many did. Including, as you can see there, the very dubious, the morally dubious tax collectors and prostitutes.

Hard to think of an equivalent today. Drug dealers, ISIS recruiters, weapons profiteers. These are people who say no to God and morality in their lives.

And they look like they're absolutely beyond hope. But when they heard John the Baptist and when they hear the preaching of Jesus, that they are not beyond hope, that the kingdom of heaven is open to all who repent, they raced into the kingdom.

But there's a second group who heard John the Baptist, like the second son. And this second group always says the right things. But underneath, they feel entitled to the kingdom.

Repenting is not our responsibility. Absolutely, we always do what God wants. But you can't expect us to repent and be baptized. The thing about son number two is he does not lift a finger, even though he says he's going to.

[12:27] It's challenging, isn't it? This exposes entitlement. So the person with entitlement always says the right thing. Here are some lines from a person with entitlement.

Absolutely, I want to serve Jesus. Absolutely, I want to give. Absolutely, I want to do the will of the Father. But they never actually do it. And Jesus, in verse 31, when he says the prostitutes and tax collectors go in before, go into the kingdom before these leaders, he means instead of.

In other words, if they do not believe his words, they put themselves outside the kingdom of God.

This is the first parable. This is the authority of Jesus.

He has come to open the doors of the kingdom of heaven to all. Nobody is beyond hope. And God the Father calls us into his kingdom.

And the only thing that can keep you out, one of the only things that can keep you out, is this sense of entitlement and you just leave the door for others and never take an action. And while the leaders are reeling from this, Jesus leaves no break.

[13:36] He doesn't even take breath. He moves very quickly to the second parable. And the second parable is in verses 33 to 46 of chapter 21.

Very familiar story, this one. I preached on it recently here at St. John's. So it ought to be very familiar to you all. I had to look it up though.

So here is a second parable. The second father, he's got a gorgeous vineyard. Gorgeous.

Generously works it, makes it beautiful. A huge investment, providing for some lucky tenants who are going to work it.

And then he leases it out to tenants. And these are tenants from hell. So he sends his servants to gather the fruit at harvest time, as is right. And the tenants turn vicious and violent.

And they beat the servants and kill them. And then with almost irrational kindness, the father does it again. Sends more servants with the same result. And we know, of course, from the Old Testament, that God describes his work in the world and amongst his people as a vineyard.

[14:41] And his desire is for fruit. A humble life of prayer and obedience, which comes from the fear of the Lord and the basic recognition of God's authority. And in the Old Testament, God sent prophet after prophet after prophet.

Some they beat and some they killed. And in the parable, in verse 37, the father has a son who he believes is worthy of the highest regard and respect.

And he sends the son. The son who's the only one entitled to inherit the vineyard. And it's only when they see the son coming over the hill that the true motives of the tenants are laid bare in verse 38.

If you look down to that verse. When the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, this is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.

Which is completely bizarre. But that's how entitlement works. They no longer think they're tenants. They think they're owners. They say the master owes the field to us.

[15:45] We deserve special treatment. We've worked this lot. It ought to be ours. It's outrageous that he should ask us for fruit. If we do away with the son, it's all ours.

Just lost touch with reality, which is how entitlement works. So these are the scripts we use today. God owes it to me. God owes me good health, long life, decent marriage, good retirement.

I deserve the life I'm living. I deserve to use my time and my money as I choose. It's mine. It's not everything that you have and I have have been given to us by God.

We are entitled to nothing. We are entrusted with everything. And Jesus makes this point with great power, I think, in verse 43.

Therefore, I tell you, verse 43, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. None of us deserve the kingdom of heaven.

[16:47] It's something that's given from the hand of God. And since it's something that's given, we're not entitled to it. And the kingdom is given to those who recognize the authority of God and the face of God in Jesus Christ because the kingdom is not a place.

The kingdom is the rule of Jesus Christ, trusting and relying on his authority. This is the problem with Christianity. The problem with Christianity is Jesus, his greatness and his majesty and his glory that he is so far superior to us.

So you look at the question Jesus asks in verse 42. Have you never read in the scriptures? Then he quotes from the Old Testament. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing. It's marvelous in our eyes. Two radically different views of Jesus. To God, he is the cornerstone, the touchstone of human destiny. But to the builders, to the leaders of Israel then and to many today, he's worthless.

He's not the source of life and love. He's not the key to all. He's not the Lord of all. He's not the most wonderful and central thing of all. Just to be dismissed and rejected. This is very, very lucky for God that we agree with him on a whole range of issues.

[18:06] But on this most important issue, God and the world are fundamental odds. And the problem is that God regards Jesus Christ as most precious and he's given him the key role in everything by making him the chief cornerstone.

And as the chief cornerstone, Jesus is the key to the whole work of God in the world. Everything that God is doing is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. The only things in our lives that will stand for eternity are those things that are built on Jesus Christ.

The only thing that will stand when the world ends are those things built on Jesus Christ. The old philosopher Soren Kierkegaard says that spiritual entitlement, tell me what you think of this, comes from the pain of inferiority.

It's when I confront someone who is so obviously superior, I react with this mechanism of leveling. I have to tear down that other one who is greater than me.

And the irony, of course, is that you can't level Jesus because Jesus has already stepped off the throne and humbled himself to service and to die for us. This is true authority. Here is the son.

[19:24] He's the only one entitled to the kingdom, the son of God. And what does he do with his entitlement? He gives it away. He offers us title to the vineyard so that we can build our lives on him, build our loves and our hopes and our future on him.

It's just marvellous. And then we go to parable three in the first 14 verses of chapter 22. Are you still with me? Good.

Have I lost anyone? Time to come back. Okay. Okay. Third parable. And this third father happens to be a king. You see verse two, who throws a massive wedding feast for his son.

And he wants everyone to join in the celebration. It's a lovely picture. God, the king of all. And it means that Christianity is at its essence an invitation to the great feast in heaven in the future.

It's not about rules and do's and don'ts. It's at its heart entering into the joy of God. And the king is so generous. He provided all his feasts of feasts.

[20:32] And then we have this very strange reaction from those who've already said yes. When the time comes for them to enter in, they find they've got other things to do. And they don't like being reminded that it's time to enter in.

And they react with both indifference and violence. They say they want to enter into the joy. But there's something else that gives them joy. And so they kill the messengers. But so intent is the king

on many people entering into the joy that after destroying the murderers of his servants, he sends different servants to gather in the bad and the good to fill the wedding hall with guests.

And when the feast begins, we discover someone who thinks that they are entitled to be there without any preparation. In verse 11 and 12. There is someone there without a wedding garment. They've just presumed to come in. They've refused to allow the invitation or the joy of the feast to change them. This is why entitlement is so grievous.

There's something about this man that doesn't fit. He believed in the king. He even turned up to the feast. But there's no joy. There's no real joy and there's no real change. I've been thinking about this this week.

[21 : 56] Spiritual entitlement can kill churches. Because instead of joy and amazement at the kindness and forgiveness of God, there is grumpiness if things aren't the way I want them.

That's entitlement. You know, instead of a sense of privilege and belonging to the feast together, we begin to look at others as burdensome and inconvenient. Instead of finding ways to serve others, we find ways for them to serve us.

And you begin to take God's grace for granted. And you care deeply about a narrowing set of concerns which are yours. And an entitled church is a disaster where everyone wants their own way, feeling they deserve special treatment.

But one of the key marks of entering into the joy of the Lord here is that the servants try and bring as many others into the feast as possible.

So there's one thing that will keep us from making other disciples for Jesus. And that is our entitlement. You'll find you're too busy with other priorities. That the grace of God is meh, take for granted.

[23 : 08] And if you look at Jesus' authority here, it's astonishing. It's not just that he can see the future and can tell the future, but he can bring us into that future because he is the central person of that future.

And we're all future-oriented creatures. And I think Jesus is trying to tell us here we have an amazing future in store. If Jesus is right, God has spread a feast for us and he's made everything ready beyond our imagining.

And it means that despite what's going on in our world, God's purposes for our world are fundamentally good. And that means, if you believe this, that our lives are not controlled by tragedy or outrage, but by the God who loves us and sent his son to die for us and the future he has prepared for us.

And it's the authority of Jesus that's opened the way to this future. And I think this is the only real remedy to our entitlement. Because it's as we allow the wedding feast to settle into our hearts, that's the only thing that can expand our horizons.

Because the wedding feast is very big. It's bigger than any grievance, any loss, any bitterness, no matter how genuine. And there is always hope for all of us.

[24 : 33] And Jesus' love and Jesus' power and Jesus' authority gives us the happiest, widest, most generous and hopeful horizons.

And this is what makes the change. I'll finish with this. This is from a scholar talking about the early Christians and the transformation that happened amongst them.

He says, It was not their love that made the early Christians such an irrepressible force. In the midst of an overstretched empire that had grown decadent and fat off its own success, and which had ceased to see any life beyond its own horizons, it was the hope of the early Christians that allowed them to kiss the dying, to hold their own bodies in chastity, and to turn their martyrdoms into murals. It's a great challenge to us. Amen. Amen.