

Intro

Things are coming to a head. Jesus comes to Jerusalem like a king being coronated. The crowd's pronounce him Messiah. He asserts his authority in the temple. He heals the blind and the lame. He receives praise. Jerusalem's religious establishment is seething. Confrontation is coming.

This gives rise to a discussion. Who's in and who's out? The religious establishment assumes their right-standing while assuming notorious sinners are excluded. Are they right? Who will inherit the kingdom of God? Who won't?

One way I like to cut to the chase in evangelism is asking this question. Why does one person enter heaven? Why is another person excluded from heaven? To answer that question, let's look to Matthew's gospel.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Point 1: Unbelief identified (21:23-27)

Explanation

These events occur on Tuesday. On Sunday Jesus arrives on a donkey. On Monday Jesus cleanses the temple. On Tuesday Jesus teaches in the temple and he's questioned by the chief priests and the elders.

Chief priests

Former high priests and their families. The high priest was chosen from this group. Heads of large groups of priests. They were comprised primarily of Sadducees.

Elders

Consisted of priests and lay members of the nobility. Leading men of Jerusalem who were powerful dignitaries.

- These groups were members of the Sanhedrin.

Sanhedrin

The supreme religious, political, and legal counsel in Jerusalem. Handled legal disputes not settled by lesser courts. Held jurisdiction in Judea meaning when Jesus was in Galilee the Sanhedrin had no authority over him. In 6 AD jurisdiction over capital punishment (death penalty) was transferred to a Roman procurator, meaning the Sanhedrin had no authority to have Jesus put to death (see John 18:31). The high priest was the president of the Sanhedrin. Composed of chief priests, scribes (mostly Pharisees), and elders.

Two questions

"By what authority are you doing these things?" – 21:23

What gives you the right to clear the temple, heal and teach? Some sort of legal or written authority.

"who gave you this authority?" – 21:23

We the supreme religious authority in Jerusalem didn't sanction what you're doing. So who did? Their resistance reveals that they don't believe Jesus is of God.

On the other hand, they're setting a trap. If he claims human authority he loses all credibility. If he claims divine authority they can charge him with blasphemy and insurrection. Blasphemy because he claimed to possess divine authority and sanction, and he accepted praise and identification as the Messiah. Insurrection because the Messiah was a king, a king who would overthrow the nations. The Sanhedrin was worried that if Jesus' following continued to increase, Rome would step in and punish Israel (John 11:45-53).

In response to their trap, Jesus sets a trap of his own.

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. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" – 21:24-25

John from heaven is a problem because John endorsed Jesus, so if they endorse John, they have to endorse Jesus. So they can't say John's from heaven. But they can't say John's from man either, because John was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people as a true prophet. John from man = they run the risk of losing the people's support and perhaps an uprising.

They claim ignorance to avoid the predicament. Jesus says since you're unwilling to tell me, I'm unwilling to tell you the source of my authority.

Application

Jesus draws out their unbelief. John was God's messenger. They should have received John's preaching. They feared man. They should have feared God.

Two markers of unbelief to learn from:

- 1) Unbelief rejects God's revelation (refuses to repent)...faith receives God's revelation (repents)
- 2) Unbelief fears man...faith fears God

Faith is Godward. Unbelief is self-centered and man-centered.

Are there areas where you're hesitant to trust God's word? Are there areas where you're afraid of man's opinion? This is a fight for faith. A fight to fear God rather than man. Call on God today to help you trust his word and fear him instead of man.

Point 2: Only those who repent enter the kingdom (21:28-32)

Explanation

The discussion continues. Jesus tells a parable. A man with two sons owns a vineyard. The son's labor is critical to the family's survival. Free labor. Grapes needed to be taken off the vines.

In that culture respecting one's parents and obeying them was expected. How different from today! An obstinate, disobedient son would bring shame on himself.

The father commands one of the sons to go into the vineyard and work. This son initially rebels and refuses to work. At some point he changes his mind and obeys.

The father moves on to the second son, commanding him to do the same: go into the vineyard. This one respectfully pledges obedience, but doesn't follow through.

Jesus poses a question to the chief priests and elders:

"Which of the two did the will of his father?" – 21:31

They reply with the obvious answer. The first. Jesus offers pointed application:

"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you."

Offensive, radical, shocking. Tax collectors were despised because they were considered both a traitor and a thief. They were private contractors who paid Roman authorities for the right to collect taxes. Their rights included ability to impound goods when they suspected the goods hadn't been declared for taxation and confiscating flocks that used public pasture. They were traitors because they worked for the Roman Empire. They were thieves because they charged more than required in order to make a profit.

Prostitutes were despised for their sexual immorality. Vile, shameless behavior.

Tax collectors and prostitutes = the worst dregs of society according to religious establishment.

Jesus justifies his statement:

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. – Matt 21:32

- 1) The chief priests and elders didn't believe John
- 2) The tax collectors and prostitutes did
- 3) Having seen others repent, the religious authorities still remained unrepentant themselves
- 4) You're excluded from the kingdom because of unbelief

Application

The chief priests and elders ≠ evangelical leaders. The Sanhedrin would be equivalent to religious leaders from unbelieving traditions. Religious groups where you're saved by works rather than faith. Groups where church attendance or being baptized or refraining from the most despicable acts of sin get you into the kingdom. Unbelievers who think they're right with God when they're not.

Let's consider how offensive Jesus' words are. It would be like saying to upstanding "moral" people, people who work hard, who obey the law, whose kids get good grades, who give the shirt off their back, that white supremacists or child abusers or drug dealers or gang members or schemers who cheat the elderly and foreigner will enter the kingdom of heaven before you. Think of the Transformation Project whom PCC supports. I can say to you in good conscience that in prisons there are people who've committed despicable acts, heard the gospel message, and repented. They will enter heaven while moral people who never went to prison will be excluded. Some prisoners see their need for forgiveness and trust Christ. Many moral people see know need for forgiveness and reject Christ.

What's the difference between the religious leaders and these despicable sinners? The despicable sinners repented of their sins and the religious leaders didn't. Who enters the kingdom of God? People who repent. Who is excluded from the kingdom? People who don't repent.

Repentance

Repentance = a u-turn. Turning from living for ourselves to living for God. Repentance = a change of mind. A changed stance towards God. We're saved by faith alone. But real faith results in repentance. We turn

from our sins because of truths that we believe. We trust God's character and promises. Believing God to be good we come to see sin as bad. We trust that God is more desirable than sin. Loving God, because he first loved us, the cross is our proof, we choose God over sin. A change of mind (faith) inevitably results in a change of behavior.

Evangelism

How we engage non-Christians. Not as people who foremost need to change their opinion about abortion or sexuality. Rather as people who foremost need to change their stance towards God. A changed stance towards God yields changes of opinion and behavior. Faith changes people. The new birth changes people.

Extend mercy! Relate to sinners how your sins required God's mercy. That they're not so unlike you. We both need a substitute. We both need forgiveness. We both need the new birth. We both have learning to do. Relate from your own stance of need, not from a stance of superiority. This was a chief priest and elder problem! They thought they were morally superior to the dregs of society. All the while blind to their own sin and need for God.

Use this model with family and friends you're trying to reach.

Non-Christians

God's mercy is great enough to forgive the worst things you've done. Jesus' death on the cross is worthy to forgive any sin you've committed. If you come to him on his own terms. Trust God. That you have sinned against him. You've broken his law. That Jesus died for every sin you've committed. To pardon you from the guilt you've earned. Turn from your sins. Trust that God's ways are better than your ways. Better than the ways of popular culture. God forgives us to set us free from sin's control.

This isn't Christians patting ourselves on the back for moral superiority. If we understand our own selves, we identify with you. We understand our own rebellion, temptations, habits, selfishness. Jesus highlighted certain sins to shock these religious leaders. That God forgives anyone who comes to him in faith and repentance no matter what they've done. That's what I'm communicating. God forgives sinners. God doesn't forgive people who think they're fine on their own. People who think they don't need to repent.

Point 3: Persistent refusal to repent has consequences (21:33-46)

Explanation

Having indicted the chief priests and elders as unrepentant unbelievers, Jesus gives them another parable.

A master owns a house and plants a vineyard there. Fence, winepress, tower. This would be an investment property intended to make profit. Tenants would do all the work for an agreed upon percentage of the crop. Significant wealth was required because there wouldn't be a crop for four years. It takes four years to produce harvestable grapes. The master's done everything necessary to ensure a successful operation. It's up to the tenants to carry out his plan.

When it was time to reap the crop, the master sends servants to gather his share of the fruit. One's beaten. One's killed. One's stoned. The master's persistent sending more servants than at first. They're abused too.

Finally, as a last resort, the master sends his son. Surely they'll respect my son. The son isn't a mere slave. He's a member of the upper class representing the master's authority. Mistreating the son will invite a harsh response.

Maintaining their defiance, the tenants see the son and sense an opportunity to improve themselves. They can kill the son and take his inheritance. So they kill him. Killing the son wouldn't give them the son's inheritance. This is illogical. It's a foolish plan.

At this point Jesus questions the chief priests and the elders:

"When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" – 21:40

They respond with the obvious:

"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." – 21:41

Interpretation

- 1) Jesus gets the chief priests and elders to indict themselves
- 2) Master = God the Father
- 3) Vineyard = Israel
- 4) Tenants = chief priests and elders (Jerusalem's leaders)
- 5) Slaves = the prophets
- 6) Son = Jesus

Ps 118:22-23 (21:42)

- 1) Ps 118 context = a time of threat and God's deliverance
 - 2) Stone in Ps 118 = the Psalmist = the king (David?) or Israel
 - 3) Cornerstone = likely the large stone at the corner of a building's foundation
- Located at the foundation (Isa 28:16) and tripped over (1 Pet 2:7-8)
- 4) Typological use: what happened in the days of the Psalmist is happening again in Jesus' day
 - 5) The Psalmist was rejected and surrounded, but God delivered him
 - 6) Jesus was rejected, but has become the foundation... Jesus replaces Jerusalem's leaders
 - 7) "this was the Lord's doing" = God is behind these events... his predestined plan was unfolding (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)

21:43-44

- 1) Kingdom of God = the sphere of God's saving rule (was in national Israel, currently in the church, will be in the eternal kingdom)
- 2) Taken away from you = supervision of God's saving rule taken from Jerusalem's leaders and given to another entity
- 3) A people producing its fruits = the church, which begins with the apostles
- 4) Producing its fruits = whereas Israel was unfruitful, the church will be fruitful
- 5) In Matthew 16:19, Jesus told Peter that at some unspecified time in the future he would give Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven"... in Matthew 18:18 we see the binding associated with the kingdom of heaven belonging to the whole church
- 6) The one who rejects Jesus (the stone) will be crushed by Jesus when he returns to set up the eternal kingdom (Matt 13:36-43)

Implications

- 1) Major change in salvation history = God working through local churches spread throughout the globe instead of one particular nation... God's revealed truth confined to one nation to the gospel going throughout the world
- 2) Jesus founds his church on the apostles, transferring the kingdom to them
- 3) Believing Gentiles join with the believing remnant of Israel as inheritors of the promises (Rom 11:11-24)
- 4) new man is formed – the church – (Eph 2:15), uniting Jew and Gentile together in one body (Eph 2:12-16)

Application

The chief priests and the Pharisees (used interchangeably with elders) understood they were the wicked tenants. So they resolved to arrest Jesus, but the fact that the crowds believed him to be a prophet stands as a roadblock.

Persistent refusal to repent resulted in kingdom supervision being taken from Jerusalem's leaders. Likewise, if we refuse to trust Jesus and repent of our sins all that remains for us is judgment when Jesus returns. If this is you, repent and believe today.

Conclusion

Unbelief identified. Fight for faith in the Bible and fear of God. **Only those who repent enter the kingdom.** Rejoice in God's mercy. Engage the unrepentant. **Persistent refusal to repent has consequences.** Rejoice in God's mercy. Engage the unrepentant.