

# **Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven**

## **Responding to Jesus, Part 1 \* Matthew 21:23-46**

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 21. While you are turning, I want to say a very happy anniversary to my wonderful wife. Eighteen years ago today I made the second best decision of my life when I decided to marry a beautiful young lady by the name of Eva Wagenschutz. I'm going to do a throwback Sunday and show you a picture from our wedding day, most of all to prove that there was a time when I actually had hair. Anyway, it's been a great 18 years, and we are very thankful to have spent a few of those years here with you, and for all of the prayer and support you give to our marriage and our family. Now, if you are wondering what we are doing for our anniversary, just remember that I told you a few weeks ago we are going to Nebraska. Wooh-hoo, right? I have a conference there this week and since all the kids have been farmed out, Eva is going to go with me. It's going to be great.

All right, now, you may have noted that a minute ago I said that marrying Eva was the second best decision I have ever made. The reason I didn't say it was the best decision is because, as we have talked about over and over again, the most important decision in life is what you do with Jesus. Therefore, the best decision I have ever made happened 35 years ago when Jesus first summoned me to follow him and I responded by saying yes. I don't remember a whole lot of the details, but I do remember that it was in the living room of my family home in the little town of Waynesboro, PA. I vaguely recall my dad sharing the gospel with me and then shortly thereafter walking down the aisle in a church service to be baptized. Now, it's been an interesting journey since then, with lots of ups and downs. But here is one thing I can say about the last 35 years. Since the day I first trusted Jesus I have always believed that he is the Son of God and therefore has the authority to not only be my savior, but also my king. By this I mean that even when I don't live as I should, I know that he is the one who gets to call the shots. That he is the one in charge, not me. And you know what, this is the issue in view in our passage today, the issue of authority. The issue of who is in charge. In fact, take a look with me at v. 23-27:

*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?" [24] 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?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' [26] But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." [27] So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. (Matthew 21:23-27 ESV)*

Ok, let me reset things here for a second. You will remember from last week that in chapter 21 Matthew begins to record the events of the last week of Jesus' life. Let me say again that this is, by far, the most important week in history. If Jesus is the most important person in history, and here at Harmony we believe that this certainly is the case, and if this is the most important week of Jesus' life, a fact that no one would argue, than this is without a doubt the most important week in history. There are big, big, big things going on here.

Matthew 21 gets started with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the temple. That's what we studied last week, with the main focus being Jesus confronting the religious leaders and pushing them to make a decision on whether they are going to crown him or kill him.

So, that was last week, and in our passage today we find Jesus going right back to the scene of the crime, so to speak. After spending the night in the town of Bethany, Jesus gets up the next day and heads right back to the temple, and upon arriving there the religious leaders immediately rush over to him and ask who died and made him boss. They want to know where he gets off thinking he can control what goes on in the temple. You see, they thought they were the ones in charge, that they were the ones with authority, and when Jesus started calling the shots they wanted to know

who told him he could do so. This, by the way, is the issue many people today have with Jesus. There are many people who question his authority, many people who question why he thinks he can tell them what to do and how to live.

Now, it's interesting to see how Jesus responds to the religious leaders here. You will note that he doesn't answer their question. And he doesn't answer their question because it should have been glaringly obvious where his authority came from. It should have been clear that Jesus was the Messiah, God's one and only chosen Son, and therefore his authority came directly from the Father himself. So really, the problem isn't that they didn't know where Jesus' authority came from, but rather that they didn't want to accept it.

And you will note that instead of answering their question, Jesus turns the issue back on them and asks his own question, a question they are unwilling to answer. The guys who are supposed to have all the answers play dumb and look ridiculous in doing so. That by the way, is what happens when you are more concerned about pleasing people than you are about pleasing God. You end up looking like a fool. Anyway, while Jesus doesn't answer their question, he does address the issue of authority by telling three parables that we are going to study over the next two weeks. These parables are the parable of the two sons, the parable of the tenants, and the parable of the wedding feast. All three of these parables are about Jesus' authority and how people respond to it. So, I have titled this message: Responding to Jesus, Part 1, which means that next week will be Responding to Jesus, Part 2. Got that? This week and next we are going to look at three parables that describe how people respond to Jesus' authority. The key in all of this, of course, is making sure we are responding to Jesus' authority the right way. Let's be clear, there is a right way and there is a wrong way to respond to Jesus, and our choice in the matter makes all the difference in the world.

## **The Parable of the Two Sons**

Let's begin with the Parable of the Two Sons in v. 28:

*"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.' [29] And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. [30] And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. [31] Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. [32] 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 21:28-32 ESV)*

So, this parable is pretty simple. A father has two sons whom he tells to go and work in his vineyard. The first son initially refuses to go, but later changes his mind and decides to go. The second son, on the other hand, initially says he will go, but then actually decides not to go.

Now, what is Jesus' getting at here? What's his point? Well, the first son represents those who initially rebel but then repent and believe, and the second son represents those who profess to believe but never repent and therefore show that they didn't truly believe in the first place.

- **True belief in Jesus is evidenced by repentance.**

Let me simplify a little bit. The main point of this parable is that true belief in Jesus is evidenced by repentance. The evidence of whether you believe is shown not by what you say, but what you do.

Let's talk about each of the sons a little more. The first son initially just outright refuses to obey. He knows what the father wants, but he stubbornly refuses to do it. His dad says, "Do this", and he responds, "No way, un-uh, ain't gunna happen", perhaps with a few choice words scattered in. Some of you have children like this, right? More to the point,

some of you have been children like this.

However, while the first son initially rebels, he eventually changes his mind. Look at v. 28 again.

*And he answered, "I will not," but afterward he changed his mind and went.*

Let me explain what *changed his mind* means. It means that he repented. That's what it means to change your mind. And notice what this changing of the mind lead to. He changed his mind and *went*. The changing of his mind lead to obedience, to do what his father had commanded him to do. I've shared this definition with you before, but I think it's worth sharing again.

- **Repentance is a change in mind that leads to a change in direction.**

*Repentance is a change in mind that leads to a change in direction.*

Do you see the two components there? Repentance is a change in the way that you think, which leads to a change in the way that you live.

So, that's the first son. The second son, on the other hand, initially agrees to obey, but never actually does. He says all the right things, he gives the appearance that he is going to obey, but he doesn't go through with it. He never actually obeys, he never actually submits to his father's authority.

Jesus is pretty clear about whom the two sons represent. The first son represents people like tax collectors and prostitutes, people who rebel against God and make no bones about it, people who are obviously living in sin but eventually come to repent and place their faith in him and as a result become a part of God's kingdom.

On the other hand, the second son represents those who claim to be believers, people who appear to be good, but show by the fact that they have failed to obey that they aren't truly submitting to Jesus and therefore

are not a part of God's kingdom. When Jesus says in v. 31 that the tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom before the religious leaders he doesn't mean ahead of, he means instead of. It's not that tax collectors and prostitutes are at the head of the line, it's that the religious leaders aren't in the line at all.

Now, let me show you what makes the difference here, and it's found in v. 32. Look at it with me closely:

*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.*

The John that Jesus is referring to here, of course, is John the Baptist. And the way of righteousness that John came in is the fact that he preached Jesus as that way. John's role, his job, his entire ministry was pointing to Jesus as the way to salvation, the way to have the righteousness God requires for human beings to have a relationship with him.

And the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed John when he preached this, which led them to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus for salvation, with the result that they were granted a place in God's kingdom. The religious leaders, on the other hand, failed to believe John, and therefore failed to believe in Jesus, and because they failed on both accounts they ultimately missed out on being a part of God's kingdom.

Now, here is the application point for us. It's pretty simple, and it goes back to the main point of the parable. True belief in Jesus is evidenced by repentance. Simply saying that you believe is not enough. Coming to church, calling yourself a Christian, and saying all the right things doesn't cut it. The true evidence of a relationship with Jesus, the true evidence of salvation is a change in mind that has led to a change in direction. So, let me ask, have you had a change in mind about who Jesus is? Have you come to understand that he is the only way to be made right with God? And has this change in mind led you to a change in direction? Has it changed the



way you are living? Are you living in obedience to him? If so, regardless of your past, regardless of what you have done, regardless of how much you have rebelled, you can know today that you are right with God and as a result have entered into his kingdom.

Isn't that a wonderful truth by the way? That no matter what we have done, no matter how dark our past, through faith and repentance God will wipe it all away? That he will remember it no more? That he will never count it against us? What a wonderful, wonderful, truth this is.

## **The Parable of The Tenants**

So, that's the Parable of the Two Sons. Let's now take a look at the Parable of the Tenants, which really makes a similar point, just with a little more detail. Follow along as I read, picking up in v. 33:

*"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. [34] When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. [35] And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. [36] Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. [37] Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' [38] But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' [39] And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. [40] When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" [41] 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." [42] 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'? [43] Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. [44] And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." [45] When the chief*

*priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. [46] And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet. (Matthew 21:33-46 ESV)*

Ok, I want to point out four huge truths from this parable, four truths which are a great summary of the gospel.

### **1. The depths of human sinfulness.**

First, this parable displays the depths of human sinfulness. In the story the tenants aren't satisfied to have a great job with a great boss and the opportunity to make a great living. No, they want it all. They want to be in charge and so they rebel against their master, even after he makes repeated efforts to reconcile with them, even after he gives them repeated opportunities to make things right. This of course, is our story. It's my story; it's your story. Desiring to be in charge, we too have rebelled against our master and repeatedly refused his gracious offer of reconciliation. We too have refused to listen to his representatives and ultimately have murdered his son. When we look at the tenants, we are looking at ourselves. Can you see that? Can you see that the tenants represent you? Can you see your rebellion against the God who has created you?

### **2. The magnitude of God's love.**

Second, this parable displays the magnitude of God's love. To be honest, Jesus almost makes God look weak in this parable by the fact that the master is so incredibly patient with the tenants. I mean the parable really stretches the limits of believability. It's obvious the master had the resources to exact revenge on the tenants and get what was due him, and he would have been well within his rights to do so from the moment the tenants refused his first servant. And yet the master continues to give the tenants the opportunity to make things right. Look at v. 34-39 again. You've got to see this.



*When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. [35] And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. [36] Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. [37] Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' [38] But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' [39] And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

The master repeatedly seeks to be reconciled with these tenants. He gives them chance, after chance, after chance, and when nearly all hope is lost, in one last desperate attempt, he sends his son. Note it's not sons, or one of his sons, but his only son. These tenants were so important to the master that he was willing to risk his only son to be restored to them. And friends, this pictures in a wonderful way God's great love for us. I said earlier that this parable stretches the limits of believability, and in a real way that's what God's love for us does. It really is unbelievable that God would love us so much that he was willing to send his son to die so that we don't have to. More on that in a minute.

### **3. The inevitability of coming judgment.**

The third thing this parable displays in the inevitability of coming judgment. While the master patiently does everything he can to be reconciled to the tenants, there is a day when his patience and efforts at reconciliation will come to an end. There is a day when he will call the tenants to account. This, of course, is something that Jesus has been absolutely clear about in Matthew. While God is longsuffering and desires for everyone to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, if we continue to refuse his offer of salvation there is a day coming where we will have to answer for our sin. Let's look ahead to next week's parable and see what that looks like. Note how Jesus describes it in chapter 22 verse 13:

*Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

That, my friends, is a picture of hell. It's a picture of what happens to those who don't accept God's gracious offer of reconciliation. So, make no mistake. Don't allow God's patience to lull you into thinking that he will eventually let you off the hook. Don't think he will eventually forget about you. Don't think that somehow you will get away with being in rebellion to him. The only way to avoid judgment is through repentance. The only way to avoid it is by changing your mind and trusting in his son. Judgment day is coming friends, and sooner than any of us think.

#### **4. The salvation offered through Jesus.**

Ok, the fourth and most important truth this parable displays is the salvation God offers through his son Jesus.

As we have already seen, the son in this parable represents Jesus. He is the Father's best and final offer of reconciliation. In fact, look at v. 37 again:

*Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'*

So, just like we saw last week, with this parable Jesus is once again being confrontational. He's bringing the religious leaders to a decision point. He's making the case that he is God's Son, the one that the prophets had long been telling them about, and now they have to decide if they are going to accept or reject him.

Let's talk a little more about what this accepting and rejecting looks like. Take a look at v. 42, where Jesus is quoting from Psalm 118:

*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'?"*

So, there are two choices we have when it comes to Jesus. One, of course, is to reject him, just like the religious leaders eventually did. Just like many people do today. The problem with this, of course, is that rejecting Jesus

has catastrophic consequences. You will note that not only is Jesus the son in this story, but he is also the stone in v. 42. He is the cornerstone upon which God builds his kingdom. He is at the very center of what God is doing. And look at what Jesus says in v. 44 happens to those who reject him as the stone:

*And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone it will crush him.*

Let me give you another translation of this verse, one that puts it a little more plainly:

*The person who trips over this stone will be smashed to pieces; and the person on whom this stone falls will be ground to powder.<sup>1</sup>*

That's pretty matter-of-fact, isn't it? If you stumble over Jesus, you will eventually end up being crushed by him.

Of course there is another option, and it's a much better one. Instead of rejecting Jesus, instead of tripping over him, we can accept him, which in the context of this parable means submitting to his authority and building our lives on him. It means accepting who he is and that he and he alone is the one way to be made right with God. So friends, the question is: will Jesus save you or will he crush you? As John MacArthur says, "For those who will not have Jesus as Deliverer, He becomes Destroyer."<sup>2</sup> Which one will it be for you?

Now, in conclusion, let me summarize the two parables we have studied today. Together they show us four important things. One, we have all rebelled against the God who has created us. In the words of Romans 3:23, we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Every single one of us. Two, God loves us more than we can ever imagine. These parables show the

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner. Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28 (Kindle Locations 7372-7373). Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Four Volume Set (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 37049-37050). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

incredible lengths to which God has gone to be reconciled with us. Again, every single one of us. Three, judgment is coming. It is inevitable and it is inconceivably horrific. And four, these parables show that we can avoid judgment by repenting and placing our faith in Jesus Christ as God's last, best offer of reconciliation.

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