

## Week of September 5, 2021

### Matthew 21:23-46

<sup>23</sup> When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching. They asked, "What kind of authority do you have for doing these things? Who gave you this authority?" <sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, "I have a question for you. If you tell me the answer, I'll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. <sup>25</sup> Where did John get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans?" They argued among themselves, "If we say 'from heaven,' he'll say to us, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' <sup>26</sup> But we can't say 'from humans' because we're afraid of the crowd, since everyone thinks John was a prophet." <sup>27</sup> Then they replied, "We don't know." Jesus also said to them, "Neither will I tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. <sup>28</sup> What do you think? A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> 'No, I don't want to,' he replied. But later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied, 'Yes, sir.' But he didn't go. <sup>31</sup> Which one of these two did his father's will?" They said, "The first one." Jesus said to them, "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you on the righteous road, and you didn't believe him. But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. Yet even after you saw this, you didn't change your hearts and lives and you didn't believe him. <sup>33</sup> Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower. Then he rented it to tenant farmers and took a trip. <sup>34</sup> When it was time for harvest, he sent his servants to the tenant farmers to collect his fruit. <sup>35</sup> But the tenant farmers grabbed his servants. They beat some of them, and some of them they killed. Some of them they stoned to death. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other servants, more than the first group. They treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup> Finally he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. <sup>38</sup> "But when the tenant farmers saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come on, let's kill him and we'll have his inheritance.' <sup>39</sup> They grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup> When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?" <sup>41</sup> They said, "He will totally destroy those wicked farmers and rent the vineyard to other tenant farmers who will give him the fruit when it's ready." <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "Haven't you ever read in the scriptures, The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it's amazing in our eyes? <sup>43</sup> Therefore, I tell you that God's kingdom will be taken away from you and will be given to a people who produce its fruit. <sup>44</sup> Whoever falls on this stone will be crushed. And the stone will crush the person it falls on." <sup>45</sup> Now when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard the parable, they knew Jesus was talking about them. <sup>46</sup> They were trying to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, who thought he was a prophet.

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### Unable to See the Forest for the Trees

They say "ignorance is bliss," and it couldn't be more true. Sometimes it's easier to not know and to not have to see. Would that chocolate bar taste as sweet if we had to be confronted with the reality of the child slavery which harvested the cacao? Would this fall's newest, hottest fashion be as appealing if we had to witness the poverty of those producing it? Would the latest, greatest technology seem as necessary if we had to face the environmental degradation from mining the rare-earth metals that make it possible? One would think not, but the truth is most of us are at least somewhat aware of all these things, yet our behaviors do not change. It's not due to a lack of empathy or an abundance of malice, behaviors don't change because it's so easy to ignore and not have to think about. In Australia, all cigarette packs come with gruesome images of the effects of smoking; those choosing to smoke there cannot get away from the images - they make their decision despite it. If our clothes, candy, electronics, etc. came with pictures of the cost of producing each of those items, how many would we still consume? It's a heavy thing to have to consider, but it's the same scenario that the religious experts found themselves in when Jesus confronted them in Jerusalem.

The religious experts lived in a kind of bubble. Rome liked that they helped keep a steady social order, so they didn't suffer the same oppression the average Palestinian did and were given many special perks, so long as that order was maintained. They also kept themselves above the average citizens. They could shut themselves off from the problems their neighbors faced while maintaining their religious control on the people, demanding sacrifices or threatening heresy, a

threat that could mean death. This system had them so removed from both the people they were to serve and their own faith, that when Jesus appeared before them they were too afraid of losing their power to realize anything else. They demanded to know under whose authority Jesus worked, and when he turned the question back around on them they chose their answers as carefully as possible as to not upset the balance they'd created, but it wasn't good enough for Jesus. He saw through their farce and was able to force them to admit to their evil ways. It only made them angrier, feeding the fire of their rage so hot that they were willing to do just about anything to get rid of him. Though they still had to think about the order they were to keep, so they bid their time.

If confronted with our own willful ignorance, how would we respond? I don't mean with things like chocolate, though that is an important conversation, too; I mean with our relationships. We turn a blind eye to the suffering around us, yet are outraged when we are inconvenienced. If told of our own privilege, we either want to deny it exists or claim that we are somehow more deserving of it than others. We too willingly shape our viewpoints to fit ideologies rather than shape our ideologies to fit reality. Are we like those evil tenant farmers who received much but demanded more and even killed to keep what they had, or can we realize that all we have belongs to God and seek to produce good fruit with what's been entrusted to us? It takes humility and strength to do this, two things that are so often viewed as opposites, but, in reality, are intrinsically linked. This strong humility comes only through Christ, the one whose humility led him to death for our sake and whose strength raised him.

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*Glory is yours alone, O God, yet too often we seek it for ourselves. May we be like the tax collectors and prostitutes who encountered Jesus and changed, rather than like the religious experts who called themselves holy and denied Christ. Guide us in your truth, and give us the strength to fight the wiles of this world with humility. Amen.*