

Matthew 21b

When Jesus went to the temple and was teaching the people, what happened (v. 23)? The chief priests and the elders interrupted His teaching to ask who gave Him the authority to teach, to perform miracles, and to cleanse the temple since they had not.. They hoped to trap Him, no matter how He answered. If He claimed to have authority in Himself as the Son of God, they would accuse Him of blasphemy. If He claimed authority from men, they would discredit Him. If He claimed authority from God, they would challenge Him. They considered themselves the guardians of the faith, professionals who, by formal training and human appointment, were authorized to direct the religious life of the people. Jesus had no formal schooling and certainly no credentials from Israel's rulers. Their challenge reflected the age-old resentment felt by professional religionists against men with the power of divine anointing.¹

How did Jesus reply to their question (vv. 24-25a)? In response to the religious leaders' question, Jesus asked another question, promising that if they answered His question, He would answer theirs. He asked, "*John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?*" Though this question seemed fairly simple, it prompted a debate among the religious leaders. The answer was obvious: John was a man sent from God. His power came from *divine enablement* not from *human endorsement*.²

What was the dilemma the leaders faced (vv. 25b-26)? If they admitted that John's ministry was from heaven, they were trapped. they would have had to acknowledge that Jesus received His authority from God, since that is what John announced. If John's authority was divine, why hadn't they repented and believed in Christ?

On the other hand, if they responded that John's baptism was from men, they knew the people would rise up against them, because the people regarded John as a prophet from God. Jesus thus put them in a position in which *they* had tried to place *Him* on many occasions³ – between a rock and a hard place.

After deliberating, how did the leaders respond (v. 27)? They refused to commit themselves, so they pleaded ignorance. They knew that whatever they said would bring bad consequences for them. They also wanted to avoid losing face.

And what was Jesus' retort? In keeping with His word, Jesus therefore refused to answer their question. Instead He gave them a parable.

What was the story of Jesus' parable of the two sons (vv. 28-31)? In Jesus' parable, a man asked his two sons to go ... work in the vineyard. The first son said he would not go but later he changed his mind and went. The other immediately said he would go and work but he never showed up. Jesus then asked, "*Which of the two did what his father wanted?*"

How did the religious leaders respond? When asked which son did the will of his father, the religious leaders unwittingly condemned themselves by saying, "*The first.*"

How did Jesus then explain the parable to them (vv. 31b-32)? Jesus immediately applied this to the religious leaders. While some seemingly accepted the ministry of John the Baptist (John 5:35), their actions (Luke 7:29-30) proved they were like the second son. On the other hand many tax collectors and prostitutes received the message of John and did the will of the Father thus identifying themselves as the

first son.....the one who obeyed. Therefore they would be allowed entrance into the kingdom of God. But the religious leaders who did not repent and believe would be denied entrance. These religious leaders stood condemned. They must have been stunned by Jesus' words that despised, immoral people such as tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom and they, the religious leaders, were not!⁴

What was the story of the parable of the tenants (vv. 33-39)? Jesus told of a landowner who went to great expense to make a vineyard productive. He then rented out the vineyard to farmers who were to care for it. When harvest time came, the landowner sent his servants ... to collect what was rightfully his. But the tenant farmers mistreated the servants, beating one, killing another, and stoning a third. Other servants were sent with the same results. Finally the landowner sent his son, thinking they would respect him. The farmers, however, reasoned that if they killed the son, the land would be theirs. Therefore they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

What was the meaning of the parable? It seems clear that Jesus was speaking of the nation of Israel that had been carefully prepared by God to be His fruitful vineyard (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7). The care of the vine had been committed to the nation's religious leaders. But they had failed to acknowledge the Master's right over them and had treated His messengers and prophets badly. They ultimately would even kill His Son, Jesus Christ, outside Jerusalem (cf. Hebrews 13:12).⁵

What question did Jesus ask of the religious leaders (v. 40)? He asked His listeners what they thought the landowner would do to those unfaithful farmers.

How did the religious leaders answer (v. 41)? Obviously, he would not let them continue to operate the vineyard, but he would bring judgment on them. The land would be taken away from them and used by other tenants who would give him his rightful share of the harvest

How did Jesus respond to their answer (vv. 42-44)? Their answer condemned them. When Christ, the Cornerstone, presented Himself to the builders—the leaders of Israel, they had no place for Him in their building plans. They threw Him aside as useless. But following His death He was raised from the dead and given the place of preeminence by God. He has been made the topmost stone in God's building.....the capstone.....fulfilling the prophecy of Psalms 118:22-23.⁶

21:43 Jesus bluntly warned the religious leaders that if they continued their rejection of God and His Messiah, they could expect that God would pass the leadership of His work on earth to others, i.e., Gentiles.

21:44 The choice before the religious leaders is the choice before every person. We can be broken to pieces in humble surrender before God or be completely broken in judgment.

How did the religious leaders respond (vv. 45-46)? The chief priests and Pharisees realized Jesus' remarks were aimed directly at them. They would like to have arrested Him then and there, but they were afraid of the people (cf. v. 26), who thought Jesus was a Prophet (cf. v. 11), so they were unable to act.

¹ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1283.

² Ibid.

³ Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Victor Books, 1985), 69.

⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1285.