

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 26: Cleansing the Temple; Authority Challenged

Matthew 21:12-46

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage is one long confrontation over a single question: by what authority does Jesus act, and will the people of God submit to Him? Doctrinally, the stakes could not be higher. In cleansing the temple, Jesus acts as its Lord, claiming a right over the worship of God that belongs to God alone. In the three parables He exposes the religious leaders as a generation that says the right words but will not obey, that kills the prophets and at last the Son, and that will therefore lose the very thing they presumed to own. And in verse 43 He announces the great turning point of redemptive history: the kingdom of God will be taken from a faithless leadership and given to a people who bear its fruit. Help your class see clearly that this new people is the church Christ builds on Himself, the rejected stone become the cornerstone, drawn from every nation, and that the kingdom is His reign now, not a future earthly political empire. Get this right and the whole shape of the New Testament comes into focus.

But the chapter aims at more than correct doctrine; it aims at the heart. Jesus is not content to win an argument with the chief priests. He is exposing the religion of the lips that never reaches the hands and feet, and that exposure is meant for us, not only for them. The polite son who said "I go, sir" and never went is the picture of nominal Christianity in every age. The tenants who treated the owner's vineyard as their own are a mirror for everyone who has forgotten that life, gifts, and time all belong to God. Teach so that your students cannot watch this confrontation from the safe distance of history.

So press both targets. Send your class home marveling that Jesus is the Lord of the temple, the cornerstone, the King whose kingdom now belongs to a faithful people of every nation. And send them home searching their own hearts, ready to be the son who actually goes, who bears the fruit of the kingdom, and who bows to the authority of Christ in obedience and not in words alone.

Question 1

Student Question:

When Jesus cleanses the temple He quotes Isaiah, "My house shall be called a house of prayer," and Jeremiah, "but you make it a den of robbers" (v. 13). What does His zeal reveal about the holiness of worship and what God refuses to share His house with?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene with care. The temple in Jesus' day was the center of Israel's national and religious life, and the outer Court of the Gentiles had been turned into a noisy commercial bazaar. Money changers exchanged ordinary coins for the temple shekel, and merchants sold animals for sacrifice, often at a markup that preyed on the poor and the pilgrim. The one space where Gentiles could come near to the God of Israel had been crowded out by commerce.

Notice the two texts Jesus weaves together in verse 13. From Isaiah 56:7 He claims the temple is meant to be "a house of prayer," and Isaiah even adds "for all the peoples," which makes the abuse of the Gentile court all the more pointed. From Jeremiah 7:11 He charges that they have made it "a den of robbers," the very phrase Jeremiah used before the first temple fell. Jesus is not merely tidying up; He is pronouncing judgment on a worship that has lost its heart.

Help your students feel the holiness at stake. God will not share His house with greed. Worship is not a marketplace where we come to get a transaction done; it is the meeting of the redeemed with their Redeemer. When anything, profit, performance, convenience, comfort, takes the central place that belongs to God, the house of prayer becomes a den of something else.

Then turn it gently inward. Paul tells the Christian that his own body is now a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and Peter says the church is a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). The same Lord who cleansed the temple still walks into the lives of His people and overturns whatever competes with God for the center. Let your class ask what tables He might want to turn over in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The holiness of worship and God's refusal to share His house with greed or idolatry (Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11)
- Jesus acting as Lord of the temple, exercising authority that belongs to God
- Worship as the meeting of the redeemed with God, not a transaction or a marketplace
- The Christian's body and the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19; 1 Peter 2:5)
- The ongoing work of Christ to cleanse His people of competing loves

Discussion Prompts

- What things tend to crowd out prayer and worship in your own life?
- How does it change worship to remember it is a meeting with God, not a transaction?
- What table might the Lord want to overturn in your heart this week?

Question 2

Student Question:

Right after the cleansing, the blind and the lame come to Jesus in the temple and He heals them, while children shout His praise (vv. 14–15). What does it tell you about Jesus that He clears out corruption and then fills the space with mercy, and where do you need Him to do both in your own heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a self-examining question, so the goal is honest reflection rather than information. Begin by helping students see the beautiful sequence in verses 12 through 16. First Jesus drives out the corruption; then the blind and the lame come to Him and He heals them; then children fill the cleansed space with praise. The same act that judged the merchants opened the door for mercy.

Many of us picture the cleansing as only an act of anger. But notice what filled the emptied space: healing and worship. Jesus does not clear out the corruption and leave a void. He fills it with Himself, with mercy for the broken and praise from the smallest worshipers. This is what He does in a human heart as well.

Press the question toward your students' inner lives. We are often willing to let Jesus deal with the obvious sin, but slower to let Him fill the cleared space with new affections and new mercy. Repentance that only empties is dangerous; Jesus warned of a house swept clean that is left empty and then invaded by something worse (Matthew 12:43–45). The cleansed life must be a filled life.

Encourage them to name a specific place where they need both. Where do you need Jesus to drive out something corrupt, and then to fill that very place with His healing and His worship? Keep the tone hopeful: the Lord who overturns tables is the same Lord who heals the lame and welcomes the praise of children.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The union of judgment and mercy in the ministry of Jesus
- Repentance that not only empties of sin but fills with new affections (Matthew 12:43–45)
- Jesus as the healer of the broken and the welcomer of the lowly
- True worship as the proper occupant of a cleansed heart

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you need Jesus to drive out something corrupt in you?
- What healing or new affection do you long to have fill that same place?
- How can you keep repentance from leaving an empty space behind?

Question 3

Student Question:

The leaders demand, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (v. 23). Jesus answers with a question about John’s baptism. What is Jesus exposing about the way these men handle truth, and what does the exchange teach about the source of His authority?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The leaders’ question in verse 23 is the hinge of the chapter: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” They are the officials responsible for the temple, and a Galilean teacher has just acted as its Lord. Their question is not a sincere search for truth; it is a trap meant to force Jesus either to claim divine authority openly, which they could call blasphemy, or to back down.

Watch how Jesus answers a question with a question (vv. 24–25). He asks whether John’s baptism was from heaven or from man. This is not evasion; it is exposure. Their private deliberation in verses 25 and 26 reveals everything. They do not ask, “What is true?” They ask, “What is safe?” If they say John was from heaven, they condemn themselves for not believing him; if they say from man, they fear the crowd. So they plead ignorance: “We do not know.”

Here is the heart of it: men who will not honestly answer about John have already refused to answer honestly about Jesus, because John pointed to Jesus. Their refusal is not intellectual but moral. They are not lacking evidence; they are lacking the will to submit. So Jesus says, “Neither will I tell you” (v. 27), not because the answer is hidden, but because they have shown they will not receive it.

Draw out the source of Jesus’ authority, even though He does not spell it out for these men. The whole Gospel has been answering their question. He acts with the authority of God because He is the Son sent by the Father, the rejected stone who is the cornerstone, the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth will be given (Matthew 28:18). The tragedy is that the answer stands before them and they will not see it.

Apply it pastorally. We too can hide moral resistance behind a fog of supposed uncertainty. “I am just not sure” can be an honest struggle, or it can be a refuge from a truth we do not want to obey. Help your class tell the difference, and warn them that pretended ignorance, chosen long enough, can become real blindness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The divine authority of Jesus as the Son sent by the Father (Matthew 28:18; John 5:19–27)
- The moral, not merely intellectual, roots of unbelief
- The danger of asking what is safe rather than what is true
- John the Baptist as God’s witness pointing to Christ
- Pretended uncertainty as a refuge from obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to ask what is safe rather than what is true?
- Have you ever hidden behind uncertainty to avoid obeying something you knew?
- How does the whole Gospel of Matthew answer the leaders' question about Jesus' authority?

Question 4

Student Question:

In the parable of the two sons, the one who first refused later repented and went, while the one who promised never obeyed (vv. 28–31). Jesus says tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom ahead of the religious leaders. Where in your life are you more like the polite son who says the right words but does not actually go?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The parable of the two sons (vv. 28–31) is short and devastating. A father tells his first son to go work in the vineyard. The boy flatly refuses, “I will not,” but later changes his mind and goes. The second son says all the right words, “I go, sir,” and never lifts a finger. Jesus asks which did the will of his father, and the answer is obvious even to His opponents: the first.

Then comes the sting in verse 31: “tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.” These were the people everyone considered the most distant from God, the “I will not” son. But many of them heard John, repented, and turned. Meanwhile the respectable religious leaders, the “I go, sir” son, said all the right things about God and never obeyed.

This is a self question, so let it search the class. The danger Jesus is naming is not open rebellion but polite religion that never produces obedience. It is possible to attend faithfully, speak the right language, even teach a class, and still be the son who said “I go, sir” and never went. Words of agreement are not the same as a life of obedience.

Help your students locate the gap between their words and their walk without spiraling into shame. Where do we say amen to a truth on Sunday and live as though we never heard it on Monday? The good news embedded in the parable is hopeful: the first son could change his mind. It is never too late to stop saying no and finally go.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience over lip service as the test of genuine faith (Matthew 7:21; James 1:22)
- The danger of nominal, word-only religion
- The grace that welcomes the repentant outsider into the kingdom
- Repentance as a real change of mind that produces a change of life

Discussion Prompts

- Where do your words to God outrun your actual obedience?

- What helps you move from agreeing with a truth to actually living it?
- Who in your life shows you that it is never too late to turn and obey?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus says even after the leaders saw John's ministry and the response of sinners, "you did not afterward change your minds and believe him" (v. 32). Why is a willingness to change our minds and repent so central to receiving the kingdom, and what makes hardened religious people so resistant to it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question follows the thread of repentance through verse 32. Jesus says the leaders saw John come "in the way of righteousness," saw the tax collectors and prostitutes believe him, and yet "did not afterward change your minds and believe him." The phrase "change your minds" is the language of repentance, and it stands at the very center of how a person enters the kingdom.

Explain why repentance is so essential. To enter the kingdom is to come under a new King, and that requires turning from our own rule to His. Repentance is not merely feeling sorry; it is a change of mind that turns the whole life in a new direction. John preached it, Jesus preached it, and on the day the church began Peter preached it: "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). There is no entrance into the kingdom that bypasses repentance.

Then probe why hardened religious people resist it so fiercely. Repentance requires admitting we were wrong, and the religiously respectable have the most invested in being right. The tax collector knew he was a sinner; the Pharisee was sure he was not. Pride in our own righteousness is one of the great barriers to the kingdom, because it sees no need to change.

Bring it home gently. The longer we go on assuming we are fine, the harder our hearts can become. Help your class cultivate a tender, teachable spirit that is quick to say, "I was wrong," and quick to turn. The same evidence that moved the outcasts to repent left the leaders unmoved, not for lack of proof, but for lack of humility.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance as a genuine change of mind essential to entering the kingdom (Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)
- The hardening effect of self-righteousness and religious pride
- John's ministry as a call to repentance preparing the way for Christ
- Humility and teachability as the soil in which faith grows

Discussion Prompts

- Where is pride in being right making it hard for you to admit a fault?
- What does genuine repentance look like beyond simply feeling sorry?
- How can you keep a tender, teachable heart toward God's correction?

Question 6

Student Question:

The first son did not stay where he started; he changed his mind and went into the vineyard (v. 29). What is one area where God has been calling you to stop saying no, turn around, and finally go to work where He has sent you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question draws on the hopeful turn in the parable of the two sons: the first son "changed his mind and went" (v. 29). The whole point is that a no is not final. The boy started in the wrong place and ended in the right one, and his father counted him as the one who did his will.

Many in your class carry a long-standing no to God in some specific area. Perhaps a ministry they have avoided, a relationship they will not reconcile, a sin they keep excusing, a step of obedience they keep postponing. The parable invites them to stop where they are, turn around, and go.

Help them be concrete. Vague resolutions to "do better" fade quickly. The first son did a specific thing: he went into the vineyard and worked. Ask each person to name the one place where God has been saying, "Go work," and they have been saying, in words or in practice, "I will not."

Encourage them with the father's heart in the parable. He does not disown the son who first refused; he rejoices that he came. God is not standing over your students with a stopwatch and a scowl. He is the Father who welcomes the one who finally goes, and it is never too late to begin.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The possibility of genuine change and a turned-around life in Christ
- Obedience as the true measure of doing the Father's will
- God's welcome of the one who repents and returns
- Concrete, specific obedience over vague good intentions

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one area where you have been saying no to God?
- What concrete first step would count as actually going into the vineyard?
- How does the father's welcome in the parable encourage you to begin?

Question 7

Student Question:

In the parable of the tenants, the owner sends servant after servant, and finally his own son, saying, "They will respect my son" (v. 37). How does this parable trace the long patience of God toward His people, and what does it reveal about who Jesus claims to be?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The parable of the tenants (vv. 33–41) retells the whole story of Israel in miniature. The owner plants a vineyard, an image drawn straight from Isaiah 5, where the vineyard is the house of Israel. He builds a fence, digs a winepress, builds a tower, and leases it to tenants. Everything is provided; the tenants only have to render the fruit at harvest.

Trace the long patience of God through the parable. The owner sends servant after servant to collect his fruit, and the tenants beat one, kill another, stone a third (v. 35). He sends more, and they do the same. These servants are the prophets, sent across the centuries, rejected and often killed by the very people they were sent to serve. The parable is a sober history of how God's people treated His messengers.

Then comes the climax in verse 37: "Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'" Here Jesus says more about Himself than the leaders may even grasp. He is not another servant, another prophet in the long line. He is the Son, distinct from all who came before, sent by the Father as the final appeal. This is a quiet but unmistakable claim to a unique relationship with God.

Help your class marvel at the patience and then the love revealed here. After every rejection, God did not give up but sent another messenger, and at last His own beloved Son. The cross is foreshadowed in the parable: they will throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him (v. 39). God's answer to centuries of rejection was not to withdraw, but to come near in His Son.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The long-suffering patience of God across the history of His people (Isaiah 5:1–7)
- The prophets as God's servants sent and rejected through the centuries
- Jesus as the unique Son, distinct from all the servants who came before (Hebrews 1:1–2)
- The cross foreshadowed in the killing of the son
- God drawing near in His Son as the final and greatest appeal

Discussion Prompts

- How does this parable change the way you see God's patience with His people?
- What does it mean that Jesus is the Son and not merely another prophet?
- How does the owner's decision to send his son reveal the heart of God?

Question 8

Student Question:

The tenants seize the son, throw him out of the vineyard, and kill him, thinking they can seize the inheritance for themselves (vv. 38–39). Where are you tempted to treat the things God has entrusted to you, your time, your gifts, your very life, as though they belong to you and not to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question presses on verses 38 and 39, where the tenants seize the son and reason, “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.” The root sin of the tenants is plain: they wanted to own what was only ever entrusted to them. The vineyard belonged to the owner; they treated it as their own.

This is the temptation of every steward. God has entrusted us with a body, a life, a measure of time, abilities, relationships, and resources. None of it is ours by right; all of it is on loan from the Owner. The tenants’ fantasy, that they could remove the heir and keep the inheritance, is the same lie that whispers to us that our lives are our own to spend as we please.

Help your students name the specific places where they live as owners rather than stewards. For one it may be money clutched too tightly; for another, time guarded too jealously; for another, talents buried rather than used; for another, the very direction of their life, run as a private project rather than surrendered to the Owner.

Turn it toward worship and freedom, not guilt. The steward who remembers that everything belongs to God is actually set free, free from the crushing burden of ownership and free to hold every gift with open hands. Paul reminds us, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Belonging to God is not bondage; it is our deepest joy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Stewardship: all of life entrusted to us, owned by God (1 Corinthians 4:7)
- The sin of treating God’s gifts as our private possession
- Belonging to God by creation and by redemption (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)
- The freedom of holding every gift with open hands

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to live as an owner rather than a steward?
- What would change if you held your time, money, and gifts with open hands?
- How is belonging to God a freedom rather than a burden?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus declares, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (v. 43), and then names Himself the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone (vv. 42, 44). What is this kingdom that is being given to a new people, who are they, and what does Jesus mean that it bears fruit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, so give it your fullest attention. After the tenants kill the son, Jesus draws the verdict out of His opponents’ own mouths: the owner will put those wretches to a miserable death and let the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons (v. 41). Then He quotes Psalm 118:22, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and lands the hammer blow of verse 43: “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”

First, be clear about what is being taken away. It is not that God abandons His promises; it is that the leadership of national Israel, the builders who reject the cornerstone, forfeit their privileged stewardship of the kingdom because they will not bear its fruit or receive its King. The kingdom is taken from them, not from the world. This is the great turning point Matthew has been building toward.

Then be clear about what is given and to whom. The kingdom is given “to a people producing its fruits.” Peter, quoting the very same stone passage, tells us who this people is: those built on Christ the living stone, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,” who were once not a people but now are God’s people (1 Peter 2:4–10). This is the church Christ builds on Himself, drawn not from one nation but from every nation, the true Israel of God made up of all who come to the cornerstone in faith and obedience.

Now guard the boundary carefully, because this verse is often badly misused. The kingdom Jesus speaks of is not a future earthly political empire that He will set up at some later date. It is the reign of God established in Christ’s church, the kingdom Daniel foresaw that “shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44), the kingdom Jesus said some standing there would see come with power (Mark 9:1), the kingdom into which believers were transferred when the church began (Colossians 1:13). Christ is reigning now, from the right hand of God, as Lord and Christ (Acts 2:34–36). The fruit-bearing people are not waiting for a political kingdom; they are living in His kingdom now and producing its fruit.

Finally, let the cornerstone imagery land with weight and warning. The rejected stone has become the cornerstone, the very foundation of everything God is building. Verse 44 warns that this stone is one you cannot ignore: fall on it and you are broken, let it fall on you and you are crushed. There is no neutral relationship to Christ. He is either the foundation we build our lives upon or the stone over which we stumble. Lead your class to build everything on the cornerstone, and to be among the fruit-bearing people to whom the kingdom now belongs.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The kingdom taken from a faithless leadership and given to a fruit-bearing people (v. 43)
- The new people as the church Christ builds on Himself, drawn from all nations (1 Peter 2:4–10)
- The kingdom as Christ's reign now in His church, not a future earthly political empire (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Colossians 1:13)
- Christ reigning now as Lord and Christ at the right hand of God (Acts 2:34–36)
- Jesus the rejected stone become the cornerstone of all God is building (Psalm 118:22)
- The impossibility of neutrality toward Christ: foundation or stumbling stone (v. 44)
- Fruit-bearing as the mark of those who truly belong to the kingdom

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the kingdom belongs to a people who bear its fruit, and how do we bear it?
- How would you answer someone who expects a future earthly political kingdom of Christ?
- Is Jesus the cornerstone you are building on, or a stone you are stumbling over?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter, from the cleansed temple to the rejected cornerstone. The leaders perceived that Jesus was speaking about them, yet would not bow (v. 45). Name one specific way the Lord of the temple is confronting you, and how you will answer His authority this week, not with words only but with obedience.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole chapter and press it toward the heart. Matthew 21 has shown us the Lord of the temple cleansing His Father's house, the King whose authority the leaders dared to question, the Father who sent servant after servant and at last His Son, and the cornerstone on whom a new and fruit-bearing people is built. The final note is sobering: the chief priests and Pharisees perceived that He was speaking about them (v. 45), and still they would not bow.

That is the danger to name. It is entirely possible to understand the passage perfectly, to see exactly what Jesus means, and still refuse to submit. Knowledge is not the same as surrender. The leaders got the message; they simply did not obey it. Help your students avoid being hearers who understand and walk away unchanged.

Invite each person to be specific. Where in this chapter has the Lord put His finger? Is it the table He wants to overturn in your worship, the no you have been saying, the ownership you

have been clinging to, the cornerstone you have been stumbling over? Give them a moment of quiet to name one thing and one obedient response.

Close in worship, not merely resolve. The astonishing news of this chapter is that the rejected Son became the cornerstone, and that the kingdom is now given to a people who bear fruit, a people Christ has welcomed from every nation, including us. Let your obedience this week flow out of gratitude that you have been built into His house at all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between understanding the truth and submitting to it
- Christ's authority as something to be obeyed, not merely acknowledged
- Specific, concrete obedience as the fruit of a real encounter with the King
- Worship and gratitude as the proper motive for obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Where in this chapter has the Lord most clearly put His finger on your life?
- What single obedient step will you take this week in response?
- How can this class support and pray for you as you take it?