

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 26: Cleansing the Temple; Authority Challenged -- Matthew 21:12-46

The crowds are still buzzing from the triumphal entry, palm branches scattered in the dust, hosannas hanging in the air. And then Jesus walks straight into the temple, the most sacred space in all Israel, and the mood changes in an instant. He does not admire the architecture. He does not nod politely at the religious machinery. He overturns the tables of the money changers and drives out those who bought and sold, and His voice cuts through the noise like a blade: "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers" (v. 13). This is not the gentle Jesus of the felt-board pictures. This is the Lord of the temple, jealous for the honor of His Father's house.

Watch what happens next, because it tells you everything. The blind and the lame come to Him in the temple, and He heals them (v. 14). Children cry out, "Hosanna to the Son of David" (v. 15), and the chief priests and scribes are indignant. The very place that had become a marketplace becomes, under the hand of Jesus, a place of healing and worship and the praise of little children. He has not come to tear down what is holy. He has come to cleanse it, to restore it to its purpose, to make it again what God always intended it to be.

But the leaders are not amazed. They are threatened. The next morning they confront Him: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (v. 23). It is the question underneath the whole chapter, indeed underneath the whole Gospel. Who is this man? Where does His authority come from? Jesus answers them not with a lecture but with a question about John, and then with three parables that land like hammer blows: two sons sent to the vineyard, wicked tenants who kill the owner's son, and a kingdom that will be taken from those who refuse its fruit.

By the time He finishes, the chief priests and Pharisees know He is speaking about them (v. 45), and they want to arrest Him but fear the crowds. This is the great collision of Matthew's Gospel, the King confronting the keepers of religion who will not bow to Him. As you walk through this passage, do not stand at a safe distance. Let the Lord of the temple walk into your own life, turn over the tables you have set up where prayer should be, and ask you the same searching question He asked them: will you say yes to His authority, not with your lips only, but with your obedience?

Group Discussion: Jesus walks into the temple and immediately confronts what it had become, declaring, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers" (v. 13). What does His zeal for His Father's house reveal about how God feels when worship gets crowded out by other things, and where do you see that same crowding happen today?

Personal Reflection: Jesus told of a son who said “I will not” and then went, and a son who said “I go, sir” and never went (vv. 28–30). When you look honestly at your own walk with Christ this week, where have your words said yes to God while your actions quietly said no?

Read Matthew 21:12–46

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 56:6–7, God's house meant to be a house of prayer for all the nations; Psalm 118:22–23, the stone the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone; Daniel 2:44, God setting up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed; 1 Peter 2:4–10, Christ the living

stone and His people a chosen race built into a spiritual house; Acts 2:36–41, the response of faith, repentance, and baptism to Jesus crowned Lord and Christ.