

# Jesus, the Priests, and the Temple of God

Thomas Robinson, *Jesus and the Presence of God 3*, June 14, 2015

## **Matthew 21:23-46** (ESV Adapted)

<sup>23</sup> 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?**”

<sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> **The baptism of John**, from where did it come? **From heaven or from humans?**”

And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘From humans,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> 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.”

<sup>28</sup> “**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.’ <sup>29</sup> And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he **changed his mind** and went. <sup>30</sup> And he went to **the other son** and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> 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**.

<sup>33</sup> “**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 [cf. Isa 5:1-7].

<sup>34</sup> When the **season for fruit** drew near, he sent **his servants** to the tenants to get his fruit. <sup>35</sup> And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.

<sup>37</sup> **Finally he sent his son** to them, saying, ‘**They will respect my son.**’

<sup>38</sup> But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘**This is the heir.** Come, **let us kill him** and have his inheritance.’ <sup>39</sup> And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. <sup>40</sup> When therefore the **owner of the vineyard** comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

<sup>41</sup> 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.**”

<sup>42</sup> 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?’ [Ps 118:22-23, cf. Isa 28:16]*

<sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the **kingdom of God** will be taken away from you and given to a people producing **its fruits**. <sup>44</sup> And *the one who **falls on this stone** will be **broken** to pieces; and when **it falls on anyone**, it will **grind** him to chaff.*” [Isa 8:14-15; Dan 2:34-35]

<sup>45</sup> When **the chief priests and the Pharisees** heard his **parables**, they perceived that he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup> And although they were seeking to arrest him, they **feared the crowds**, because they held him to be a **prophet**.

## The Crash of the Rejected Stone

Matthew is describing Jesus' second entry into the temple. The first as humble king on a donkey [Zech 9:9] with people crying '*Hosanna to the Son of David, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*' [Psa 118:25-26]. It led to confrontation with the chief priest [21:15].

The second begins with the sign of the fruitless fig tree. It continues with parables of vineyards unworked by those who promised to work, or held hostage by tenants who refuse to give the harvest to the one who planted it and kill his servants and his son.

The confrontation is deep and fundamental and Mt is helping us understand it by focusing on its scriptural roots and how Jesus understood its surprising character and impact.

Jesus quotes Ps 118 just before the '*Hosanna*' portion. A stone rejected by the leaders becomes the cornerstone – the kingdom of God, with God's anointed king, the Messiah, 'Son of David.' It echoes Isa 28:16. Jesus adds references to Isa 8:14-15, Dan 2:34-35 – God's stone of stumbling and the stone that crushes the idol of human power to chaff.

It's all focused on the chief priests. In Mt 2:4 they know the signs of the Messiah. But when Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, Jesus immediately refers to his coming suffering at the hands of the chief priests & elders [Mt 16:21, 20:18]. They believe neither John nor Jesus.

## The Dead Prophet who Reverses Religion

Jesus focuses the problem through their rejection of John the Baptist [21:23-32]. They claim the right to judge Jesus' authority, but could not recognize God's work in the Elijah-like work of John. They admit their spiritual blindness as temple leaders by saying, '*We don't know.*'

Jesus had invited them in, if they could believe John. He tells a simple parable. Easy question.

But he follows it with a devastating application. The most condemned in society – tax collectors and prostitutes – are entering God's Kingdom ahead of the priests. They could recognize John's prophetic call to repentance. The priests evaluated him politically as a threat to them. They were so locked into their structure of power, they couldn't change.

Everything's upside down. The priests don't know God. The sinners recognize God's call. Just as Jesus had been judged for calling '*tax collectors and sinners*' [Mt 9:10-13], so it continues.

## The Murdered Son who Overthrows the Powerful

Jesus tell another clear parable leading up to a question with a clear answer. He echoes a famous prophetic parable in Isaiah [5:1-7] pronouncing judgment on Jerusalem and Judah.

Jesus changes the focus from the vineyard itself to the '*tenants*,' standing for the chief priests. They don't produce fruit because they don't really believe in God's real power.

The only power they know is that of control and violence, none of God's self-giving love.

The '*Son*' is that '*Son of David*' who is also God's Son [2Sam 7:14], the Messiah. He embodies Israel. He's rejected by priests as not bringing God's authority. Listeners answer the question with their version of judgment on Caiaphas and the aristocratic priesthood.

## 'This is the Lord's Doing' – The Unexpected God

But it doesn't fit. The Son gets killed! That wasn't supposed to happen to the Messiah. Jesus uses the parable to re-write expectations of how God works. The Son is killed, the stone is rejected. But that doesn't stop the transforming power of God. The chief priests will watch as their power base (trying to collaborate with Romans and appease zealots) evaporates into war and the destruction of the temple in ad 64-70. Sadducees cease.

But the Son who is killed becomes the cornerstone of the fulfillment of the prophecies in a way that they could not imagine and wanted to block. His death will invite them into life and forgiveness, renewal of Israel as a light to the whole world. God really is surprising!