

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

MATTHEW 21:23-44

WE now commence the section in which we see the King in Jerusalem, and in the Temple, the Center of opposition.

The hostility of the priests and rulers is more than ever manifest.

First, they challenged Him as to His authority, and He answered them in parables. They were angry, for they saw that His two parables were intended to apply to them, and they commenced with more earnestness than before to plot against His life. He answered their anger with a third parable, a parable of judgment. Then they endeavored to entangle Him in His talk, bringing to Him questions.

In this section we see the forces that had always been against Him manifesting themselves in clear succession; and they are the forces which are against Him still.

They are:

- First unbelief, as represented in the rulers who asked Him concerning His authority;
- secondly worldliness, as represented in the men who asked Him questions concerning the tribute money;
- thirdly rationalism, as represented in the men who asked Him questions about the resurrection;
- Finally intellectual dishonesty, as represented in the man who asked Him a question which was merely that of casuistry.

Let us consider first, the challenge of unbelief; and the King's answer. The challenge was expressed in the words: "**By what authority doest Thou these things? and who gave Thee this authority?**"

Let us remember the occasion upon which the question was put. Think of the surroundings. We have studied the story of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem, and the fact of the cleansing of the Temple. We now see the Christ, having returned from the quiet, lonely vigil near Bethany, coming into the Temple which He had cleansed. Remember these events all took place within two or three days. He had driven out the money-changers, overturned the tables of the traffickers in the courts of the House of God, and for one brief moment restored the Temple to its original purpose.

He had now returned to the cleansed Temple, and was teaching. He had come with quiet assumption of authority. We cannot understand these men's questions at this point unless we see this, the Man Who had dared to cleanse the Temple, had now returned to it in order to teach, and the people - Jerusalem was very full at this time - were crowding upon Him. That was the occasion.

While He was so teaching, the chief priests and the elders came to Him. That appears a simple statement, but it was no mere casual coming of the chief priests and elders. They were fringe of the crowd, sometimes nearer, these rulers, the members of the official council, members of the Sanhedrim. But this was not an occasion when some member of the Sanhedrim, having heard Him teaching, asked Him some casual question.

This was an official visit of the chief priests and the elders of the people, the representatives of the ruling powers of Jerusalem in matters of religion, the men of authority, the men whose authority had perhaps never been questioned for long years until Jesus came.

He did not commence by questioning their authority. As a matter of fact, He told His disciples that they were to do all that the Pharisees told them as they sat on Moses' seat. He had never called in question the fact that these men had authority; but He had so taught as to make the people call in question their authority; for as we have already seen, they **"were astonished at His teaching; for He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."**

Now this was His last visit to Jerusalem, and the men of authority, who had been put into contrast with Him by the people, and not by Himself, came to Him, and interrupted Him in His teaching. They had the technical right to do this within the Temple Courts, according to their own understanding of their own position, and according to the popular estimate of that position.

They now asked Him two questions.

First, **"By what authority doest Thou these things?" "By what authority";** that is, What is the note of Your authority? Is Your authority a political authority, a social authority, or a spiritual authority? What do You claim? That was the first question, and that was the deepest.

But that which really troubled them was revealed in their second question, **"Who gave Thee this authority?"**

His presence there was without their sanction. He had asked no permission from the elders or priests to find His way into the Temple Courts and to teach. Such was their challenge, and it was made in order that they might encompass His arrest, and end His mission.

Now let us carefully notice the King's answer.

This story, in common with many others, has suffered from a very superficial interpretation. We need to understand the spirit of it.

First, He declared to them that He was quite willing to tell them, if they were ready to receive His answer. **“I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things.”**

- It was not that He declined to declare His authority.
- It was not that He resented their interference, and was not prepared to answer;
- It was quite useless for Him to tell them His authority; they were not prepared to believe Him.

He was perfectly prepared to declare what was the nature of His authority, and whence He obtained His authority, to men who were ready to receive it.

What was His test? **“The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or from men?”**

He said, in effect, You are challenging Me as to whether I have any right to come into the House of God, and assume authority in the House of God. Am I a Teacher answering the authority of God, or am I here as a man craving the popular acclaim of the people? I will ask you one question, “The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men?”

Before He could reveal to them what they asked, He took them back to the last revelation which they had received; for readiness to receive a new revelation always depends upon the attitude to the previous one. That is always the principle of God’s dealing with men. Thus we see that there was more in Christ’s question, than appears upon the surface.

Supposing these men had admitted that the baptism of John was from heaven, then their question concerning Christ was immediately answered, because John had been His herald. John discontinued his ministry when Jesus began.

John had said, **“He must decrease, but I must increase.”** If they had accepted that testimony as from heaven they would not have asked Him this question about His authority. They knew full well what John’s testimony to Him had been. Thus there was an intimate connection between His question and their answer. The prime meaning of Jesus’ question was this; “What did you do with the last light that fell upon your pathway? If you tell Me that, I shall know whether you are ready to receive more light or not!”

How did they reply? Their difficulty was twofold.

“If we shall say, From heaven” and that is what we ought to say then He will ask us why we do not obey Him.

“If we shall say, From men” and that is what we would prefer saying **“we fear the people.”**

The multitude had come to the common conclusion that John was a prophet, and they dare not say that he was not. Therefore **“they answered: We cannot tell.”**

To catch its significance we must interpret that particular answer of these men in the light of what Jesus said to them immediately afterwards **“Neither tell I you.”**

He ignored, and treated as untrue, what they declared, when they said they knew not. They withheld an honest answer; He withheld the answer which they asked. Theirs was the answer of blindness and of dishonesty. Of blindness, for they had seen the issue of John's ministry. They had seen an ethical revival resulting from the emotional revival. They had seen harlots and publicans pressing into the Kingdom of God, which meant obeying God, yielding to His demands, giving up the things John denounced, turning to the way of righteousness; and yet they dared to look in the face of Jesus, and say, "**We cannot tell**"

It was willful blindness, and it was absolute dishonesty; and as such our Lord treated it. Then said He, "**Neither tell I you.**"

And why not? Because it was quite useless. If they were blind in the presence of the evidences of the Divinity of the mission of John, then they would also be blind, as they were, in the presence of the evidences of the Divinity of the mission of Jesus. If they were dishonest in dealing with the former light, they would be dishonest whatever He declared to them.

And not only because reply was useless, but because reply was needless.

"**By what authority,**" said these men, "**doest Thou these things?**" and in the use of that word they revealed their subconscious conviction. They did not say, By what authority sayest Thou these things? They knew perfectly well that wherever He had come with His ethic, He had also provided a dynamic, and by obedience men had been changed. His answer therefore declared that the things concerning the authority of which they had questioned Him, were themselves the evidences of the authority.

Then immediately, not allowing them to escape, He continued; "**But what think ye?**"

And then He gave them two parables, in which He condemned:

- First of all their methods, in the parable of the two sons;
- Secondly, their motives, in the parable of the vineyard, the husbandmen, and the one son who was cast out.

In considering the blasting of the fig-tree we turned to the song of Isaiah, that great song of the vineyard.

Now observe that both these parables are parables of the vineyard. Christ spoke as in the particular region which the prophet had described; as the Servant of God, The song of the well-beloved concerning His vineyard, was the. song of the vineyard neglected. The fences were to be broken down, and destruction was to come thereto; and He was in Jerusalem for the specific purpose of pronouncing doom upon that very vineyard of the Lord of hosts, because of its failure.

Thus when He was dealing with the rulers, His two parables returned to the figure of Isaiah, the figure of the vineyard. The second one is most evidently an accommodation of the Song of Isaiah, in order to apply its truth to the rulers of His day, who had failed.

Let us take the first, and notice what our Lord did.

He stated the case by employing the figure of two sons.

The father said to the first of them, **“Son, go work to day in My vineyard,”** and he said, **“I will not,”** and then he repented and the word “repent” here is not to change the mind, but to be filled with sorrow he realized the mistake, and he went into the vineyard.

To the next son he said the same thing, and he replied and it is a somewhat curious and yet remarkable reply **“I sir.”** We read it, **“I go, sir”** but the word “go” is not in the Greek. He simply said, **“I sir.”** The phrase is idiomatic and suggests that this son put himself into contrast with the other one, who said he would not go, as though he said, You may depend on me sir!

That is the graphic force of the word here. And he went not.

Now said Christ to these men: Which was the true son which did the will of his father? He compelled them to find the verdict He made them the jury of their own actions. They found the verdict. **“They say unto Him, The first;”** the man who said, I will not go, but repenting, went, is the man who does the will of God; rather than the man who declared, I am ready to go, but went not.

Then notice carefully the application.

He put into contrast two classes of people the publicans and the harlots, the rebellious people who said, We will not do the will of God; and those very men who were the rulers. He said in effect; You have given a verdict against yourselves. The publicans and harlots had said, We will not; and then repenting, went. The rulers had said, We go, and had not done so.

For the purpose of this contrast He had taken them back to John’s ministry.

They had heard him, and professing obedience had been disobedient. The publicans and harlots had heard him, and they who had said, We will not go, had repented, and entered into the Kingdom of God.

There is no question as to what Christ thought of those men; He knew perfectly well that they were sure John’s ministry was from heaven.

John came in the way of righteousness, and they knew that they, the exponents of the ethic of Judaism, could not quarrel with the great ethic he declared; they knew it was the way of righteousness; and yet when he pronounced the way of righteousness they did not obey; they who affirmed their loyalty to God, would not obey the ethic through John.

And it was not merely true that the publicans and harlots believed and obeyed, and they did not; the truth was that they refused to believe, even though they saw the signs of the publicans and harlots entering into the way of righteousness.

They not only refused to be persuaded by John himself, but when they saw the effect of John's preaching, that those men and women whom they despised, and would not help, were helped, and lifted, and healed, they still refused.

The parable was indeed a white light, and a fierce fire; and the King standing there in the Temple, challenged as to His authority, instead of answering the quibble, assumed the throne of judgment, and welcomed into the Kingdom of God harlots and publicans who set their faces toward the Kingdom, and flung out the men who had professed to be the exponents of His Kingdom, who nevertheless had been disobedient to His command.

If in this first parable He had condemned their methods, He now probed more deeply into their lives, and dealt with their motives.

And once more the figure is Isaiah's figure. The proprietor's perfect provision was in order to the production of fruit.

"Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower."

He made every provision necessary in order that He might gather fruit from His vineyard. To borrow the word of Isaiah, **"He looked for judgment, but, behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry."**

What did He look for? For judgment, for righteousness. Thus Jesus reminded them of this song of their own prophet. He then declared that the proprietor let this vineyard **"out to husbandmen."**

He said, **"he went into a far country,"** which was a figurative way of saying that God made the priests and rulers and elders responsible for the vineyard; and the failure of the vineyard was to be charged back upon them.

That was the perpetual message of the prophets; **"Woe to the idol shepherd."** And so also when Christ saw the multitudes and was moved with compassion it was because they were as sheep without a shepherd. This parable is not for the crowd, but it is for the shepherds.

The priests and the elders were in front of Him; the men who ought to have taken care of the vineyard of the Lord of hosts, and so cultivated it that it would have brought forth fruit for which God looked; judgment which is justice, and righteousness.

They were responsible. But what had these husbandmen done? The messengers came to receive the fruit. They beat them, bruised them, flinging them out, because instead of husbanding the vineyard for the proprietor, they had been cultivating it for themselves.

And at last, said the King, He sent His own Son. Now, said the husbandmen, is the opportunity, that for which we have been waiting. We have gathered the fruit for our own self-enrichment, now we will possess the whole husbandry; let us kill Him, and the inheritance shall be ours.

Said Jesus, What shall be done with these men?

He had made them find the verdict; He now made them pass the sentence.

He Who compelled them to be the jury, finding the verdict in the case of their own wrong, now compelled them to be the judge, passing sentence upon their own iniquity. And they were quite vehement about it, and their very vehemence is the evidence of the tremendous force with which Jesus spoke the words, that searching intensity that stirred the conscience, and compelled attention, and made the chief priests forget their quarrel with Him and speak out the truth.

He found the deepest in them, and appealed to that deepest in them which they were resolutely setting themselves to stifle, in order to crucify Him. He compelled them to tell the truth. What shall be done to these men? Oh, they said, **“He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, who shall render Him the fruits in their seasons.”**

There was no need for Christ to say anything more.

They saw He spoke concerning them. They knew perfectly well that they had come to arrest Him, and challenge His authority in the Temple; and yet with quiet and matchless authority He had gathered them to the judgment throne of the unending ages, and made them say they were miserable sinners who deserved punishment at the hands of an angry God. They made their own confession.

This was the condemnation of their motive.

They had been exercising authority in ethical and religious matters, but never for the sake of the glory of God, but for the sake of the maintenance of their own official position.

They said, We will take this vineyard of the Lord of hosts; it is our great opportunity to maintain our own position; we will farm it, and work it for ourselves. We are not anxious that God should find judgment and righteousness, we are anxious that we should find dignity and office.

That is the dastardly sin of false authority in every age, that it cares for its own robing and dignity, and for the enslaving of the people to its own rule, and not for judgment and righteousness and truth for which God is seeking.

Thus our King brought these rulers to His judgment throne, and then flung back upon them their own sentence, **“Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”**

You are here to arrest Me, you are here to encompass My death, you are the builders, you are here to take this Stone that lies in your way, a stumblingblock, and fling it out! **“Did ye never read in the Scriptures,**

**“The stone which the builders rejected,
The same is become the head of the corner:
This is the Lord’s doing,
And it is marvelous in our eyes?”**

A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence. Fall on it and there is a touch of mercy even here and you will be broken, but the broken man can be healed. But let it fall on you, and you will be ground to dust, and there is no healing then.

The supreme interest in this paragraph is the revelation of Jesus. He is the Master of all ages, and His judgments are the judgments of the ages. His is the voice of eternity, and He so deals with men as to compel them to acquiesce in the justice and righteousness of His verdicts and sentence.

~ end of chapter 58 ~

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