

Matthew 21:28-32

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[0 : 00] This morning we're going to look at a parable and it's Matthew 21 verses 28 to 32.! And you'll notice that there are two parables in this part of Matthew.

There's this one and the next one which we'll do next week. And they're both aimed at correcting Israel.

And so in that sense the whole thing is written to Israel but there are big spiritual lessons we can take from it as individuals as well. And just before we read the bit that we're going to deal with I just want to draw your attention to verse 45.

Which is at the end of the second parable where it says when the chief priests and Pharisees heard his parables they understood that he was speaking about them.

So normally parables are so that only the discerning can understand and the people who are unbelievers don't really get it.

[1 : 08] But these parables are aimed at Israel. But they are also aimed at attitudes. And so we'll see as we go through.

Now the background to this, this is a logical follow on from what we've studied so far. And so in recent chapters he has taken the religious Jews through an examination of their own hearts.

And he's done it both individually and nationally. He's challenged their thinking, challenged their heart attitudes. But he's also pointed out that the nation is being led astray.

And the Jews by nature follow their leadership. They've been brought up to follow their leadership. And they trust their leadership to lead them in right paths. And Jesus is dealing with their leadership.

And by extension he's dealing with the whole nation that follow the leaders. And so these leaders have followed Jesus all over the land and examined him as a potential Messiah.

[2 : 19] They've investigated all his claims and all his miracles. You may remember from some earlier studies that they had a system where if someone presented themselves as a potential Messiah. They would carry out an investigation in two phases.

The first thing they would do is observe and say nothing. Because if it proved to be not much to worry about, not much to concern oneself about, they would just let it fizzle and die.

But if it looked like a serious contender, they would then follow that person and ask questions and get them to justify what they were doing.

And they would probe more deeply to see whether this was a real contender. And Jesus had withstood every single test. He'd answered every question. He'd sometimes completely confounded them with his knowledge.

We read in several places that people were amazed at his teaching. And many people have discerned that he is Messiah. You may think back to Matthew 12 when he cast out the dumb spirit.

[3 : 25] And the people said, surely this can't be the son of David, can it? They knew who he was. But it was the leaders that said, no, no, no, he's doing this by the power of Beelzebub.

He's doing this by the power of the devil. Time and time again, he fulfilled messianic prophecies involving feats that only God could do. He's healed the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dumb.

He cleansed the woman with the issue of blood. He cleansed lepers, which according to the rabbinic teaching and according to the scriptures, only Messiah could do.

They had a law on their statute books that had never been used until Jesus showed up and cleansed lepers. So he'd raised people from the dead.

He'd taken control of the weather. He'd fed thousands of people twice with very, very meagre provisions. And then just before what we're reading, he'd entered Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9 verse 9, which was made something like five or six hundred

years prior to this.

[4 : 39] And he did it on the 10th of Nisan, fulfilling the prophecy in Daniel chapter 9 verse 24 and following. Exactly 173,880 days after the decree to rebuild the temple.

So on the back of all that, you may recall that they have challenged his authority. They've said, by what authority do you do this? And they were trying to ask him the question that he couldn't really answer without getting into trouble.

By whose authority do you do this? They set a trap for him because if he said my own authority, he'd probably get strung up for blasphemy. But if he said God's authority, he'd probably also get strung up for blasphemy.

They wanted to kill him. And so what we read is that he had. Remember, he had done this three years prior to this.

In John chapter 2, you read that he cleansed the temple then and he's come and he's cleansed the temple again three years later. So he drew an analogy between them and the fig tree, the particular fig tree that he went to and found it was full of leaves, but no fruit.

[5 : 57] It promised fruit, but gave no fruit. And he made this analogy between them and the fig tree. And therefore the nation, what he was saying was the nation would soon die and wither because it had the appearance of being fruitful, who had all the pomp and ceremony, all the funny hats and all the regalia.

But actually they were completely unrighteous. So they had no fruit of righteousness. And so there'd been several attempts to kill him.

There was an ongoing plot to achieve this. They wanted to kill him. And they got particularly angry when he impinged upon the national pride. We're God's people.

Chest puffed out. And when he took them down a peg, it always made them angry. And in Luke 4 verse 29, he had reminded them of the occasion when God had favoured the Gentiles over the house of Israel, which was like a big insult to the Jews.

One could cite several other occasions when they plotted to kill him. Matthew 12 and verse 14 is another one where they, after he said that they'd committed the unforgivable sin or the sin that would not be forgiven, they wanted to put him to death.

[7 : 22] And John 11 verse 53 is another occasion where they got upset at him and wanted to put him to death. So Jesus is about to upset them again.

And so he tells two more parables which are recorded in this chapter. We're going to look at the first one. So let's read it. Verse 28 through to 32.

But what do you think? And remember, he said, you can't tell me whether John the Baptist was from heaven or from man. So I'm not going to tell you by what authority I do this.

And immediately after that, he says, but what do you think? It's almost as if he's consulting them, isn't it? But actually, what we're going to find is that he's very skillfully causing them to reveal that they understand the need for repentance and causing them in a strange way to face up to the truth and answer their own question as to whose authority Jesus is working under.

So he said, but what do you think? A man had two sons and he came to the first and he said, son, go work today in the vineyard. And he answered him, I will not.

[8 : 47] And by the way, that's emphatic. It's not my dad. And it's no. I'm sure none of you would say that to your parents or grandparents.

Just saying. So he said, he answered, I will not.

But afterwards, he regretted it and went. The man came to the second and said the same thing.

And he answered, I will, sir.

But he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, the first. Jesus said to them, truly, I say to you that the tax collectors and the prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.

For John came to you in the way of righteousness. And you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes did not believe him.

[9 : 48] Sorry. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes did believe him. And you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterwards so as to believe him.

It occurs to me, and I didn't put this in the notes, but as I read it. When the Bible here speaks of believing, it's not like when you're presented with a doubtful account of something, you have to rack your brains as to whether you're likely to believe in this or not.

It talks about believing because all the barriers to belief have been removed. Jesus expected them to believe in John the Baptist because of the fruit of John the Baptist's ministry.

And many people, as we've already read, you know, they didn't want to, when they were asked to answer Jesus's question, they didn't want to say that John the Baptist was not from heaven because all the people believed he was a prophet.

So they believed he was from God. And so they're caught because they don't want to take any notice of John the Baptist, but at the same time, they don't want to admit that he's a prophet.

[11:07] And in fact, Jesus marks him out as the greatest of all the prophets, the greatest prophet that ever lived. So when it talks about you didn't believe him, it presumes that all the barriers to belief had been removed.

It's actually very simple and we can't sometimes make a big thing of it. Well, do I believe it or don't I? When you've seen the evidence, you have no reason not to believe.

And Romans 1 tells us this, that we are all without excuse because God has shown his hand. He showed his hand in creation. And he showed his hand through everything that he did with Jesus. And we have all the history of that to fall back on. And there is no excuse for anyone to reject Jesus. They were still rejecting him, having actually been there when he did all these miracles that fulfilled the scriptures.

And also because John had introduced him as the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. He'd introduced him as Messiah. So he starts with, what do you think?

[12:14] And then he paints this scenario, which was very analogous to their own circumstances. In that he was saying that these two sons, the first son said, no, I'm not going to do it.

But then repented and went and did it. And notice there's no record that the son had any discussion or debate on the matter with his father.

He just changed his mind and went and did it. And that is true repentance. And the other son says, yeah, I'll go, dad.

And then doesn't. The other son had leaves, but no fruit to take us back to the fig tree. Yeah, dad, I'll do it. Oh, what a willing son.

But he wasn't willing at all, really. He didn't do it. But true repentance is that about face, that turning away from a bad decision to the right decision.

[13:23] It doesn't involve debate. It just involves literally making a U-turn. And it's actually a much misunderstood concept.

There are those of us who believe. I'm sure, I hope they're not in this room. And if they are, please have your thinking corrected by what I'm about to say.

The Lord doesn't call upon us to make a list of our sins every day and tick off the ones we've said sorry for. That isn't repentance. It's not working out which line did I overstep today.

What it is, very simply is, I used to pull in the opposite direction to God. And now I'm turning around and I'm going towards God.

And when you think about this passage, that means that you give him absolute freedom to discipline you.

[14:28] And we will revisit that later in the talk. But you're giving God absolute freedom to discipline you. And I would, people may disagree with this, but I would say not just to discipline you, but to run for you to run towards his discipline rather than away from it.

Lord, please discipline me. We'll revisit that in a moment. Now, when these religious people were listening to this question, and he used this example of children's obedience to their father.

Deuteronomy 5 verse 16 says this. It says, honour your father and mother as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the Lord your God gives you.

So the implication there is, if you disobey your parents, you will not live long in the land and it won't go well with you. So it's actually very straightforward.

And Exodus 20, 15 and Leviticus 20 verse 9 both prescribe severe penalties, including death, for children who are disobedient to or curse their parents in some way.

[15:54] And so there's the very idea that a son would refuse the instruction of his father is a complete anathema to these religious people who, when all said and done, they try to apply the law.

They try to apply the law without righteousness, but they try to apply the law. So to suggest that somebody would, when father says, please go and work in the vineyard, no.

That in itself is an anathema. What about the other one, though, who says, yeah, dad, I'll do it, and then doesn't do it. Well, that piles more wrong onto another wrong.

First of all, it's wrong not to want to do the will of your father. And secondly, it's even more wrong to lie to him about it. So the second son is worse than the first, but both are sinners.

And this is an important point here. Neither of these deserve a break. They've both been sinners. However, the key ingredient that releases them is this act of repentance.

[16:59] The one said to himself inwardly, yeah, I really should do that. And I'm going to go and do it. I've said no, but I'm going to go and do it. So there's active repentance.

He's turned on his heel, gone in the opposite direction to the one he planned. Whereas the other one has tried to get away with it. Now, this is why the New Testament passages are strong on the matter of obedience to parents.

And, you know, in our society today, we make light of this. And I don't know how to emphasize it so that people will take notice of it. Because children do tend to disobey their parents and the parents often allow them to get away with it.

They're not corrected and they're not made to obey. Now, it's not. If you turn to Ephesians 6. There are several scriptures on this matter.

We'll just look at two today. Ephesians 6, starting at the beginning of the chapter. It says, children, obey your parents.

[18:08] 6 verse 1. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. And then he quotes, Paul quotes the Old Testament verse that we've just read.

Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise. If you obey your parents, there's a promise behind that. And the promise is, in the land, it will go well with you. And you will live long. My goodness, when I think of what I used to do when my parents told me to do things, I certainly didn't deserve to live to my current age.

God has been gracious. But the point is that, well, let's read on. Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, so that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.

And then it goes on to talk about the way fathers should handle their children. We'll do that another day. But the point is, he picked a topic that would have really rattled their cages.

[19:11] The idea of children being disobedient. In Romans 1, just turn there. I'm going to actually read from verse 28.

The key verse is verse 30, but we'll read from verse 28. And this is a passage in which Paul is outlining sins that have a profound effect, where you can expect the death sentence, and you can expect the judgment of God to come down on you like a ton of bricks.

And it says, And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice.

They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful.

And although they know the ordinances of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

[20:28] In the eyes of these Jews, children who did this were lining themselves up for a death sentence. And errant children, particularly in teenage, early adulthood, who they would be, if they were persistently disobedient to parents, they would be taken out and stoned to death.

God treats this really seriously. And so God has picked a topic that as people who are teachers of the law, they would really latch on to. He did what?

Said no to his father? Lied to his dad? Can't believe it. It's a grave sin, what we've just read in Romans. But let's not forget something.

Turn quickly to Exodus 4 and verse 22. And this is where Pharaoh is being told to let the children of Israel go.

And he says this. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, so this is his instruction to Moses, go and say this to Pharaoh. Thus says the Lord, Israel is my son, my firstborn.

[21:39] So he's talking about sonship to the leaders of Israel, who are the leaders of God's firstborn son. So there is a connection there.

So there is a connection there where just as I, as my father's son, I'm supposed to walk in obedience to my father, and I'm supposed to walk in obedience to my heavenly father. The nation is supposed to walk in obedience to God. How are we doing on that score? Not great at the moment. But the relationship of God as father to Israel and Israel as children of the divine father is also spoken of, and you can turn there in your own time, in 2 Samuel 7 verse 14 and 1 Chronicles 17 verse 14.

In both of those passages you have Israel described as God's children and God described as father. So in using this example, he's also ringing their national bell and saying, you are Israel, you are God's firstborn son.

Are you being a good father? Are you saying no to your father or are you lying to your father? Now, given the proof that they've been provided with, they are lying when they reject Messiah because they know who he is.

[23 : 05] This question of belief, it doesn't mean, oh, they didn't know, so they didn't believe. It means they refused to believe. They were willfully ignorant.

They were willfully rebellious in rejecting Jesus. So the parable would seem to point out to them or confirm that they were unable or unwilling to see their own fault.

You see, the one son said no, but then saw his fault and corrected it. The second son refused to see his own fault.

The first son gave us a model of true repentance. It's active. You can't repent by sitting on your knees and saying sorry. You can only repent by going and doing it differently.

It's an active thing. It isn't just a passing thought. Now, when the Jews uttered their answer, so who carried out the will of his father?

[24 : 13] The first. It shows that they understood. And his response to their, you see, what they've said is, we understand the principle of repentance.

The first one repented. He's the one that should be praised, if anything. He's the one who did things right. Now, if they apply this principle to themselves, they're not doing it right.

So it's entirely hypocritical for them to point the finger at that son and say, he did it right, when themselves, they are continually being hypocritical in their refusal to accept Jesus.

And not only that, to lead others away from Jesus. And so he says this, and you think about what a smack in the face this is.

Immediately, the Jews uttered their answer, and they said, the first, and then he said immediately, truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.

[25 : 23] And somebody said, ouch, that is a big ouch. You think about it. If you put yourself up there as self-righteous, you ought to be like me.

I'm righteous, I am. I go and wail at the wall every day, and I wear these phylacteries on my forehead, and I recite things endlessly, and I'm a religious man, I'm a godly man.

That's what all of this lot were like. And he says, the prostitutes and the tax gatherers. Now, the tax gatherers were absolutely reviled.

They were people who effectively sold their soul to Rome. They'd taken a franchise off the Roman government to collect taxes, and they were given an amount that they had to return to the Roman government, and over and above that, they could keep whatever they made.

And so they had a vested interest in overtaxing people. So, I mean, Matthew, the guy whose gospel we're reading, was a tax gatherer, and we know from previous chapters that he was actually a very wealthy man, but he actually held a feast at his house to celebrate Jesus when he got born again, and he repented, and turned away from that way of living.

[26 : 47] But everywhere they went, they were loathed and hated, they were wealthy, and they were known to be extortionists. They would extort money from people far above what they had to return to the government.

So they were hated. And for a Jew to think, I'm going to get into heaven after the tax gatherer, and the prostitutes speak for themselves. I mean, you know, when you've...

Just think of it, what prostitutes have to do to earn a living, and they're going to get into heaven before me. It's...

It's humbling, to say the least. And what he was saying is, what you've done is far more morally bankrupt than anything they've done. But he then says that when they heard John's preaching, they repented.

Whereas you didn't. These religious leaders are the ones who had accused Jesus. So John comes on the scene, and he says, Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

[27 : 59] Then Jesus spent three years, and this is three years into, or three and a bit years, into his ministry, and they've seen him do everything the scriptures predicted he would do. And they're still rejecting him.

And in Matthew 12, after he casts out the dumb demon, they said he's doing this by the power of Satan. So they accused him of working by the power of Satan.

And so it was because of their complete lack of repentance that they're considered to be worse than the tax collectors and the prostitutes. And when the tax collectors and the prostitutes thought about it, a bit like the first son, when they thought about what they had done, they repented.

These guys have been made to think about what they've done because Jesus has continually held it under their noses for them to look at, and they refuse.

It's absolutely willful. So going back to Matthew, go back there. Verse 32, For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him.

[29 : 11] And that has to mean you didn't choose to believe him. What Jesus is really saying is it wasn't a struggle for you to believe him.

You had every reason to do so, and you refused. Now, John the Baptist, not only did he introduce Jesus, but he also is the one who called them a brood of vipers.

So he didn't endear himself to them, but you'll find that in Matthew 3, verse 7, he identified them as a brood of vipers and said, you know, who told you to come and repent?

Or something like that. I can't remember the words now, but their reaction and their relationship to John directly affected their perception of Jesus. Because even though they rejected John the Baptist willfully, because they knew who he was, the whole nation had said, this is a prophet.

So they knew who he was, but went, no, not going to take any notice of him. As soon as they don't take notice of John the Baptist, then they also don't take any notice of Jesus, despite him offering them so many proofs of who he was.

[30 : 28] And both John and Jesus always called out the religious Jews for their dishonesty and corruption.

They were always calling out the sin. Had they listened to John when they asked this question, by whose authority do you do this?

John had already told them whose authority Jesus was walking in. So they've answered their own question when we come to this and they say, oh, oh, the first son, the first son was the one that did the father's will.

So you lot are like the second son and you lot aren't getting into heaven. Now, there was a rather useful, and I've overlooked it, so I'll have to see if I can find it.

There's a, the scripture says, oh, in verse 31, tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.

[31 : 31] So at this point, the door to the kingdom of heaven is not actually closed to these, to these religious Jews. And I do wonder whether one of the ones who got in with the seat of his pants on fire was Nicodemus, who history tells us was a grave digger in Israel.

I can't vouch for the authenticity of that piece of information, but it came from Arnold Fruchtenbaum, so it's probably right. But he was a very wealthy man, and Nicodemus, if you remember, back in John chapter 3, was said to him, are you the teacher of Israel and you don't understand this?

And then he went through this long talk at night with the Lord that said, you need to be born again. I don't know whether he made it or not, but he might have.

But the point I want to make here is that even now, even in the face of this, God had not slammed the door. What he said is, they're going to get in ahead of you. He hadn't said, you can't get in at this point.

However, he had confirmed where Jesus got his authority from, and so the Jews had every reason to know it. So what is the application?

[32 : 50] And I can think of two applications for this. The first is a national one about which we can't do an awful lot except pray, which actually is quite a lot.

We can pray for our nation. But when you look at our nation and the way they handle Christ, we're not doing it very well. And the way the Jews came under God's judgment, you remember that following all of this, following the crucifixion and the resurrection, and then go on about 40 years to

AD 70, Jerusalem was utterly, utterly destroyed and the Jews were dispersed all over the earth and they lost their nationhood and until 1948 there was no nation.

So from 70 AD to 1948 the Jews were gone. They hadn't got a language anymore, they hadn't got a culture, they hadn't got any priests, they hadn't all of their way of doing things had gone.

I want to use the phrase from Romans chapter 1, they'd been given over. And I look at our nation and I say, have we been given over?

Now I think as a nation we have. I think we've gone beyond the point of no return. When the Jewish nation was given over, recorded in Matthew 12, there's no way back.

[34 : 30] That is a final decision for the nation. Right? That is unforgivable and so you will not be restored in that generation and hasn't been restored since until 1948.

There's almost 2,000 years of being separated from God. I think that this nation, because of its approach to so many things, for a start, abortion, and if there are any ladies in the room who've had abortions, we can pray for you and this is not a sin that's unforgivable.

However, when a nation supports abortion, the nation is asking for God to pour out his judgment on them. And it might not come today or tomorrow, but it will come.

And many, many other things. The pushing Christianity out of schools so that children who used to, when I was at school, every morning you had a Christian service and you were taught Christian values and Christian morals.

It's no longer the case. In fact, you get criticized if you treat Christian morals now. So, as a nation, we have ditched the Lord. Done away with it.

[35 : 54] So, nationally, we need to seek God and we need to cry out to the Lord for our nation. And being in the nation, but not of the nation, I hope, we can still rest in the security of God's salvation.

But we should pray for people to get saved and saved and saved because otherwise they are joining the nation that is going to come under God's judgment. And my last point is to take it personally, the whole passage seems to center around God's discipline, whether aimed at individuals or, as in this case, at the nation.

And what we must do, and we've read that verse 45, right, they knew the Lord was talking about them. we need to put ourselves before the Lord so he can talk about us, but not in the way that they did where they just didn't want to play along.

What we need to do is to welcome God's discipline. So I'm going to finish with some reading from Hebrews 12, if you want to turn there. I'm going to read from verse 4 to 11, and we're going to read it slowly and with some consideration, because had the people we've just read about in Matthew 21 had the right attitude, they would have been saved, and the nation wouldn't have come under the appalling judgment of AD 70.

But it says this, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. This is verse 4 and following. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.

[38 : 00] And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons. My son do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faints when you are reprov'd by him.

For those whom the Lord loves, he disciplines and he scourges every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you endure.

God deals with you as with sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much rather be subject to the father of spirits and live?

For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good so that we may share his holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful.

[39 : 11] Yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. We can be such proud people and we can dig our heels in when somebody does what Jesus has just done to this lot, holds our wrongdoing under our nose for us to look at.

It is a most uncomfortable thing. And at that moment we always have a choice. we can go, I don't want to hear that, I don't want to do anything about that, no, I'm not listening to that, which is the common response.

And you find, I don't know if you, you must have seen it yourself when people get into arguments and they're desperate to prove themselves right, when in fact they should be saying, I'm really sorry, I'm wrong here, I got it wrong.

And a soft answer turns away wrath, it undoes the violence that might take place. And so I think application here is that we should run towards the discipline of the Lord and say, Lord, please correct me, I don't want to be a sinful man or woman, I don't want to engage in stuff that you don't like, please discipline me, daily, hourly, whenever I need it, Father, thank you for this passage of scripture and I just pray that you will enable me to do something good with the next parable too. But Lord, all these words, although this was written to the Jewish nation and in one sense is not for us, there is so much we can take from it to keep our attitude right with you. And I pray, Lord, that you would soften our hearts towards you and towards one another and we would be good at receiving correction.

[41 : 14] Father, thank you that you guide us and that you make us aware of the futility of staying in rebellion against you.

And we look to you in Jesus' name. Amen.