

## Is He Talking About Us? Three Parables for Hypocrites

Matthew 21:23-22:13

Mark Vroegop

23 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?" 24 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. 25 The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." 27 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.

28 "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.' 29 And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. 30 And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. 31 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. 32 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.

33 "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. 34 When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. 35 And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' 39 And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 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." 42 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'? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. 44 And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. 46 And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

22 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, 3 and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' 5 But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. 7 The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as

you find.' 10 And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. 12 And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen."

If the book of Matthew were a movie, the sound track in this section would be filled with tension. You know the kind of sound that I'm talking about, right? It is the kind of music that creates this sense that something big is going to happen.

Something big is happening in Matthew. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, and we are only a week away from his crucifixion. We've got about six chapters left, and we'll be wrapping up this book in February and March of next year. But right now the tension is rising as Jesus and the religious rulers begin to go head-to-head in a whole new way. His message is not only upside-down; it is threatening to their religious system. His actions are challenging the status-quo of their lives.

**Jesus makes religious people uncomfortable.** And he particularly makes hypocritical people angry which is not an unusual response. After all, the basic and underlying problem with hypocrisy is the fact that the person uses religious activity to define him or herself. Anything that challenges this is met with fury and rage because religious superiority is all that the person has. It defines them; it is their identity. And it will cause a person to do and say crazy things – like "Crucify Him!"

That's the power of religious hypocrisy, and if we are honest there are seeds of it in all of us. That is why it is so important to study Jesus's life. He is the only true antidote to becoming like the very people we hate. No one wants to be a hypocrite when they grow up! So we need to see what Jesus says here to all of us.

### **Who Are You to Say That?!**

This exchange between Jesus and the religious rulers begins with a fairly significant challenge to Jesus's authority. According to verse 23, Jesus was teaching in the temple area. Around the perimeter of the temple was a columned area, and it was often used for informal instruction, even the early church met there (see John 10:23, Acts 3:11, 5:12). As Jesus was teaching, the chief priests and elders challenged him on his authority to teach the people: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (v 23) They wanted to know whose camp Jesus was in because his teaching threatened their hold on power.

Jesus wisely challenges their question with a question. Verse 24 says, "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. 25 The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" It

wasn't just a trick question; it was designed to expose their hypocrisy in asking him their question. They call a quick huddle which is recorded in verse 25: "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

Do you see what Jesus did here? He asked a question that exposed both their unbelief and their fear of man. Both of these issues are at the root of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a failure to place one's complete trust, faith, and belief in God for complete righteousness. It fails to realize that a self-made, performance-oriented religion is hopeless and impossible. You can't live up to expectations so you pile people below you to make yourself feel better. And it is impossible because the target is always moving: you can always find people who seem more righteous or unrighteous than you. It is the comparison to others and the fear of man that holds people in bondage to hypocrisy. No one ever intends to be a hypocrite, but unbelief and the fear of man slowly take over.

That is why Jesus simply refuses to answer (v 27). He is not going to get involved in a worthless discussion with people who are blinded by unbelief and the fear of man. However, Jesus is not totally silent. He chooses to make his point through the use of three parables.

### **Three Parables**

A parable was a common way for Jesus to make his point painfully clear to an audience that might be somewhat resistant. The power of a parable is the way in which it brings you in with a story and then delivers a point. And often this point is relatively shocking. All three parables have a similar theme: God's rejection of the hypocritical religious rulers. Jesus is responding to the challenge from the spiritual authorities

#### **The Two Sons**

Jesus's first parable involves two sons who responded to their father's instructions very differently. The first son (v 28) initially responded negatively to the request for him to go and work in the vineyard, but then he changed his mind and went (v 29). The other son responded that he would go but then he didn't (v 30). Then Jesus asks the rulers a question: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (v 31) Of course the correct answer is that the first son did the will of his father even though initially he refused, and this is the answer that the religious crowd gives Jesus. Clearly the son who paid lip-service to his father wasn't obedient. Now that they've answered the question, Jesus lowers the boom:

"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. 32 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 (Matt 21:31-32).

Ouch! Jesus tells the religious crowd that they are guilty of failing to believe and repent, and that the worst sinners in their day – the very people they looked down upon – were in a better position than them. Real religion is doing the will of the Father not just pretending. In other words, a terrible sinner who is repentant is in much better shape than the hard-hearted religious person. Fredrick Bruner summarizes the message of this parable well: “The parable of the two kinds of sons warns all spiritually serious persons to beware lest our energies be spent almost entirely in theological correctness and we make life obedience secondary.”<sup>1</sup> The problem with the religious crowd is that they were so convinced that they were right, they wouldn’t listen.

### **The Vineyard**

The second parable involves a vineyard and a group of people (tenants) who responded negatively and violently to the owner. Verse 33 introduces the context to us: a master plants a vineyard with a fence, a winepress, a tower, and then he leases it to tenants before leaving the country. At the time of harvest, the owner of the vineyard sent his servants to collect his portion of the produce. This must have been a part of the lease agreement. It was his vineyard, his fence, his winepress, his tower, and his fruit. The tenants while living on the land and acting as if they owned the land, did not in fact own the property. He is the owner; they are tenants.

Verses 34-36 record what happens to the owner’s servants. They are beaten, stoned, and a few are even killed. When the land owner sends more servants, the same thing happens. Therefore, the owner decides to send his son because he believes that they will show some respect (v 37). However, the response from the tenants is not only violent; it is a coup d’état. They seek to gain the inheritance by killing the son. “38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ 39 And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” (Matt 21:38-39)

Jesus again asks the religious rulers a penetrating question: “When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (v 40) The religious rulers respond, “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.” (v 41)

Again, Jesus nails them.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredrick Bruner, The Churchbook – Matthew 13-28, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 375-376.

"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'? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. 44 And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."  
(Matt 21:42-44)

This passage is loaded with some important truths to behold:

- Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22 which will become an important Christocentric passage in the New Testament (see Acts 4:11, 1 Peter 2:7). The text's message is simply that the rejected stone (Jesus) will actually become the very foundation for the entire building (God's kingdom / church).
- The religious rulers are going to lose their spiritual power and God is going to bear fruit through another group. This is a foreshadow of the coming church.<sup>2</sup>
- How one responds to this cornerstone – Jesus – is extremely important. If you fall on the stone you will be broken, but if the stone falls on you, the result will be that you are completely crushed or pulverized. In other words in dealing with Jesus you are either broken or pulverized, and it all depends on your response to the cornerstone called Christ.

By now the chief priests and the Pharisees are starting to cue in that Jesus seems to be looking their way a lot when he is giving these parables. Verse 45 says, "when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them." Really? But of course they did nothing because "they feared the crowds." (v 46)

The parable of the vineyard is a stern warning to the religious establishment and a foreshadowing of what will come in less than a week. The rejected son of God will become the building block for God's redemptive plan. If they fail to fall on him in brokenness, they will be crushed.

### **The Wedding**

The final parable involves a wedding feast and problem with the guests. Verse 2 sets the stage for us that a particular king was giving a wedding feast for his son, and he sent out his servants to invite the guests. However (v 3) the people who were invited refused to come. Therefore, the king sent other servants with a more colorful description of the event: "Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast." (Matt 22:4). However, the people still refused to come. In fact some were dismissive and some were violent: "But they paid no

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<sup>2</sup> Some take this to refer to a change from a Jewish focus to the Gentiles. While it is true that the message of the Gospel was "first to the Jew and then to the Greek" (Rom 1:16), it is not what Jesus is referring to here. His target is religious leaders not the entire Jewish nation. The clock is ticking on the religious rulers.

attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.” (Matt 22:5-6).

The king responds to this second rejection in two ways. First (v 7), he responds in anger and punishes the people for their poor treatment of his servants and, indirectly, himself. “He sent troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” Secondly (v 8), he extends an invitation to those people who were not invited in the first place. It is likely that these people were the poor and rural people who lived outside the city (thus “into the roads” in verse 10).

“8 Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' 10 And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.” (Matt 22:8-10)

It would seem that you could simply conclude the parable right there, but it takes a very interesting and a bit disturbing twist. As the king comes to survey the guests, he discovers a man has come to the wedding without a wedding garment. Now we are not sure exactly what is happening here, but it seems that the king had probably provided wedding garments for his guests. Since the invitation was so quick and because they were so unprepared, the king may have prepared garments for them. Remember that these people were a part of the wedding because of those who had rejected the king’s offer. Now it seems there is a man who has accepted the king’s offer to come to the party but refuses to accept the king’s provision for the party. It is a different but equally offensive rejection.

The man has no business being at the wedding of the King’s son since his refusal of the King’s help is so offensive. Therefore, the king pronounces judgment over him:

Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 22:13-14).

The king who had endured unjustified rejection from his subjects now definitively rejects an inappropriate wedding guest. He sends him out into a place described with a term used for judgment (see 8:12, 13:42, 24:51, 25:30). The rejection of the king’s provision brought rejection, banishment, and judgment.

This section of scripture ends with a simple statement: “many are called, but few are chosen.” Jesus is using the words “called” and “chosen” a bit differently than Paul uses them in Romans 8:30 and Ephesians 1:3-7.<sup>3</sup> As is often the case, the same words can have nuanced meanings depending on their usage and context. In this passage, this statement is a warning. A general call has been issued by Jesus – “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17) – but

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<sup>3</sup> Paul uses the terms to describe the effectual call of God, a spiritual awakening in which God brings new life, and his sovereign and gracious pursuit of individual people for salvation.

only a few have actually responded. The warning which we have heard so many times from Jesus is this: Not everyone who hears really believes. Not everyone who comes to a wedding is supposed to be there. Many are called; not everyone makes it.

Each of these parables has a very similar theme. It pictures the despicable rejection of God's mercy and the outright disobedience of religious people.

### **Lessons for Us?**

What do we do with these three parables and the confrontation of the religiously hypocritical? There are some really important lessons for us to learn from what Matthew says here:

#### **1. There are seeds of hypocrisy in all of us**

I've said this before: no one wants to be a hypocrite. There is nothing in the least bit inspiring about being a fake or a sham. But yet it happens so often. How does it happen? Over time your religious pursuits begin to become more about you and less about your love for God. Deceptively, as you begin to "grow" and you see change in your life in certain areas, you start to see the mistakes of others more clearly. And if you are not careful you'll develop categories of sins and people in your mind. You'll justify the presence of sin in one area of your life because of the absence of them in other areas. You'll treat Jesus like a diet: "I've been so good today, I deserve to cheat." Or you'll start to think that in comparison others you are not really that bad. You could actually find yourself thanking God that you are not like other people (see Luke 18:13). Oh be careful because the human heart is full of the seeds of hypocrisy. Give them the water of spiritual success and the sunshine of human praise, and you'll be in trouble.

#### **2. Beware when Christianity becomes cultural, political, and normal**

The problem with what was happening in Jerusalem was that religion had become too cultural, too political, and too normal. The priests had power, and the people lived in a controlled, spiritual bubble. This is far too common in our present day Christian experience. We not only have Christian churches but we have Christian sports programs, Christian bookstores, Christian schools, Christian Colleges, Christian clubs, Christian books, and Christian friends. And while individually these things are not bad, when you put all of them together it can create a Christian bubble that is not only unrealistic; it can be a breeding ground for hypocrisy.

Kevin DeYoung pastors a church in East Lansing, Michigan. He recently wrote a blog piece about the unique challenges of Christianity in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I found his piece to be not only remarkable true but familiar in other places than just what we use to call "The Christian Mecca." Here's what he said:

I love my hometown. I am not one of those who cries to everyone who will listen about growing up in a bubble or how bad it was to have churches on every corner. It wasn't bad. It was mostly terrific. But in my experience, there is in Grand Rapids **a strange combination of being tight on cultural categories while at the same time being loose on doctrinal categories.** Whether its Christian schools, or things you don't do on Sunday, or Republican politics, or being really nice, or being tall and Dutch, or being very put together there is a certain feel to Christianity in Grand Rapids. It's hard to break out of these categories. And yet on the doctrinal side, there's been an unwillingness to get worked up about theological issues. The yard should look a certain way, but the historicity of Adam is flexible.<sup>4</sup>

In other words when the culture becomes Christian it usually means the people aren't.

### **3. Obedience is the true test of what you believe**

The ultimate test of hypocrisy is if your words match how you live. Talk is cheap not only on the basketball court; it is cheap in church too. Anybody can say anything that they want about what they won't do or what they will do. But the real test comes in what you do. The question is not what you say you believe but how you actually live what you believe.

Paul warned about these people in 2 Timothy:

For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, 4 treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people (2 Tim 3:2-5)

### **4. Let Jesus make you regularly uncomfortable**

Finally let me just tell you that the only remedy for this terrible condition of hypocrisy is to spend time meditating on the life and ministry of Jesus. Let him make you uncomfortable. Let him push the envelope of your spirituality. Let him challenge your self-righteousness. Fall on the rock so that you won't be crushed.

Jesus makes spiritual people uncomfortable, and the day that you are comfortable with your religion or angry at Jesus – look out! Hypocrisy has nailed even the most religious, and it led to the murder of the Son of God.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2010/11/16/can-the-reformed-resurgence-fly-in-grand-rapids/>