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Ready to Rumble: Wretches to a Wretched End Matthew 21:23-46

The other day I was having a bit of a power struggle with Rebekah Joy, our four year old. She wanted to play on the computer, but I was working on something, and said that she needed to wait until I was done. But that didn't fit into Rebekah's schedule – she needed to play on the computer NOW and she began to throw a little fit. So, in one of my more brilliant moments as a parent of a 4 year old having a fit I tried to reason with her. I said, "Now Rebekah Joy, who's in charge?" After no response I said, "Daddy's in charge right?" To which she quickly responded, "No, Jesus is in charge!" So, I said, "Yes, you're right – but I have been crucified with Christ therefore I no longer live, but Christ lives in me!"

Who is in charge at your house? Who has the right to decide about computer time and TV shows? Who has the authority to decide the way you spend your money or how you use your time? Who gets to say what activities your kids will be in or what your priorities will be as a household? What about you, individually? Who gets to speak into your life? Who has the authority to call you out? Who gets to say that you're misbehaving or acting inappropriately? What about our church family? Who is in charge here? Who gets to decide about our mission as a church? Who gets to decide how we'll spend our money? Who gets to decide what behavior is appropriate here?

The bottom line with Rebekah is that she wanted to be in charge. She wanted to make the call about her computer time, and she didn't want to accept anyone else's authority because they might choose something different than she wanted. And in that regard, I think she was acting like a perfect human. It turns out that this 'need' to be in charge has been a problem since the beginning of humanity. Every single one of us needs to be saved from our individualistic desire to be in charge, to do things our own way – to resist anyone else's authority over us. We need to be saved from our refusal to submit.

The context of our scripture passage today makes that crystal clear; it's a battle over who's in charge of the things that are absolutely most important. Matthew 21:23ff

²³Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

²⁴Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?"

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'" ²⁶But if we say, 'From men'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."

²⁷So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Prayer of Illumination

Where was Jesus teaching when the chief priests and elders came to question him? He was BACK in the Temple! Think about that. What happened the day before? After entering the city on the red carpet as the people shouted, 'Salvation' – an entrance fit for a Messiah – Jesus went right into the Temple and cleaned house. Now, whose house was it? It was God's house, of course. But who was in charge? The chief priests were in charge. They got to decide about the religious life of Israel – who was in and who was out, what sacrifices were acceptable, what teaching was acceptable, and what offerings were necessary. They got to speak for God to the people. Then one day, during the holiest of weeks, some small town chump – Jesus of Nazareth – comes into the Temple and disturbs everything. And the religious leaders were steaming mad about the whole thing. Sometimes we get mad when someone sits in our pew – imagine how mad these guys were when Jesus messes with their system of worship.

Now it's the next day, and Jesus walks right back in there. He's ready to rumble because it's time for the whole system of the Temple to be replaced and for the whole earth to be saved from the religious oppression of the Temple leaders.

So when they come to ask him about his authority Jesus decides to put their ineptitude on display with a question about John's authority. Of course, the leaders understand the precariousness of the question. If they answer they way they believe – that it was not of God – they put themselves at risk amongst the crowd, and if they answer that it was from heaven then they have to agree that Jesus is from heaven too since that's what John testified. Either way it represents a loss of authority and power to them. So they give a completely lame answer, "We don't know." REALLY!? It was their job to know! They were the religious leaders for all of Israel.

To admit that Jesus' authority was from heaven would mean that he got to be in charge – so they try to wiggle out of answering the question from Jesus. And their answer reveals that they are no longer qualified to be Israel's leaders. It shows that they were more concerned with political power and keeping their own authority than joining in what God was doing in their midst.

So, Jesus doesn't give them an answer, instead he tells them a few stories that show Jesus' authority and the Jewish leaders' failure. Matthew 21:28-32.

²⁸"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

²⁹"I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

³¹"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Wow. This passage reminds me – don't mess with Jesus! These are fighting words! And it's all about the religious leaders' unwillingness to submit to Jesus' authority and be part of what God is doing. Neither of the sons in the parable is really a model child, right? What the father really wants is the courtesy of the second son and the follow through of the first son. But, at least the first son eventually did what the father asks. The second son had all the right words but no action. Who does the second son represent? Yes, the religious leaders. They had studied the scriptures, prayed the prayers, abstained from unholy living – but they didn't really know God. Because they didn't know God, they couldn't recognize the salvation that God was bringing through Jesus. Because they didn't recognize Jesus as Messiah, they couldn't do the work of the Heavenly Father. Jesus was the Messiah, the One that Israel had been longing for – the one the religious leaders should have recognized and embraced and lauded to the people. But instead, the leaders found him to be a threat to their authority and their power. They didn't want Jesus to be in charge. Therefore, Jesus pronounces that the sinners – the tax collectors and prostitutes – will enter the Kingdom of God before the religious leaders will even be considered. Can you imagine how that must have made their blood curdle? Jesus was saying nothing less than "You're oppressive leadership is about to end."

Even though this parable is directed at the religious leaders, I think it's an important warning for all of us. Jesus' call is for us to have obedient faith and not just verbal faith. Sometimes we can get so caught up in believing the right things or knowing the right answers that we forget what it's all about in the first place – following Jesus in obedience.

So, are you all talk and no action? Are you coming to church, talking the right way and believing the right way but not really knowing and obeying God? If that's you, I hope the Spirit wakes you up with this story. I hope you decide to put your life on the line for Jesus – in complete obedience to Him. That's where real life is – that's when you'll really experience the Kingdom of God.

I'm not sure what that will mean for you. Maybe it means finding a place to sacrificially serve Christ, maybe it means joining a Life Group and really opening yourself up to be held accountable by the community of Christ; maybe it means taking a courageous step into Celebrate Recovery to bring into the light that habit or hurt you think nobody knows about; maybe it means straightening out that relationship you are letting die a slow death; ultimately, it means surrendering our lives to Jesus every day and letting Him be in charge.

The call for obedience comes through loud and clear in the next parable too. Starting in verse 33, Jesus says:

³³"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. ³⁴When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

³⁵"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

³⁸"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' ³⁹So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

⁴¹"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

This is another story of judgment on the religious leaders of Israel. They're represented by the tenants of the vineyard. Ultimately, the wickedness of the tenants is about their refusal to submit to the authority of the vineyard's owner. They forget that they are only renters or tenants; they want to become the owners; they want to be in charge. And their wickedness is pervasive isn't it? It drives

them to completely disrespect the owner's servants – even to the point of murder. And when the owner sends his own son they see that as the ultimate opportunity to take the vineyard for themselves. So, they throw him out and kill him.

When Jesus asks them what the owner will do, the leaders ironically pronounce their own judgment saying, *“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”*

Of course, in this parable Jesus is the son who ultimately comes with the highest authority after all the other servants or prophets have been sent. The parable calls out the leaders' current rejection of Jesus and the crucifixion that they will orchestrate at the end of the week. He uses a quote from Psalm 118 to answer their question of authority with perfect clarity – verse 42.

⁴²*Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:*

*" The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?"*

⁴³*"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."*

Jesus is saying that the One they are rejecting now is actually the most important person of all time. And for that rejection, their judgment is harsh. The Kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to those who will produce fruit. It will be given to those who live in obedience to God and in submission to God's authority. It will be given to those who know and do the will of the Father. The ones who don't believe Jesus, who get tripped up on him will fall. But the ones on whom Jesus' judgment falls (like the vineyard tenants) will be crushed.

So, after hearing this did the Jewish leaders repent and believe? Sadly, no – look at verse 45.

⁴⁵*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.*

It's sad really. The ones that God intended to lead the people toward God were actually missing the huge thing that God was doing in their midst. They missed it because they forgot they were just stewards of God's work – somehow they lost track of the heart of God for the world. And God wasn't going to stand for it any more. God couldn't let them be in charge of saying who God is and what God wants, and who God loves. So God took their responsibility away.

I wonder if you're at risk of losing any of the vineyards God has given you to tend. Whether it's your church or your influence in the community or your family or your job or your ministry – if you have forgotten that God is in charge and that you're simply a steward – you need to wake up. I wonder how often we reject God's messengers because they threaten our system of control. We don't want to hear what they have to say so we lose out on the opportunity to get things right. Beloved, we need to be saved from our individualism and entitlement. The peril of doing things our way is crushing. Maybe today you need to repent and renew your trust in Jesus.

Praise God we have such a gracious Heavenly Father as Jesus shows in the vineyard parable. Remember, the owner did all the hard work. He set up the entire vineyard so that all the tenants had to do was take care of it. As tenants, they would get to enjoy the fruit of vineyard first hand, they just had to remember that they were only tenants and not owners. After the tenants rejected the first servants so violently, the owner had every right to come with an army and destroy them. Instead, the owner patiently and mercifully sends more servants. After the tenants reject the second group of servants, the owner makes the ultimate sacrifice and sends his own son – not with an army, but alone – hoping that this act of complete nobility and vulnerability will awaken the twisted tenants to his grace and their own wickedness. But when the son obediently walks right into the danger, the tenants reject him too. The owner and the creator of the vineyard is our heavenly Father, and this is the story of our salvation. Ultimately, it's the Son's death on the cross that leads to new life in the vineyard. Now, it's a mission that God graciously invites us to participate in tending. It's good to submit our lives to a God like that.

So, may we, the people of God, awaken from our own wickedness, our own refusal to submit to Jesus' authority, and our own denial of His incredible grace and love. May we obediently do the will of the Father so that we might together participate in His Kingdom work. Who's in charge of you? May it always be Jesus.