

## Matthew 21D

- We return to Jesus' four days of testing in the temple before His death on the cross, let's clarify the timeline of these events
  - All four Gospel writers give us a view on the events of this week, and it's Mark who gives us the clearest timeline for these early days
    - In Mark 11 we learn that Jesus enters the Temple for the first time on a Sunday but He spends very little time there that day
    - Matthew tells us that on that same day Jesus is confronted by His first test
    - Children were calling Jesus the Messiah, and the religious leaders challenge Jesus to silence them
    - In response, Jesus quotes Scripture to show the children were the obedient ones rather than the religious leaders, and so He passed His first test
  - Then Mark says Jesus returned to the temple on the second day, Monday, and on the way that day Jesus withered the fig tree
    - On that day Jesus upsets the tables of the money changers kicking them out of the temple
    - And as Jesus puts a stop to the corruption, He quotes from Isaiah declaring the temple to be His house, meaning Jesus was the Lamb brought in for the Passover
    - Jesus then passed His second day of testing by sanctifying God's house removing the leaven (sin) in preparation for the Passover
  - Now Matthew's account combines the events of these first couple of days to make it seem as though they all happened on the same day
    - But in reality we've reached the third day of Jesus' testing, a Tuesday, and a lot happens on this day
    - This will be by far the longest day of testing for Jesus
    - In fact, the events of this day, Tuesday, are recorded from Chapter 21 until Chapter 26 of Matthew

- And it will consist of multiple encounters with three different groups of religious leaders
- In Israel at this time, there were three principle groups of religious leaders opposed to Jesus' ministry
  - First, there were Sadducees, who represented the liberal end of the religious spectrum in Israel
    - They had a majority of seats on the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling religious council in Israel
    - And because they controlled the Sanhedrin, they also controlled the temple and all temple business
    - For this reason, the Sadducees were also called the chief priests
  - Sadducees received their income from the operation of the temple, including both from the commerce in the temple and from tithes
    - They opposed Jesus for two reasons
    - First, because He took a literal, conservative view of the Scriptures, in contradiction to the Sadducees' liberal views
    - And secondly, because Jesus' opposition to the greed and corruption of the temple operations threatened the Sadducees' source of wealth
- The second group were the Pharisees, who were conservatives in the religious spectrum
  - Though they were only a minority on the Sanhedrin, they were the religious leaders of the culture
    - Pharisees were in charge of the daily religious life of the Jewish people
    - They had authority over training and appointing rabbis in local synagogues, and they were the judges of the Law
    - For that reason, Pharisees were also called the elders of Israel
  - Pharisees gained their wealth from the money given to local synagogues and by taking bribes in judging court cases
    - They opposed Jesus because He threatened to upset Pharisaic rabbinical rule systems founded in the Mishnah

- If Jesus put an end to the Mishnah, then the Pharisees' power base and sources of income would dissolve
- Finally, there were the Herodians, who occupied a moderate place on the religious spectrum of Israel, somewhere between Pharisees and Sadducees
  - Herodians were religiously conservative like Pharisees, but they were socially liberal like Sadducees
    - But unlike Pharisees or Sadducees, these moderates were attracted to Rome's culture and economic power
    - They approved of Roman rule and its positive economic impact on Judea, and they supported Rome's appointed king, Herod
    - Because they aligned with Herod, they took the name Herodians
  - Herodians gained their wealth from working closely with the Roman authorities, making money through their political associations
    - So naturally Herodians opposed Jesus when He called Himself a king and offered to set up a new Jewish kingdom
    - A new Jewish kingdom would have meant the loss of their profitable relationships with their Roman benefactors
    - Therefore, they fought against Jesus to protect their income
  - So we have Pharisees (or elders), Sadducees (or the priests) and the Herodians all opposing Jesus for different reasons
    - And on this day they all become unlikely bedfellows uniting to attack Jesus in the temple
    - They hope to discredit Him in front of the huge Passover crowds and put an end to His ministry
    - So the pressure on Jesus to handle these attacks well is tremendous
    - It's the rabbinical equivalent of the Super Bowl or the World Cup
  - These attacks will come in waves of religious leaders coming to Jesus to ask tough questions designed to trip Him up
    - In between these moments, Jesus will respond in teaching, often through parables

- And even after Jesus leaves the temple at the end of the day, He will teach His disciples privately on the events of the last days
- Jesus is running out of time, so He is packing in as much as He can before His death
- So with that overview, let's now look at the first attack on this third day of testing in the temple

**Matt. 21:23** When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"

- The first attack is brought by two of the three main religious groups: Sadducees and Pharisees
  - Remember the priests are the Sadducees and the elders are the Pharisees, and they sit at opposite ends of the political spectrum
  - Normally, they are rivals and enemies but today they prove the adage that the enemy of my enemy is my friend
  - They've come together as representatives of the Sanhedrin in an official capacity to inquiry about Jesus' authority
- In v.23 they challenge Jesus to explain His source of authority to teach with Israel
  - Under Pharisaic rule, no one could teach on religious matters unless they were properly trained by a reputable authority
  - To some extent, churches today still follow this standard
  - Many churches require their ministers to have a degree or certification before they can teach or pastor a flock
- In Jesus' time, a teacher of the word gained authority to teach by being trained and approved by a qualified rabbi
  - And that qualified rabbi would, in turn, have received his training by a recognized rabbi, etc.
  - So the Pharisees required that new rabbis receive training and approval authority from an unbroken chain of approved rabbis
- You can see this principle at work in Paul's ministry, when Paul validated his authority before a Jewish crowd in Jerusalem in Acts

[Acts 22:3](#) "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.

- Paul was a Pharisee before he came to faith in Jesus Christ
  - So Paul defended his authority before the crowd on the basis of who trained him: Gamaliel, a highly respected rabbi in that day
  - Paul was trained by the Harvard or Oxford of his day, and in the eyes of his audience that gave him authority to teach
  - Now in reality, Paul's authority to teach didn't come from Gamaliel...it came from a much higher authority – Jesus
  - But in that moment, Paul chose to highlight his Pharisaic training to gain the confidence of his skeptics and put doubts to rest
- So in the same way, the religious leaders were asking Jesus to defend how He had been trained and where He had received His authority to teach
  - Of course, Jesus' authority to teach and His knowledge of the Scriptures had no earthly source either
    - John says Jesus is the Truth, so Jesus' was the Author of Scripture, meaning His teaching authority came directly from Himself
    - But Luke also tells us that because Jesus became a man, He had to grow up under the instruction of the Holy Spirit
    - So Jesus' authority also came from the Father, Who gave Jesus His mission to come to earth and taught Jesus to know all things
  - So the answer to their question was that Jesus had personal authority as the Word, the Son of God, and He was given authority by His Father
    - But interestingly, Jesus doesn't give these men a direct answer
    - He knew these men didn't believe in His claims to be the Messiah and the Son of God
    - So He knew they wouldn't have accepted Jesus' explanation anyway
    - They wouldn't have said, "Oh, that's very helpful, now we understand, enjoy your time in the temple."

- In fact, had Jesus given them this answer, they would have called His response blasphemy because He was equating Himself with God
  - More than likely, that was exactly what these leaders were hoping would happen...that was the trap
  - Jesus says His authority is His own, or from God, and then they would have used that response to accuse Jesus before the crowd
- So instead Jesus takes advantage of a traditional rabbinical method of discourse to shine the spotlight back on these men and their dishonest motives

[Matt. 21:24](#) Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

[Matt. 21:25](#) "The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?'

[Matt. 21:26](#) "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet."

[Matt. 21:27](#) And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know." He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

- In v.24 Jesus responds to their question by asking them a question, which was an acceptable rabbinical practice
  - Rabbis commonly tested one another by posing questions to questions
  - A group of rabbis could conduct an entire conversations with nothing but questions
  - Dr. Fruchtenbaum tells a story of a Gentile who asked a rabbi why do you always answer questions with another question?
  - And the rabbi responded, "Why not?"
- So in v.25, Jesus answers His accusers by posing a question of His own: was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?
  - Jesus is referring to the baptism ministry that John conducted on the shores of the Jordan river
  - Did John operate with the authority of God, meaning was John's ministry legitimate and holy?

- Or did John operate on his own authority and initiative, and if so, then his ministry was a fraud
- So Jesus is asking the religious leaders to render a judgment on the legitimacy of John's ministry
- Now how does Jesus' question about John's legitimacy address the religious leaders' question about Jesus authority?
  - Well, remember Jesus' public ministry began at the baptism of John
    - Well, if the Pharisees said John's ministry was from Heaven, then Jesus could respond that He received His authority from John
    - And since the Pharisees answer had validated John's authority, then they would be in no position to discredit Jesus' authority
  - But Jesus knew these men weren't going to say that John's ministry was from Heaven because they opposed John from the beginning
    - John never studied under a rabbi and certainly the rabbis never authorized his ministry, so John was not one of them
    - Moreover, John publicly called the Pharisees vipers and hypocrites to their faces
    - So if the religious leaders said John had Heaven's blessing, then they would have condemned themselves in front of the people
  - On the other hand, these men couldn't say that John was a fraud, because when John was murdered by Herod Antipas, he became a hero
    - In the eyes of the Jewish people, John was a martyr of Israel for standing up to the Roman authorities
    - If they said that John was a fraud, it would be like someone in a Boston Irish Catholic pub calling the pope a fraud
    - It would have been political – and perhaps *literal* – suicide
- So they couldn't say John's ministry came from Heaven nor could they say John was operating on his own authority
  - The hunters have now become the hunted, and Jesus has them in a trap, so in v. 25 they huddle to reason out how to respond
    - They recognize that if they answer in favor of John, then they look foolish for having opposed him

- But if they go against John's ministry, then they risk the crowd's anger at them
- So they try to save face by answering that they simply didn't know where John received his ministry
  - It was a coward's play...an attempt to save face realizing Jesus had out maneuvered them
  - And everyone in the crowd knew that they were simply refusing to answer just to save themselves
- So Jesus says in v.27 He could legitimately refuse to answer their question
  - Why? Because these religious leaders never intervened to stop John's ministry in his day
  - They allowed John to continue baptizing by the Jordan...it was Herod who ultimately stopped it
- So the logic of Jesus' question works out this way...
  - If the Pharisees permitted John's ministry to continue though they didn't know the source of his authority...
  - Then why were they demanding to know the source of Jesus' authority?
- Religious authority (or teaching authority) in Jesus' day wasn't so different than it is in our day
  - We don't rely on rabbis to validate our authority but that doesn't mean we don't recognize authority at all
    - In fact, we follow the very same standards that Jesus followed in His own ministry
    - By that I mean, we have both personal authority and authority from Heaven
  - First, we have personal authority to minister based on the spiritual gifts we have been given by the Holy Spirit
    - The very fact that the Lord has given us a spiritual gift presupposes that He intends us to use it

- You can see your spiritual gift as evidence that God has given you authority to minister in His name
- Because if He didn't want you to minister, He wouldn't have equipped you for that ministry
- And the Bible says that we are all equipped in this way
  - Paul says in Romans 12 that we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us
  - In a sense Paul means we minister according to the authority God gives us
- So with the gift of prayer, we have unique authority to minister to others in prayer, and with the gift to teach, serve, give or whatever the same
  - Each of us is to exercise them accordingly, and we have that authority from God
  - We don't need someone to allow us to minister with our gift, because we have the Lord's authority to do so
  - And the Spirit will direct us in that ministry as we abide in Him
- On the other hand, we are also like Jesus in that we are under authority as well
  - Jesus was His own authority but He was also under the authority of the Father
    - Jesus Himself said:

**[John 12:49](#)** "For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak.

- And we likewise do not minister on our own initiative
- We have been placed under authority in the body of Christ, so we are expected to use our gift in ways that fit within the body
- Simply put, ministry can't be like living marooned on a deserted island
  - We can't pretend that we are free-agents able to minister by ourselves in all respects and without accountability to anyone

- Yes we have authority to minister from God, but we also have been told by God to submit to leaders and participate in the body
- So we must balance the two, just as Jesus balanced both
- And balance means you don't wait for someone to tell you that you have authority to minister to the body of Christ
  - The Lord has already told you that when He gave you a spiritual gift
  - But as you move out in ministry to serve others, you must operate under the authority of church leaders God has appointed
  - They help share your ministry, directing it where it will be best used and discipling you in the process
- If you receive that instruction and direction in humility, your service will be more effective and fruitful
  - The Lord will work through the gifts of your leaders to make you a better minister to others in your gift
  - That's how authority worked in Jesus and how it works in our lives as well
- So having silenced the religious leaders, it was Jesus' turn to put them to the test

**Matt. 21:28** "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.'

**Matt. 21:29** "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went.

**Matt. 21:30** "The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go.

**Matt. 21:31** "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 prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.

**Matt. 21:32** "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

- Jesus poses a question to these men in the form of a parable

- In the parable, a father had two sons, and the father calls upon the sons to help him work the family farmland
  - Naturally, it was expected that sons would obey their father's request
  - Moreover, it was reasonable to expect them to contribute to the family business
- But on that day, the first son flatly denies the father's request, which was an act of rebellion and almost unheard of in that day
  - That son was rightly deserving of condemnation and in some situations he might have been put to death for insubordination
  - Frankly, there was few things worse in the minds of the culture than a rebellious son
  - But later this rebellious son has a change of heart, and feels regret for his actions
  - At which point he then goes into the field, perhaps a little late but at least he's there in the end
- Then we have the second son, who has the opposite reaction...he agrees to the father's request, but his agreement was only for show
  - While he doesn't openly rebel against the father's authority as his brother did, he still disobeys
    - In fact, the second son disobeys without ever experiencing a change in heart
    - He never enters the field, so he has an outward appearance of obedience but his heart is completely opposed to the father
  - So then Jesus asks the religious leaders the obvious question...which son actually did the will of his father?
    - Clearly neither was perfect, but only one ended up in the field at the end of the day...and that was the truest test of obedience
    - It wasn't who expressed more willingness or who gave the most lip service to the father...it was the one who obeyed in the end
    - Only the first son actually obeyed the father

- So in v.32 the religious leaders give the correct answer: the first son did the will of the father which allowed Jesus to set the trap
  - Jesus compares the first son to prostitutes and tax collectors, those who openly disobey the Lord for a time
  - But in the end, they responded to John and Jesus in repentance, proving that in the end they did the will of the Father
- And then Jesus compares the second son to the religious leaders, those who showed superficial obedience but never recognized their own sin
  - And as a result, those who were openly rebellious would be in the Kingdom while these hypocritical leaders wouldn't
  - Because what matters is where we end our lives, not where we begin them
- Because we all start in the same place...sinners without a hope for redemption
  - It's why the Bible says we all need the grace of Jesus, because we are all born with the same problem: sin
  - But the religious leaders went to the end of their lives thinking themselves righteous and without sin
- For the same reason, these men never acknowledged John's righteous ministry of calling people to repentance
  - Even though John's ministry bore obvious spiritual fruit, they still refused to believe
    - John called prostitutes and tax collectors to repent and when they heard John's call, they did repent
    - These changes of heart were miracles and clear evidence that John's ministry was a movement of the Spirit
  - Ordinarily the religious leaders would have applauded results like that and embraced any rabbi with that kind of power to convert
    - But as Jesus points out in v.32 they refused to acknowledge God's clear and obvious work
    - And because they turned a blind eye to John's anointing they were also turning a blind eye to Jesus

- Because it's the same problem...their hearts had no interest in serving the Father
- Because they didn't need a Savior, they didn't receive Jesus, and even before that, they wouldn't receive John's call to repent
- These men were like that second son wanting the appearance of obedience but not willing to make the sacrifices to obtain it
  - Much less did they desire the relationship that comes through repentance and obedience
  - It's the definition of self-righteousness, caring only about the outward appearance and not the inward reality
- So Jesus passes His first encounter on this third day in the temple
  - He shows that His authority cannot be challenged by the rabbis
    - And He exposes their false motives and self-righteous attitude
    - And in the process, Jesus demonstrates His own righteousness
  - But He's also sowing the seeds of His own destruction as these men get more and more desperate and angry
    - So realize that as we minister in the gifts we receive and under the authority of the Lord, it won't always mean we make people happy
    - Many times, the result may be unhappiness
    - But sometimes that unhappiness becomes repentance and that's what we're ministering for...the chance to bring a soul into the Kingdom by the Lord's power and authority