Responding to God

Matthew 21:23-46
Key Verse: Matthew 21:32
“For 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.”

There has been a lot going on this week, but there is this one incident that I want to talk about. This week, there was also a photo that went around. It was a photo of Omran Daqneesh, a five-year-old boy from Aleppo, Syria. His house was hit by an airstrike on Wednesday. He was rescued from his blown-up house and placed on an ambulance. He is sitting in a seat on an ambulance full of dirt and blood, with his hands on his legs. Omran’s response was one of shock. Look at his face. He doesn’t even know how to respond. To make it worse, he lost his older brother on Saturday from injuries from the airstrike. How do you respond to that? My response is intense sadness and pain in my heart. There is so much in this world that is going on and there are so many ways that we can respond to what we hear and see. We can respond with anger, empathy, jealousy, apathy, hope or pain. However, in all of it, there is God. God is there in the pain and the darkness and in the lowest points of life. God is there in the joy and the light and in the best this life has to offer. When we are confronted with God, we have to ask ourselves, “How do we respond to God?” Do we treat him with the same responses that we have for the things of this world? The religious leaders of Jesus’ time did not know how to respond to God being among them, but Jesus showed them what the proper response was.

This passage picks up right after last week’s passage. If you remember, it’s the last week before Jesus’ death and he was in the temple. There, he found a menagerie and a marketplace. He had a fit and threw everyone out, and, the next day, Jesus was hungry and found a fig tree with no figs, so he cursed it and the tree withered immediately. It was at this point that today’s passage picks up. Jesus goes back to the temple courts and begin teaching the people. However, that was not all that happened. “Jesus 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?’” (23) The religious leaders were not happy with all the things Jesus was doing. Just the day before, Jesus cleared out the temple courts. All the people selling animals and exchanging money were driven out. Those people were there because the religious leaders received a cut of the proceeds. Jesus took out part of their livelihood. On top of that, little children were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” and Jesus did nothing to stop them. The kids were proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus let them. So, the religious leaders came to him with some questions, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” The religious leaders wanted to know who told Jesus he could do the things he was doing. Now, this was about the disruptions that Jesus caused the day before, but it was also about the healings he performed. They were wanting answers. None of them had told Jesus to do any of those things and they were the leaders of the people, the chief priests and elders of the people, so

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who gave Jesus the authority?

Jesus was unimpressed with their request. “Jesus replied, ‘I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?’” (24-25) Jesus answered the religious leaders’ question with another question and if they answered his question, then he would answer theirs. So, Jesus asked them about John the Baptist. It has been a little bit since John was beheaded, but he was still a known figure, and one beloved by the people. A lot of people had opinions about John, but Jesus wanted to know the official line from the people in charge. Now, this wasn’t just some sort of side question. John was the forerunner of the Messiah, sent to prepare the way for the Lord. If you believed that that was true, then you would know that Jesus is the Messiah, since that is what John was doing. If the religious leaders were to acknowledge that John’s baptism came from heaven, then they would know that Jesus’ authority came from heaven. Their answer would tell them about Jesus’ authority. That’s genius.

Unfortunately for the chief priests and elders of the people, it posed a bit of a problem and they had to take time to deliberate. “They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will ask, “Then why didn’t you believe him?” But if we say, “Of human origin”—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.’” (25-26) If they answered Jesus that John’s baptism came from heaven, then Jesus would ask about why they didn’t believe him. None of them accepted John’s message of repentance, because here they are, acting all proud and questioning Jesus about his authority. What they really wanted to say was that John was just a crazy man baptizing people on his own, but they were afraid of what the people would do. You see, the people knew that John was a prophet from God. They could tell from his words, actions and lifestyle that he had been appointed by God to help the people to come back to God by preparing their hearts through repentance. If you look at the Old Testament prophets, their primary purpose was to bring the people back to God through repentance. Many of them pronounced God’s judgment on the people in order to get the people to turn back to God, and John was no different. He called people to be baptized for the repentance of their sins. They had to acknowledge their sinfulness and admit their wrongdoing before God. With John’s message, the people responded by turning to God, but the religious leaders responded by doing a little investigation and then doing nothing. After much deliberation, what was the result? Which way were they going to answer? They copped out and answered, “We don’t know.” (27)

Since they didn’t really respond, Jesus didn’t respond to their question. Jesus said, that if they answered him, then he would answer them, but they didn’t answer. So, he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” (27) Jesus could have walked away just then, but he took it as an opportunity to teach the religious leaders, so he begins to tell them a parable. “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.’ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.” (28-30) It is a simple story. There was a father with two sons and he asked both to go to

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the vineyard and work. One said, “No,” but later went and the other said, “Yes,” but did not go. Then Jesus asked, “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” (31) Which do you think? The one who said, “No,” but did it anyway? Or the one who said, “Yes,” but did not go? The first one, right? Jesus asked about which one *did* what his father wanted. Only one did, the other did not. It didn’t matter what they said. What mattered was what they did. The religious leaders knew this and also responded that the first son did what his father wanted. They understood the story.

After their response, Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For 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.” (31-32) They need to get the aloe because that is a big burn. The tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom of God ahead of them. One thing you can see out of this is the meaning of the parable that Jesus told. Jesus implied that the tax collectors and prostitutes are like the first son and the religious leaders are like the second son. Now the first son refused to do what the father asked, but went anyway. The tax collectors and prostitutes are sinners, they refused to do what God asked. They outright rejected living according to God’s ways, but when John and Jesus came, they began to turn from their sins. I mean, there was a former tax collector as one of Jesus’ main twelve disciples and the author of the book we are studying. They repented of their sins and began to live changed lives. They started doing what the Lord asked of them. Now, the religious leaders were like the second son, the one that said he was going to work in the vineyard, but did not go. The religious leaders claim to follow God and his rules, but they looked for loopholes and exceptions to each rule. They held anger, bitterness, pride and self-righteousness in their hearts, and had no love and grace for their fellow people. They loved their positions more than they loved God. Their lips were near to God, but their hearts were far from him.

Based on Jesus’ words, you can see that there is importance in doing what is right. Now, doing things and following what God wants does not make you good. Obeying God does not absolve you of your sins, but obedience is the fruit of a changed life. Simply saying that we follow God is not enough in God’s eyes. Simply coming to church on Sunday and agreeing with what is said in not enough. We have to put in into practice. If we don’t live changed lives, then we just fall back into our sinful patterns. Jesus teaches love and grace, but if we don’t follow that teaching, then we live our lives with road rage all the time. We are grumpy and complain about everything. We are self-righteous and point out the faults of every other person. We tear other people down to make ourselves feel better. Or, when things go bad, we are called to trust in God and rejoice in him, but if we don’t obey God, then we are filled with fear and play the victim saying, “Why me?” We blame everybody else for all our problems, while cowering because we don’t know what will happen next. The right response is doing what God asks of us, to do his work. When we say that we don’t want to, then we need to admit that we are wrong and change our ways to align with God’s will. The religious leaders in Jesus’ time said that they followed God, but their pride and self-righteousness showed that they did not. John helped countless people repent of their sins and begin to live a new life, but the religious leaders would not accept his work even then. They looked for excuses to not

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believe his message, like the fact he didn't drink wine. He must have been a weirdo to them, where instead they should have said, "Man, we were wrong about him. He is doing great work for God."

So, Jesus continued on with another parable, "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 moved to another place." (33) In this parable, there is a landowner and a vineyard. Now the landowner prepared the vineyard and took good care of it. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. He really wanted the vineyard to produce well. After all was done, he rented the vineyard out and moved away. The landowner put some farmers in charge of the vineyard with the rent being a portion of the harvest. It's not uncommon for a landowner in the first century to live away from a plot of land they own. It's like owning an apartment building, but not living in it. At any rate, Jesus continued, "When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit." (34) When it was time to collect the rent, the landowner sent some of his servants to collect. Again, it is not uncommon for a manager to send underlings to do business.

Unfortunately, the tenants responded violently to the servants' requests. "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way." (35-36) The tenants accosted one servant, killed another and stoned a third. Why would they do that? I was reading up on it, and I read that it was suggested that the tenants might have thought that the landowner was dead and they didn't have to honor any requests. I mean, if the landowner wanted to collect, then why send only servants? Shouldn't he come himself if it were so important? This thinking explains what happens next. "Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. 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.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." (37-39) The landowner sent his son to collect the rent, but the tenants killed him because they thought that if they got rid of the heir, the land would become theirs. If they thought that the landowner was dead, getting rid of the only son would mean that there were no more landowners and the vineyard would go to somebody. They thought that if they were to get rid of any heirs, they would get the land because they were the ones in possession of it.

However, the landowner was not dead and Jesus asked the question, "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" (40) When the owner comes, what would happen to the tenants? Would anything happen? The religious leaders responded, "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." (41) The leaders recognized the depravity of the tenants' actions and pronounced that the landowner would get justice. In the first parable, the chief priests and elders indicted themselves, by saying the one who did as the father wanted was the right one, not the one said that they would do. In this parable, they pronounced their own sentence to their crimes.

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You see, the landowner is God. The vineyard is Israel. The tenants are the leadership and the son is Jesus. God prepared Israel to be fruitful, but the leadership of the people was greedy. They liked their power and influence and they lorded their rule over the people. They told the people what needed to be done for God, but they condemned anyone who was not able to keep the law. When John and Jesus came, the response of the leadership was not to invite them in and respect that they came from God, but they tried to discredit them and kill them because they were a threat to their authority. Jesus was a reminder that they do not own the vineyard and by getting rid of him, they would be able to maintain their position. However, when God comes, he will not be pleased with what his tenants have done.

"Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes"? 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. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'" (42-44) Jesus is the stone that the leaders rejected. They saw all his work and heard his message, but they did not accept him and God was about to make him the most important stone in the entire building, the part of the foundation that keeps everything aligned. The religious leaders thought that they were guaranteed a spot in God's kingdom because they were the most righteous of God's people, but they made a fatal mistake and they rejected God's son and that rejection would bar them from entering God's kingdom. They were hoarding all the fruit for themselves.

This would have been a great time for the religious leaders to respond properly, but they keep going down the dark hole. "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet." (45-46) The understood the meaning behind Jesus' parables and knew he was talking about them, but they responded with more anger and they looked for ways to arrest Jesus. They wanted him out of the picture so they could continue to rule over the people. That sounds a lot like the tenants in the second parable. Not only did the leaders recognize the meaning of the parables, but they were also trying hard to fulfill them.

You see, the religious leaders continued to respond poorly to God. Historically, the Jewish leadership followed their own ideas. If you remember our study of 1 and 2 Kings, there weren't many good kings. Most of them were self-absorbed and led people away from God and these religious leaders were the same. They held their tradition and rules higher than God himself. They reveled in their own righteousness, but when they were called to see their discrepancy with God's true way, they responded with fear, pride and anger. John told the people to repent of their sins and turn back to God, but the religious leaders were skeptical. Countless sinners repented and the religious leaders didn't even notice. They simply held on to the fact that they were sinners and continued to remind them of that fact. They thought that once a sinner always a sinner.

In our lives as Christians, we too have to realize how we respond to God. We come to church on

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Sunday and hear his word. We get together in small groups after the message and talk about what we have learned, but that is not a response. A response is not just saying what we learned, but putting those things we learned into practice. Jesus shows us God's grace and love, but how many times do we respond with contempt toward "those people", the people not like us? Christianity is filled with people who profess to follow Jesus, but in reality follow their own agenda. You might know the type. They are the self-righteous who condemn others because they are unable to hold it together like they are able to. They make others look bad to make themselves look good. They are the ones who instantly wonder what sort of bad thing did you do in order to have something bad happen to you, and they ask you that question. When in reality, the bad thing happens to show God's goodness. Every time you talk to those people, you feel horrible and unworthy. Notice that I used the phrase, "those people." Even they deserve grace.

God is all around us. His hand is in everything. How should we respond? He is the great and almighty God, worthy of all worship and praise. He is the creator of heaven and earth. He is not absent or dead. He is here and living. We are not his superiors or even his equals, even though he humbled himself and came to us through Jesus. We should be in awe of God's majesty and power, and stand in reverence of his holy name. We should realize that we are nothing compared to him and repent for every single way that we fall short of his perfection. No matter how good you are, you are not better than God. Now we are moving to a time of decision. So, I implore you to take the time to see how you are responding to God. It is our actions that show whether we follow God or not. Are our actions humble or prideful? Do we look at God's work and discount it because it didn't happen the way we like it to happen? Do we see suffering and pain and sit on our hands? How should we respond? With grace, with humility, with awe and wonder, and with love.

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