

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We're at the time of year that the pace and intensity of Matthew's gospel are picking up. From now until almost end of November, most of our gospel readings will take place during the last week of Jesus' life. What we call Holy Week.

There will be more parables, and descriptions of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, and some very direct teaching about what it means to follow Jesus.

And if you haven't done it, or if you haven't done it in a while, I strongly encourage you to read Matthew chapters 18-25. Because chapter 18 is really where all of this starts, and reading those chapters together makes the connection between that and where we end up.

In our readings over the last few weeks, Jesus has been on the road to Jerusalem, teaching the disciples and others as they traveled. We've learned about the Kingdom of Heaven – that it operates differently than people expect. That God's grace and mercy are for everyone.

In last week's parable, we learned that everyone gets an equal amount of grace. That it isn't divvied out according to how long our relationship with God is.

Today, we've jumped ahead in the story and Jesus is now in Jerusalem, having arrived on the back of a donkey being greeted with shouts of "Hosanna! Save us."

He has overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple, and healed some people, and been praised as the son of David. And the temple leaders are angry at this disruption.

Our reading starts the next morning.

The interaction it describes between Jesus and the temple leaders was actually a confrontation. The way it's written almost makes it sound like a polite conversation. But the chief priests and elders didn't casually walk up to Jesus and say, "Hey, Jesus, by what authority are you doing these things?"

This was more like, "Who do you think you are?" The chief priests and elders were responsible for what was taught in the temple. It was part of their job to determine true prophets from false ones, so it made sense that they questioned Jesus' authority.

But there were also elements of fear and desperation in their question.

These leaders were the most powerful people in Jerusalem. They came from a long line of privileged ancient Jewish families; so they inherited their social power and status. They were put in place as temple leaders by Roman leadership to maintain order on behalf of the Empire, so they were closely aligned with that power dynamic.

At first, everything would have been above board to maintain Jewish protection and safety, and they'd have been left alone to practice their faith. It was in their best interest to keep that balance. But as things developed, the temptation of greed came into play.

They were financially compensated by the temple treasury, a system that oppressed their fellow Jewish people and allowed them a sense of security in their power. And they wanted to hold onto that.

So, in their confrontation with Jesus, it's important to pay attention to their side conversation about how to answer Jesus' question – because they didn't focus on the question. They focused on what their answer would mean for them.

Because no matter how they answered, their authority, power and status would have been jeopardized. So, they played it safe.

¹We watch things like that happen in real time today when someone asks a politician a direct question. Instead of answering, they calculate. We can almost see their mental gears turning as they ask themselves, "What can I get away with saying? What will play well to my base?"

But in this parable, in the context of the gospel reading, Jesus didn't let the temple leaders off the hook. He essentially says, "You of all people should have been able to recognize who I am. And the fact that you know the answer, but refuse to take a side, speaks volumes about your priorities. And the people you despise and think aren't worthy, they get it. And because they get it, they're in line ahead of you going into God's kingdom."

That last part is also important – "ahead of you." Not "instead of you." The religious leaders are still part of God's kingdom. They just aren't at the front of the line like they thought they were. They weren't yet able to experience its fullness because they were caught up in their power structure.

²The Rev. Dr. Leah Schade describes it as like being in an airport waiting to board your flight and Jesus is the gate agent. When it comes time to board, instead of calling first class, he calls Group 9 to board first – the ones relegated to the back of the plane, whose seats are next to the toilets. Everyone still gets on the plane, just not in the order they were expecting.

This is what the Kingdom of God is like. Its authority, its power and status, isn't what people have in mind. And that's the challenge Jesus presented to the temple leaders.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2026/09/what-matt-21-23-32-teaches-about-integrity-in-an-election/>

² Ibid.

³They were responsible for the temple and guiding the people in faithfulness. But they didn't do it because they were ultimately more concerned with protecting themselves. They didn't seem to consider that reconsidering was an option.

That they could have been like the first son in the parable – changed their minds, and their hearts, and gone into the vineyard. They could have listened to God and become the leaders God called them to be – freed from the system that held them bound. That's the invitation Jesus presented to them.

It's an invitation we have always had as Christians – intentionally asking who we are listening to. And it's more prominent at some times in our lives than in others. Usually during some kind of life transition when we're reevaluating things and figuring out what might need to change.

⁴With the midterm elections coming up, it's an invitation we're called to pay close attention to because we are being inundated with promises made by people from all parties who don't intend to keep them. And it's only going to get more intense in the coming weeks.

But this invitation isn't limited to life transitions, or to the next six weeks. Or even to politicians. It always applies to current religious leaders. To individual Christians. And to churches and their mission.

And when we remember that, it puts some potentially uncomfortable questions in front of us:

When have we said "yes" but didn't follow through?

When have we said "no" but changed our minds and did the right thing in the end?

What have we condemned in others that is the exact thing for which we should be repenting ourselves?

Where have we confused protecting our standing with fulfilling our calling?

Where has our concern about how people will respond kept us from faithfully responding?

When I was preparing for today, I came across an article that said the Kingdom of God is both liberating and terrifying. Liberating because it frees us from so many things that hold us bound. And terrifying because it asks us to let go of the things we don't realize hold us bound.

Things like status and authority. All the things we hold onto because they make us feel safe and have given many of us a lot of privilege.

³ <https://micahkrey.com/2026/09/21/matthew-2123-32-18th-sunday-after-pentecost-september-27-2026/>

⁴ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2026/09/what-matt-21-23-32-teaches-about-integrity-in-an-election/>

But in between the liberation and the terror is an invitation to pay attention to who and what we're listening to. To take a minute and honestly give thought to where our hearts are turned – because our actions follow.

And to let go of what we're listening to if it keeps our hearts from being turned toward God.

None of this is about pretending that faithful decisions are easy. Many times, they aren't. It isn't about acting like we're not afraid. It isn't about ignoring disagreements we might have and the costs of our answers.

It is about remembering that our actions will follow where our hearts are turned. And that Jesus gives us a standing invitation to reflect on whether who and what we're listening to turns our hearts toward God.

Because the promise Jesus makes in this parable is that our previous response doesn't have to be our final one. We can reconsider. We can give a different answer. We can begin doing, or turn back toward doing, the work of God's faithful people at any point.

When we do, our lives are immediately changed. Our understanding of authority and status and power is flipped.

We are at once liberated from the things that hold us bound, and we're able to let go of the things we don't realize have a hold on us.

We're no longer worried about whether we're in first class, and we're okay with being in Group 9.

Because we experience the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven because we are free to live in the grace and mercy of God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.