

MATTHEW 22-23

22: 1-14 – Parable of the Wedding Banquet

This parable has been told by Jesus in a few variations. In other gospels, the context is a little different. Here in Matthew it follows closely the parable of the wicked tenants Jesus just spoke in 21:33-46. This parable like the one before is quite explicit as to who is being talked about. The king, his son and the wedding banquet represent God, Jesus and the promise of the gospel for new life and hope for the people of God. The problem is, all the key players in Jewish society reject Jesus as the Messiah of God and refuse to come to the party. The invitation, then, is extended to the riffraff, the people who are on the margins – the lame, the blind, the prostitutes and tax-collectors – those who are morally and physically cursed. But there is also a catch. Just because Jesus invites all these to the party, doesn't mean the call of the gospel isn't about change. Tax-collectors must change their practices. Prostitutes must change their way of life. Those who responded to Jesus' gospel from the heart transformed their lives as well. That's what the reference to being at the party without a wedding robe is all about.

As we will continue to see, weeping and gnashing of teeth in hell is for all those who claim the privilege without the responsibility. At the front of the line are the religious, political and wealthy leaders of Israel.

22: 15-22 – The Question about Taxes

In what follows Jesus is engaging different groups of religious leaders. Here he is engaging the Pharisees and Herodians (those who support Herod as King). The question about paying taxes to Rome is deeply political and divisive. When Jesus was a boy there was a famous Jewish revolt against paying taxes to Rome led by a rebel called Judas. Paying taxes to Rome was a constant reminder of Jewish subjection to a foreign oppressor. The denarius (main currency) was also a reminder because it had the emperor's image on it, with the words: "Son of God, high priest" inscribed on it. For a Jew this was idolatry. Judas and the revolutionaries were captured and crucified on crosses.

If Jesus claims that the tax must not be paid, he will be supporting the revolutionary fervour and gather respect from most people who expected the messiah to lead a revolt against the Romans. But this would also set him up for crucifixion and play into the hands of the religious leaders who want him dead. If he claims that taxes should be paid, he will be discredited among the people. Jesus' response is brilliant because he resists either trap. He asks to see a denarius, and it is the Pharisees and Herodians who produce it (meaning they have possession of the currency, while Jesus does not). He looks at it, perhaps with some disgust and asks about the image on it (Caesar). If it belongs to Caesar, give it back to him. But God demands something much greater than material currency. God demands our heart and soul. Clearly in this exchange, it is the Pharisees and Herodians who appear more beholden to Caesar than Jesus, and Jesus has managed not to tell people to refuse paying taxes either. If our heart and soul is rooted in our money, then we are slaves to a power that is not God. God wants

something much more of us, which means we must detach from our money. How much are our lives and our identities intertwined with our money and possessions?

22: 23-33 – The Question about the Resurrection

Now the Sadducees have a go at Jesus. While most religious leaders and the clear majority of Jews believe in some kind of resurrection of the dead, Sadducees do not. They try to provide a scenario where the resurrection would seem ludicrous. Would there not be conflict in heaven if there was a woman with 7 husbands there? But Jesus embarrasses them as well. 1) Resurrection life is eternal life and therefore the need to populate the world through reproduction is no longer necessary. Being like angels means that sexuality for reproduction and much that shapes life here and now is no longer necessary. Life will be different. 2) Resurrection is current, not just in the future. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may still participate in a future resurrection of the dead, but they are alive and present with God right now.

Jesus is basically attacking the view that the greatest obstacle to Jewish salvation has to do with Roman oppression. The deeper enemy is the collective of sin and death. The resurrection deals with death and empowers us to live now with confidence and resistance to any force or person who threatens our life now. Our eternal life belongs to God and no person can deprive us of that. The transformation of the heart deals with sin and this is what the religious leaders not only fail to realize, but they lead people in the wrong direction as teachers. They focus on external things – laws and rituals, Roman oppressors and paying taxes - rather than conversion to love as forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation and resurrection in the face of suffering and oppression because we refuse to play the enemy's game of hateful violence and revenge.

22: 34-40 – The Greatest Commandment

The Pharisees are big on the law. Jesus points them to the heart of it. It's not about fulfilling the law so that we are accepted by God. Rather, it's about understanding the law right and our relationship to God on a foundation of loving grace. If we have the goal and foundation right, our lives will better fulfill God's will. If making money or defeating our enemies is our goal, our energies and priorities will be directed accordingly. If love of God and neighbour from our heart outward is our goal, then this directs our energies, values and priorities accordingly.

22: 41-45 – The Question about David's Son

This is a riddle with an important message. The Messiah is David's son by lineage, which makes him human like everyone else. But he is also "The Lord" (God) in relation to David, and hence above David and any ordinary human being. Clearly Jesus is claiming more for the Messiah than merely prophetic or ordinary kingly status. Jesus is claiming the Messiah to be the very representation of God, of greater authority than any human being.

23: 1-39 - Jesus denounces the Scribes and Pharisees & Laments over Jerusalem

Chapters 23-25 look to the future and warn of things to come. This is the final block of Jesus' teaching balancing what was said in the sermon on the mount.

Religious leaders are great at doing 2 things: 1) Telling people what they must do to be right with God and to make God return to save them; and 2) making a big show of their religiosity outwardly. In fact, however, they are 1) hypocrites in their hearts and 2) burdening people with the wrong priorities while refusing to bear the real burdens of the law – compassion, mercy, justice and righteousness of heart before God.

This is evident in many ways – they value the gold above the temple and the gift above the altar (vs16-22). They like to be treated with respect and honour, to be called teacher and rabbi. Jesus emphasizes humility and servanthood. That's what a real leader under God would do - point to God rather than themselves. They (religious leaders) focus on tithes (money for the temple and synagogue) and external rituals (to separate themselves from uncleanness) but inside are full of hatred, contempt and self-righteousness. They are part of a long line – priests and teachers of the law who condemned and killed prophets before Jesus.

Jesus is so upset with them because they have led the people astray and have turned them against Jesus and the true path to Israel's salvation. And so, Jesus ends by lamenting about Jerusalem (as he lamented about Galilee earlier), that his fate, as all prophets before him, will lead to the destructive fate of Israel, beginning with Jerusalem the capital. In the next chapter Jesus will become more specific about this fate.