

## FROM CHEERS TO JEERS

March 29, 2026 (Palm Sunday)  
Matthew 21: 1-11 & Matthew 27: 21-26  
By Dean Feldmeyer

Did you hear it—the great, grinding, rumbling sound?  
No, it wasn't another earthquake.  
It was the sound of public opinion shifting beneath our feet.  
And it's happening faster and faster—more and more often.

### THE EVER-CHANGING POPULAR OPINION

In 2003, a majority of people from all major religious groups opposed legalizing same-sex marriage. Now, a majority in all but three surveyed groups support it. They may not like it but they're willing to allow it because, who's hurt, right?

Alex Lundry of the market research firm TargetPoint said of these findings, "This is moving faster than any issue we've ever tracked. This is the future talking to us."

If same-sex marriage were the only issue where public opinion was shifting rapidly, it would be interesting—but only in the way outliers are always interesting. What's truly striking is that this is just one example among many. Across a wide range of issues, public opinion is in a state of rapid and constant flux.

In 2012, only 48% of Americans favored legalizing marijuana. In less than a year—by 2013—that number had jumped to 58%, according to Gallup. When marijuana became legal in Colorado, activists moved quickly to take advantage of the unexpected shift in public sentiment.

Today, fourteen years later, twenty-five states have legalized recreational (adult-use) marijuana, along with the District of Columbia and several U.S. territories. Fifteen others have legalized marijuana for medical use.

One reason for these rapid changes may be the overwhelming influence of social media. About 200 million American adults—roughly 72% of the population—use social media every day for an average of two hours. People once allowed their opinions to evolve gradually as they gathered information and listened to others. But opinions formed on social media do not evolve. They form rapidly and harden quickly, becoming resistant to any gradual process of change.

This may help explain some of the rapidly shifting opinions we've seen in the news over the past few months.

One day Stephen Colbert is hailed as the greatest satirical voice of his age—the darling of the media, the new Mark Twain, a contemporary Jonathan Swift. Then he—or a writer from his show—makes a joke about an ethnic minority. Someone paraphrases it on social media, where satire rarely survives 140 characters, and suddenly people are calling for him to be fired.

A few years ago, various internet sites ran the headline: “Diet Soda Linked to Heart Disease, Death.” But when we read the story, we discovered that “linked” was a problematic word. The study presented at a meeting of the American College of Cardiology found no causal link at all. The connection was purely statistical. No one was claiming that diet soda causes heart disease. In fact, women who drank diet soda in moderation had a lower mortality rate than those who drank it rarely or never.

Unfortunately, many people read only the headline and rushed to Facebook and X to spread the news that diet soda was killing us.

Conventional wisdom — what pundits used to call public opinion — is fickle, capricious, volatile, mercurial, and inconsistent. And thanks to social media, it’s becoming even more so. One day consumer confidence is up; the next day it’s down. One day someone’s approval rating is high; the next day it has plummeted.

One day Jesus rides into town on a donkey, carried by a wave of popularity. Five days later he is whipped, spat upon, cursed, and the very same crowd that cheered him on Sunday is jeering and demanding his execution on Friday.

“There is nothing new under the sun,” says Ecclesiastes. And the story of Palm Sunday — and the week that follows — illustrates that perfectly. Public opinion was as fickle then as it is now.

### **A LITTLE STREET THEATER**

In the late sixties and early seventies, we called it “guerrilla theater,” and we thought we had invented it. It was street theater — short skits and sketches laced with humor and acted out in public. We rehearsed them until they looked completely impromptu, as if we had made them up on the spot.

Then we would head into downtown Cincinnati or to community festivals, bang a gong to gather a crowd, and perform a five- or six-minute skit — sometimes pulling audience members into our little dramas. And just as quickly as we appeared, we would disappear, melting back into the crowd.

Most of the skits were stories from the Bible, rewoven as satire, poking a finger in the eye of the establishment and our favorite target, the “Military-Industrial Complex.” It was heady, exciting, and maybe even a little dangerous. Who knew what might happen if someone didn’t find us funny?

Of course, we didn’t invent it. Street theater is as old as the Middle Ages — maybe older.

Maybe it’s as old as the first Palm Sunday. Because isn’t that exactly what Jesus staged in Jerusalem that day? Wasn’t it a piece of street theater, performed to expose the pretensions of the religious and imperial establishment and their grand notions of emperors and empires?

Palm branches were waved at conquering generals when they rode triumphantly into Rome after defeating an enemy. They entered in parade, riding in an ornately armored chariot or on a white warhorse, followed by the spoils of war—treasures and captives brought as tribute to Caesar.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of Caesar!” the crowds would shout.

Some scholars believe that a scene not unlike that was unfolding that very Sunday on the other side of Jerusalem, as Pontius Pilate entered the city with a retinue of dignitaries and soldiers, returning to take control of a city roiling with the return of spring and the celebration of Passover.

At precisely the same time, Jesus was the center of a very different kind of procession — one Matthew tells us was carefully planned and orchestrated. Jesus would enter not in a chariot or on a noble steed, but on a donkey, an animal considered lowly and unimpressive. It was satire at its finest, pointing out the absurdity of any earthly ruler who dared to call himself divine.

Jesus’ followers waved palm branches just as Romans waved palms for their generals and emperors. They spread their cloaks on the road. They shouted blessings and praise to this new kind of conqueror, this revolutionary kind of king.

“Hallelujah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

It was bold. It was edgy. It was countercultural—and more than a little dangerous. It was all very naughty and mischievous fun.

Except some people weren’t laughing. Some didn’t get the joke. Some believed Jesus was becoming dangerously disruptive and needed to be stopped before the Romans grew nervous and punished everyone for the zealotry of one obscure rabbi from Nazareth.

So, they had him arrested — to silence him. They brought him before the high priests, defenders of the establishment and the status quo, who questioned him and tried him quickly and quietly in the early hours of the morning, finding him guilty before anyone could object.

And when he refused to speak in his own defense, the crowd — the very ones who had joined his procession—turned against him.

In just five short days, their cheers became jeers.

### **FROM CHEERS TO JEERS**

Just as he predicted, they betrayed him. They turned their backs on him. They cried out for his blood. They ran away and hid.

Why do people turn on their leaders and saviors? What changes public opinion — conventional wisdom — so quickly and so completely?

Sometimes people turn because they never understood the leader's message in the first place.

They thought they understood. They believed he was ushering in the kingdom of God — the Day of the Lord —the long-awaited moment when wrongs would be righted, order restored by force, and Israel placed back on top where she belonged. That's why they shouted "Hosanna!" That's why they followed him and tolerated his puzzling parables and opaque metaphors. This was the one who would deliver them from Roman oppression. The one who would finally usher in the real kingdom.

Only the kingdom he brought was not centered in Jerusalem but in the human heart. The revolution he offered was not built on revenge and violence but on love and kindness. And when they realized this, they felt betrayed and their cheers turned to jeers.

Sometimes people turn because the cost of following becomes too high.

It was easy enough to follow Jesus when it meant anonymous, mischievous fun. But now things were turning serious — deadly serious. A person could get hurt, even killed, following this man. "Take up your cross and follow me" wasn't just a metaphor. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" wasn't an exaggeration. "Sell what you have and give it to the poor, and come, follow me" wasn't hypothetical.

He meant every word.

So, the prudent, safe thing was to distance yourself from him as quickly as possible. And what better way to do that than to shout "Crucify him!" when Pilate asked what to do and Caiaphas gave the cue?

And sometimes people don't really "turn against" a leader because they were never truly for him in the first place.

Maybe they were just out shopping or on their way to work when that little street-theater demonstration happened. They got swept up in the moment, carried along by the crowd. It was a brief diversion in an otherwise dreary day. They went along to get along, but they were never committed. They were simply part of the crowd.

And on Friday, they would be part of the crowd again—still uncommitted, still doing what everyone else was doing, trying not to stand out.

In Reginald Rose's classic drama *\*Twelve Angry Men\**, the jurors are never named—only numbered. Each is identifiable not by his name but by his behavior: one is a crusader, one a bigot, one analytical, one burdened by personal issues. And one juror simply cannot bring himself to care about anything except the fact that he has tickets to a baseball game and wants to leave in time to make it.

So, he votes with the majority. And when the majority shifts, he shifts with it. He cannot be made to care about conviction or acquittal. He just wants to get to his baseball game. We all know that guy.

On Sunday he cheers.  
And on Friday he jeers.

Not because he believes any of it, but because it's the easy way.  
And who knows—maybe it will get him what he wants.

**AMEN**