

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Commission: A Study of Matthew 21–28

STUDY THREE

Slugging It Out with Caustic Critics

Matthew 21:23–46

Like honey attracts flies, Jesus attracted critics. As time passed, they became increasingly more caustic, intense, and downright ugly.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

PEOPLE often imagine Jesus as He is pictured in medieval paintings—a sad look on His face, His body as thin as a willow branch—sheepish, docile, and passive. But that's not the Jesus of the gospels. Matthew portrayed Jesus strong and determined, fearless in defending God's truth, unbending in pursuing His mission, and unquenchable in His passion for what's right and good.

Jesus had already stood toe-to-toe with religious leaders, rebuking their hypocrisy (Matthew 15:1–14). Instead of repenting, though, they assaulted Jesus with hateful accusations, relentless challenges, and verbal traps. Fearlessly, Jesus fended off each attack with fiery rebukes aimed at melting their hard hearts. Each encounter, however, only angered them even more.

Jesus' cleansing the temple set the stage for the final showdown. With their money-making machine upended, the chief priests surrounded Jesus like a mob of thugs to discredit His authority and disgrace His character. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we begin round one where Jesus blocked every blow and even turned these religious leaders' own tactics against them.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Perhaps a critic has publicly assaulted you, and you know the humiliation of his or her caustic words. Draw near to Jesus as your courageous defender and pray for insight as you study His words of hope.

Father, when enemies attack me, I feel like the psalmist, “surrounded by terror” (Psalm 31:13). Surely, Jesus felt the same way. Help me learn from Him as my protector in my time of need, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The events in the passage took place on Tuesday of Holy Week, Jesus' *final* day to teach and preach the gospel publicly.¹ How quickly time had passed since the Father pronounced Him “my dearly loved Son” at His baptism (Matthew 3:17), launching Jesus' public ministry. Sadly, His public proclamation was met with increasingly intense hostility.

Read [Matthew 21:23–46](#) thoughtfully. Jesus was probably teaching in one of the temple's porticos when some priests and elders demanded His credentials: “By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right?” (Matthew 21:23).²



Observation: Question and Response, Parables and Rebuke

When we observe the Scriptures, we identify similar words and concepts that weave through a passage to develop a theme or themes.³ Throughout this passage, look for the theme of *submitting to authority*.

Question and Response—Matthew 21:23–27

What was Jesus doing that prompted certain Sanhedrin members—part of the ruling council of Judaism—to demand that Jesus prove His authority? (Hint: use the context to determine what “all these things” refers to in Matthew 21:23.)



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Of course, Jesus' authority came from His Father at His baptism. But instead of saying so, Jesus shifted the focus to John the Baptizer's authority. What did Jesus ask about John (*Matthew 21:24–27*)? How did Jesus' question hook *them* on the horns of a dilemma?

Since priests and elders refused to answer His question, saying, "We don't know," Jesus refused to answer their question . . . at least not directly. Instead, through parables, Jesus turned their question into a rebuke. We'll examine two of the parables now and the third in the next study.

Parables and Rebuke—Matthew 21:28–41

Looking at the first parable *Matthew 21:28–32*, describe the attitude and actions of both sons toward their father. Which son submitted to his father's authority?

We'll save Jesus' interpretation for the next phase of our study. For now, let's move on to Jesus' second story about a group of evil tenants. Summarize the story and write down key words that Jesus would've emphasized (*Matthew 21:33–39*).



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Jesus asked these Sanhedrin “judges” to issue their verdict: “‘When the owner of the vineyard returns,’ Jesus asked, ‘what do you think he will do to those farmers?’” (Matthew 21:40). What did they say in [21:41](#)?

In 21:42–46, Jesus issued *His* verdict on these leaders and the nation. Let’s look deeper into these verses as we interpret the passage.

By the time Jesus’ final week arrived, enough was enough. He decided to be as firm and as aggressive as His opponents, and we admire Him for that. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: What Do Jesus’ Parables Mean?

Jesus had a way of turning the tables on His enemies by pointing out their heart problem—namely, their unwillingness to submit to God’s authority. Jesus’ parable of the two sons illustrates their disobedient nature. Whom did Jesus say the sons represented, according to [Matthew 21:31–32](#)? What insight into the religious leaders’ hearts did Jesus reveal, and how is that revelation instructive for us?



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Underneath their righteous robes, the priests and elders were like disobedient children, disrespectful and two-faced. In the parable of the landowner, Jesus warned them of the deadly consequences of their defiance. What is the meaning of Jesus' story in Matthew 21:33–41? What does this story teach us about God, and how is that truth relevant today?

It didn't take long for the priests and elders to catch on that they were the "wicked farmers" plotting to kill Jesus (Matthew 21:45). By their own definition of judgment, they deserved death.

Concluding this section in 21:42–44, Jesus shifted His metaphor to a "stone." Why? Remember the *authority* theme. What authority did Jesus indirectly claim by quoting *Psalms 118:22–23* and by taking the kingdom of God away from the Jews? For help, read pages 161–162 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.

By casting Himself as the landowner's son and the rejected stone, Jesus subtly answered the priests' and elders' original question about His authority. He was the Son of God, the Messiah whom the Jews rejected. But there was an unexpected twist: *the rejected stone would become the cornerstone*. God would vindicate His Son, and Jesus would become the cornerstone of God's new building project.

No doubt, giving the vineyard to others is a reference to turning over to the Gentiles the blessings that would have gone to Israel. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: The Cornerstone of the Church

Years later, Paul picked up the cornerstone metaphor in his letter to the church in Ephesus. Addressing the Gentile believers, Paul explained how God was erecting His new temple. What great truths did Paul share about Christ's church in *Ephesians 2:19–21*?

Not long after Paul penned these words, in AD 70, the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The “stone,” which the religious leaders had stumbled over, crushed them and the nation. But out of the rubble emerged the church, the new dwelling place of God in the heart of every believer.



Application: Lasting Lesson

So, we learn from Jesus' stories that God is *very* patient, but His patience has limits. After years of God sending prophets and even His Son to call His people to repent, judgment eventually came to the nation.

Yet, out of His judgment emerged hope for renewal. The temple may lie in ruins, but God would make a new covenant with His people, indwelling us with the Spirit as living temples and forming us into the church of Christ.

What hope does Christ's strong message to His enemies give you today?



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What instruction or inspiration does Christ's example give you for facing a caustic person?

On that Tuesday, Jesus told a third story to rebuke His enemies—a parable about a king who planned a grand wedding feast for his son. Who did the king invite to enjoy the delicious banquet? We'll find out in the next study, but here's a peek at the guest list—you're on it!



A FINAL PRAYER

Dear Father, give me the confidence to stand strong for Christ. Help me to proclaim the truth clearly when Your enemies are spreading lies. Thank You for making me a temple of the Holy Spirit and joining me to Christ's body, the church. I stand in Your grace on that solid rock of truth and secure my life to the Cornerstone of my faith. In His name I pray, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. On Wednesday, Jesus remained in Bethany. On Thursday, He returned to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, which led to His arrest in Gethsemane and overnight trials. He was crucified on Friday and resurrected on Sunday.
2. Jesus taught under the covered colonnades that encircled the Court of the Gentiles. The largest was the Royal Porch, so-called because it was nearest the ancient site of Solomon's palace—a fitting place for the Son of David to teach. It consisted "of four rows of columns, 162 in all, forming three vast halls, on the south side of the temple complex." William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 776. A picture of a model of the temple with the Royal Porch on the south side is on page 150 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*.
3. Learn more about Pastor Chuck's *Searching the Scriptures* method on the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)" at [insight.org](#).

