

## Matthew 21:23-32 Asking the Right Questions Sept. 25, 2005

### A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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**The Sermon in a Sentence:** Fear and pride can blind us to God at work.

**Why I Am Preaching It:** So that our congregation will resist our fears and swallow our pride in obedience to God.

At first glance this passage does not have much to do with us. From our point of view, the argument about John the Baptist was settled a long time ago. But looked at from another angle, it has a lot to do with us. How could religious leaders who had devoted their whole lives to studying the Scriptures and leading the people miss the point so completely when God showed up? It is a sad tale of how these leaders were destroyed by something as simple as asking the wrong questions: questions based on fear and pride. Could the same thing happen to us?

As the story begins, things were getting tense. In the previous verses, Jesus had just entered Jerusalem, with the crowds shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” They were praising Jesus as the Messiah, the unique one sent from God. And Jesus did nothing to stop them.

And the first thing he did once he got to the holy city was to go to the Temple and confront the people who sold the birds to be sacrificed and who changed secular money into Temple currency. The sellers and the moneychangers had a legitimate function, but the whole system had become corrupt. This all took place in the Court of the Gentiles, the only place in the Temple where non-Jews were allowed, so they were left with no place where they could worship the Lord. In anger, Jesus drove out the moneychangers and the dove salesmen.

Today’s passage picks up after that incident. The chief priests and the elders, that is, the Jewish hierarchy, could not take it any longer. They held that the two pillars of the faith were the Sabbath and the Temple. Jesus had deeply offended them numerous times by healing on the Sabbath. Now he attacked their Temple by driving the salesman and the moneychangers out. If the leaders weren’t angry with him on spiritual grounds, then they were angry on economic grounds, as some of them made a tidy income off the sale of sacrifices and the exchange of money.

And in this supercharged situation, the religious hierarchy approached Jesus with the question, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” If they had really wanted to know the answers, they would have been good questions. Somewhat as we have ordination, a rabbi needed another rabbi to affirm the authority of his teaching by the laying on of hands. Further, the rabbis always quoted some one to give authority to whatever they said. “According to Rabbi ben Judah, ...”

Back in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus often started his teaching by saying, “It was said unto you... but I say unto you...” He amazed the people because he felt no need to back up his words with the authority of anyone else.

Now if they were asking about his authority because they really wanted to know, Jesus would have answered, “I do this by my own authority as Messiah,” or perhaps, “I do this by the authority granted to me by my Father in heaven.”

But Jesus rightly discerned the real meaning behind their questions. When they asked, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” they probably meant it the way we do when we say something like, “Who told you that you could barge in here and start ordering me around?!” It is more a threat than a question.

On first reading it might look like Jesus’ response is a trick to keep from having to answer them. But it’s not. He actually is answering their question, though they don’t want to admit it. John and Jesus were a package deal. John always claimed that his whole ministry was meant to point the way to Jesus. If John was a true prophet, then Jesus was the Messiah, and his authority came from God. If the ministry of John were merely a human creation, then Jesus also could be dismissed.

It was the responsibility of the Jewish leaders to discern between true and false prophets. There was nothing hidden about John’s life and message. For several years they had been given the opportunity to evaluate him and to draw a conclusion. Jesus had every right to expect a response to his question. “We don’t know,” was an unacceptable answer, and they knew it. If after three years they could not or would not see the truth about John, there was no point in Jesus’ telling them the truth about himself.

The hierarchy was caught between a rock and a hard place. They loved the power and the respect they received from the people, and, they would say, from God. They were afraid of losing it. They knew enough about Jesus to realize that if they accepted him as Messiah, the stranglehold they had over the people's religious life would be broken.

They also knew enough about the people and about Rome to realize that if they expressed their true feelings, they would lose in one of two ways. Either the people would harm them directly, or the people would riot and the Romans might replace the current leaders with someone else. So they wiggled out of it with their fearful answer, "We don't know."

Ironically, within a generation the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. In the end, the chief priests and elders lost everything, included their coveted power. The very thing that they most feared came upon them after all.

After revealing them for who they were, Jesus applies a little story to them about a family and a vineyard. The vineyard in the Scriptures is one symbol for the kingdom of God, as Jesus tells us in the parable. Last week we heard about the vineyard as well, when Pastor Wayne preached about the owner who hired workers at different times during the day. There we saw the grace of God, how he rewards whoever is willing to enter his kingdom, even if it is at the last hour.

He is still talking about the kingdom, but in this parable the focus is different. Last week, everyone that the owner approached was willing to work. This week, one son is willing, and the other is not. And there is an interesting twist to the parable as well. The one who originally balked ended up entering the vineyard after all. And the one who had all the right words at the beginning never entered at all.

Ada Lum reminds us that we cannot understand Jesus unless we see his sense of humor. There is a flash of that humor in the parable. The first son was so rude: "I will not," but he came out all right. The second son knew exactly how to talk properly with his father: "I will, sir," but blew it in the end. Surely Jesus was poking fun at the elders for their pride in having all the externals perfectly in order, while being blind to God's call on their lives.

I have thought a good deal about the tragedy of the chief priests and the elders. They devoted their whole lives to the religious leadership of God's people. They prided themselves on their obedience to the commandments and the traditions. They gladly accepted their role as wise and clear-sighted guides for the blind, foolish people. They longed for the coming of the Messiah. But it was all useless, because they had allowed themselves to be dominated by two things: fear, and pride.

They admitted their fear of the people in verse 26. Because of that fear, their underlying question was, "How can we protect our status?" The questions they needed to ask were ones like, "Do the Scriptures affirm the message of John? Are the prophecies that we have studied for so long finally being fulfilled in Jesus?" But they didn't. They cut themselves off from the right answer by asking the wrong question. That is what fear does to people. They ask the wrong questions.

Along with fear, they were also blinded by their pride. Pride also makes people ask the wrong questions. They didn't admit their pride, but Jesus saw it well enough. Why did they not find life through Jesus? Because when John came to point the way, they refused to repent and to believe him. The first step in repentance is to admit you are wrong and to start in a new direction. No proud person will admit that he or she is wrong. And that is why the prostitutes made it in, but the chief priests didn't.

Now of course this sorry story is not just one for the history books. The Holy Spirit guided the formation of the Bible in such a way that it would guide God's people in all generations. Do we run the risk of following in their footsteps? How might fear and pride distort the questions that we ask ourselves?

For a while I worked in a church in Venezuela that had a healthy small group program. The leaders gathered once a month to share what had happened in their previous small group meetings, and to go through the biblical materials for their upcoming meetings. One month we looked at a passage about making relationships right.

The next month, one of the leaders could hardly wait until the sharing time. He had been in a strained relationship with a neighbor woman. Things had deteriorated to the point where they were not speaking to one another. That is where it stood when we had our Bible study.

As he prepared for his small group study in the following days, he faced an inward struggle. He resisted the idea of going to see this neighbor to work things out. Remember that fear comes down to asking the wrong questions, and we can imagine the ones he must have been asking: “What if she refuses to talk to me? What if it gets even worse?” Of course his pride was saying the same things that ours would: “Maybe, just maybe, she will have a valid point. How can I admit I’m wrong? I’ll lose the edge in this dispute with her.”

But as he continued preparing for the study, he began to ask some better questions: questions like, “How can I honor God in this situation?, and How can I teach to my group what I am not willing to do myself?” He swallowed his pride, went to his neighbor, and asked her forgiveness for his part in the deterioration of their relationship. “You’re not to blame,” she answered. “It was my fault.” And she even ended up attending the neighborhood Bible study that he was preparing for! The result will not always be so satisfying. The Scriptures teach us to live at peace with all as far as it depends upon us. Sometimes it does not depend upon us. But sometimes we will have some wonderful surprises as we learn to ask the right questions.

In any decision-making process it is wise to consider what questions I am asking myself. Are they based on fear of all the things that might not go as I had hoped? Are they based on faith in God and in his word to guide me? And we need to look at our pride as well. Am I resisting a course of action because it will bruise my ego?

I have been talking more at a personal level, but I can think of at least two areas here in our congregation where we will need to make decisions. God is at work. We don’t yet know how he is working, but we want to make sure that we ask questions that lead us towards following Jesus.

The first area I am thinking about is our congregation’s response to the General Synod’s resolution on same-sex marriage rights. It has come to us in a very confusing form. The background information attached to the resolution and the study materials provided by the denomination point towards approval of two men or two women marrying each other.

But the resolution itself focuses more on civil rights for same sex couples. So we have two different issues all mixed up together.

Some materials from our national office say that the UCC welcomes diversity. Other materials indicate that those who do not favor the resolution are out of step with the direction of the denomination, and that such diversity is not welcomed.

How can we discern the will of God in such confusion? We need to ask the right questions, like, “What do the Scriptures say about resolving differences in the Christian community? Are there steps towards reconciliation that we might take? How can we honor God in our relationship with those who disagree with us? Are we dealing with false teaching? To answer that one, we need to go back to the Bible. If so, what do the Scriptures say are appropriate responses for a congregation when false teaching is being introduced into a denomination by its leaders?” If we ask the right questions and obey when the answers become clear, we need have no fear at all of how things will turn out.

And of course pride can get in the way. Are there any points at which we can agree with something in the resolution? Will we admit it? Are we humble enough to give another opportunity to those in our national office who have spoken or written hurtfully or unwisely? I admit that I have been angered at what I perceive as arrogance on the part of some of our national leaders. I also admit that I am most bothered in others by the things I am struggling with in myself. Am I willing to acknowledge that I might have misunderstood some of what was said? Am I too proud to make a fresh start with those leaders if there is evidence of some openness on their part?

The other area that came to mind was our participation in an outreach to Kochi. Again, we need to ask questions like, “How can we honor God in coming to this decision? What does God desire for the relationship between our English and Japanese speaking congregations? What is God’s larger call for our church, and in what ways might Kochi be part of that call?”

And again we need to resist pride. About the best advice that Becky and I received before going overseas was this: “When you are in another culture and you think somebody has mistreated you, just assume that you did not understand what was going on.”

Church growth experts tell us that the easiest way to grow is church is to get a bunch of people together who are all alike. Could be. But it brings more

glory to God if two congregations like ours that do not naturally think and act the same are both willing to humble themselves, to try again when feelings have been hurt. Whether the relationship is with our denomination, our sister congregation, with a family member, or with someone else, we will get tired. We will be tempted to say with the first son, "I will not go that extra mile." But as we resist our fears and swallow our pride, we will see doors open to work with our heavenly Father in his vineyard.

Let's pray.