

Jesus Troubles the Comfortable and Comforts the Troubled ~ Matthew 21:23-46

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Sometimes the same situation can bring comfort and trouble. Later today, 2 football teams will face each other in a game called the Super Bowl. They will play the game. And at the end of the game, the team that wins will celebrate. The team that loses will despair. Same game – yet to one it will bring trouble and to another comfort.

Or take a painting in an art gallery. Imagine it's a piece of modern art. So you can't really make out what the artist had in mind. Two art gallery visitors look at the painting. One says, "What a piece of junk. It looks like he spilled a can of paint on the canvas." The other says, "How brilliant. Look at what she did with the different colors." Same painting – it troubles one and comforts another.

Or imagine we're back in the middle-ages and a king arrives back at his castle after a long journey. During his time away, his second in command oppressed and mistreated the servants in the castle. So when the king rides across the drawbridge, the servant's rejoice. But the second in command despairs because he knows his mistreatment of the servants will become known to the king. From the same person comes comfort for one and trouble for another.

The same happens with Jesus. We have seen recently, that Jesus will not allow anyone to remain neutral towards Him. To some His words and actions brought comfort. To others they brought trouble. The same may happen to us today - Jesus words may bring us comfort or trouble. It depends on whether you're feeling troubled today or comfortable. So what kind of trouble and comfort am I talking about?

The troubled are those dissatisfied with life apart from Jesus. You may be missing God and His deep love for you. You're very convinced of your own sinfulness and wonder if God could ever accept you. Or you're troubled by your sin or any sin creeping into your family. You may wonder where God is in light of what's happened in your life recently. You still want to be close to God. To those kinds of troubled people, Jesus has some words of comfort today.

The comfortable are those who are quite satisfied with life apart from Jesus. You're not really walking closely with Him right now and you don't really care about that. You might be convinced that you're a good person. You don't need to confess any sin. Or you might have politely rejected or refused to acknowledge any authority of Jesus over your life. You're convinced you know what's best and Jesus has no right to say anything about how you live your life. That's the type of comfortable I'm talking about. To comfortable people, Jesus has some troubling words today.

So as we go into today's text, I'd like you to think for a moment of these definitions of trouble and comfort. In which group do you belong at this moment? You might be a little of both. Maybe there's an area of your life that you're troubled about. You want Jesus to come in and do something in that area. But there's another area that you've reserved for your own comfort zone. You won't let Jesus in there because what you do, think or say in that area is your business and your freedom.

Wherever you are at on the troubled to comfortable scale, I invite you to hear His words for you today. I pray that you will discover words of comfort and appropriate trouble from Him that will direct you to where He wants you to go today.

So let's go to our text – Matthew 21, starting in verse 23 – the continuing account of Jesus' final week. Page 696 in the Bibles in front of you.

Matthew 21:23-46 (ESV)

²³ And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"²⁴ Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'"²⁶ But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet."²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'²⁹ And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go.³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

³³ "Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

The temple authorities have seen Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt triumphantly on Sunday. Then on Monday, Jesus disturbs the entire trading system of the temple. The religious authorities have had enough. They challenge Jesus to silence children crying out “Hosanna to the Son of David.” But Jesus will not stop them because they cry out the truth about Him.

Now it's Tuesday morning. Jesus goes into the temple and begins teaching there. But the chief priests and elders are ready for him. They come up and don't wait until He's done teaching. While He teaches, they question Him. “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” It's a valid question in one sense. After all, they are the guardians of the temple. They are responsible for teaching. Jesus is not an approved teacher nor does he have credentials as a graduate from one of their rabbinic schools. On the other hand, they are there to trap Him so they can arrest Him. They could reject Him because they governed God's temple. But if He says by ‘my own authority’ they could dismiss Him as one of many who claimed to be Messiah.

By what authority are you doing “these things?” What things? They could be referring to overturning the tables and driving everyone out of the Court of the Gentiles like he did yesterday. It could be his healing and welcoming of the lame and blind in the temple. It could be the teaching He proclaimed at that moment.

Jesus answers with a question. If they answer it, He will answer theirs. “Where did the baptism of John come from? Heaven or earth?” Jesus takes them back to his forerunner, John the Baptist. Before Jesus began His public ministry, John prepared the way by calling the people and the religious leaders to repentance because of the Lord's coming. Was John's ministry from heaven or from man? Immediately, the questioners must go on the defensive. Jesus and the

crowd already knew the answer. It was very common knowledge that these leaders didn't believe John's ministry or baptism was from heaven. If they did, they would have repented and turned to God. Since John pointed to Jesus, the religious leaders would have had to recognize Jesus as the Messiah which they refused to do. But would they admit this publicly?

The leaders draw back and talk among themselves. I wonder how the disciples got the information about this private conversation. Maybe one of the questioners later turned to Christ and told them what was said. But they weigh their options. If we say, "from heaven," then Jesus will ask us "why didn't you believe him." But if we say "from man," the crowd will go against us for they believed John was a prophet. So Jesus has them.

They conclude it would be better not to answer the question. So they say "we don't know."

What has happened? Jesus just exposed them as liars. They marched up claiming moral authority to stop His teaching. But they have just lied because everyone knew they didn't believe John. So since they don't answer his question, He won't answer their question. But Jesus doesn't go back to teaching.

He goes on the offensive. He asks them to rule on another question. A father tells son #1 to go and work in the vineyard. Son 1 says "No." But then changes his mind and goes. The father tells son #2 to go and work in the vineyard. Son 2 says "Yes." But then he changes his mind and does not go. So Jesus asks the leaders "which son did his father's will?"

The leaders answer correctly – "the first." But they did not realize that this parable was about them. Jesus however, makes it clear. "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you." Son 1 symbolizes tax collectors and prostitutes represent son 1. Son 2 represents the religious leaders. Tax collectors and prostitutes initially said no to God. They chose a lifestyle of greed for the tax collectors and sexual immorality for the prostitute. But when John came preaching, they repented. Though they'd started by saying no to God, now they said yes.

But the religious leaders looked like they said yes to God initially. After all, they were religious leaders. Yet they rejected God's messenger, John. And despite seeing the dramatic change in the lives of the tax collectors and prostitutes who repented, they still didn't believe John's message.

As one commentator puts it, “Although the scum of society, the morally degenerate, begin by saying no to God, many ultimately repent. They do what is commanded and enter the Kingdom. The religious authorities make a great show of saying yes to God, but do not do what He says. They do not repent, and therefore do not enter the Kingdom.”¹

Within Jesus words, there is both comfort and trouble for us today.

To the troubled, Jesus comforts us by saying **“Despite what you’ve done in the past with your life, God welcomes anyone who comes to Him in repentance and belief.”** Another commentator states “the gates of God’s kingdom open wide to bluntly ungodly people who repent.” Isn’t it great that God shows mercy and grace to us who initially reject Him or have consistently rejected Him for decades? Some of you came to Christ later in life. God showed grace to you and put up with 20, 30, 40 or 50 years of rebellion. But He doesn’t look at what we said and did back then. He looks at what we say and do now. If you have turned to Him, that’s all that matters to Him now.

But to the comfortable Jesus says **“Talk is cheap. Does your life show repentance and belief in me today?”** Some of us may look back to a time when we received Christ. Maybe we prayed a prayer at a camp 25 years ago. Maybe we said we were a Christian 5 years ago. But’s what happening today in our walk with Christ? If it’s nothing or very little, we need to confess our comfort with a complacent Christian life. It’s not too late to turn back to Christ. Notice Jesus does not say the religious leaders *won’t* enter the kingdom of heaven. He says tax collectors and prostitutes would go in before them. They were in because they believed John’s message and turned to God. But it was still possible for these religious leaders to turn just as it is still possible for us to turn back to Christ today. If you’ve been living a complacent Christian life, will you repent of that and turn to Him today?

But Jesus does not stop with the parable of the two sons. He tells another parable that also involves a vineyard. A master or owner plants a vineyard. He’s ready to make a heavy investment in it. Not only does he plant, he builds a wall around it. He also provides a tower from which workers could see and warn of any danger. He builds a winepress when they can process the harvest. Some historians say that it took 4 from initial planting before the owner actually made a profit. This owner entrusts the care of the vineyard to tenants. Tenant farmers lived and worked on an owner’s land. They were fed by the land. They could keep a small portion for themselves. But they had to give the owner his share of the harvest. Well harvest time arrives. So the owner sends servants to the tenants to collect his portion of the fruit.

¹ D. A. Carson – Matthew, God with us.

But the tenants mistreat the master's servants. They beat the first one. They kill the next one. They stone the third. These were major crimes in the ancient world. To murder someone's messenger was seen as basically murdering the one who sent the message. This landowner had every right to send soldiers to deal with the tenants.

Instead the master sends more servants. The tenants do the same to them – beating, killing, stoning. Surely, the master will send his soldiers now. Instead the master decides to send his son. The master reasons the tenants will respect the son of the owner. But the tenants reason among themselves. The son is the heir. If they kill the son, they will somehow inherit the estate. There was no grounds or precedence for this in ancient law. Roman law sided with the landowner a great majority of the time. The only way tenants could gain ownership of an estate would be to kill the landowner and all his heirs – somehow convince the authorities that they had no part in this and then hope for a favorable ruling from the court that gave them the land. So it appears these tenants had not thought through their plot. They would commit a crime out of passion thinking they will somehow gain the estate by murdering the son. So the son arrives. They take him out of the vineyard and kill him.

Jesus again asks the religious leaders to render a verdict. He has completely taken them in with His parable. They seem almost enraged by such a hideous outcome. We can see their emotion in their answer. "He (the owner) will put those wretches (not just tenants but wretches) to a miserable death (not a quick death but some sort of process that inflicts pain and punishment on the tenants). Then he will rent out the vineyard to other good tenants who will give the owner the fruits in season. They did not realize they had just condemned themselves.

So Jesus unfolds this for them. Verse 42. "Have you never read the Scriptures: The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes." That's a quote from Psalm 118:22-23. The stone in that Psalm could represent Israel as a nation or David as king. If it's the nation Israel, she was rejected when larger and more powerful nations looked down on her as insignificant. Yet she became a cornerstone or cap stone when God raised her up as a great nation under David and Solomon. Or the stone could be David himself who experienced much rejection early in his life. His brothers rejected him. King Saul rejected him. Even Samuel in a sense rejected him initially because he thought David's older brother should be king. But the Lord chose this 17 year old kid to be Israel's future king. Eventually, God raises him up to be the cornerstone or capstone of the nation. He becomes Israel's greatest king and the future deliverer must come from the line of David.

So Psalm 118:22-23 talk about the stone the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone. Immediately following come verses 25 and 26. “Hosanna or Save us Lord. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” This is what the crowd sang and said as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey. So what is Jesus doing? He’s applying verses 22-23 to Himself. He will become the stone the builders reject. Yet God will raise Him up to be the cornerstone. The people will sing forever “Save us, O Son of David. Blessed are you who come in the name of the Lord.”

But who are the builders who reject Jesus? Jesus tells us in Matthew 21:43 – Therefore I tell you religious leaders – authorities over Israel’s most holy site in Jerusalem – the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces and when it falls on anyone it will crush him.” You, religious leaders, are the builders who reject the stone – me. Yet God will raise me up to be the cornerstone. And those who reject me will fall and be broken to pieces and crushed.

Suddenly, the parable becomes a review of Israel’s history. God is the landowner. God entrusted Israel’s leaders with caring for the vineyard – the people of Israel. God sent messengers like prophets and good kings and priests to lead the nation. But Israel’s bad kings and false prophets beat, killed and stoned God’s messengers. So God sent more messengers and prophets. They beat, killed and stoned them. Finally, God would send His own Son, Jesus. 3 days from this moment, Israel’s leaders would ensure Jesus was taken outside of the city and killed there. They thought by doing this they would keep the inheritance of the vineyard. They thought they would continue as Israel’s religious leadership.

But on the day that Jesus was crucified and died, the temple in Jerusalem was spiritually destroyed. There was no more need of it. People would now have direct access to God through Christ. About 37 years later, the temple was physically destroyed when the Romans besieged Jerusalem in response to a massive rebellion. They tore down the city and the temple. It has never been rebuilt to this day.

The religious leaders no longer need help to interpret the parable. They realize Jesus talks about them. But instead of repenting or pondering whether Jesus’ words were true, they want to arrest him. But they conclude it would be too risky because of the crowd. So they will have to arrange to get him sometime at night when he’s surrounded by far fewer people.

What does Jesus say to us today through this parable? **To the troubled, Jesus says God is patient.** God acts with unbelievable grace and mercy in the parable. Though He had every right to send soldiers after His first servant was

beaten, He keeps sending messengers. He risks his own Son's life hoping that they will respond. If we've been living apart from God, if we've allowed distance to develop between us He patiently calls us to come to Him. Or we might be going through something in our lives and trying to figure it out all on our own. He patiently calls us to come to Him with whatever we face. John Newton the former slave ship captain, pastor and author of Amazing Grace believed in the cross the Christian finds daily forgiveness, spiritual power, godly motivation, daily healing and eternal hope. God receives anyone who recognizes Jesus as the cornerstone and builds their life on Him.

But God's patience will not last forever. **To the comfortable, Jesus says turn to me before you get crushed by me.** Judgment Day will one day come officiated by Jesus. We will see Him describe it in Matthew 25. If you're living apart from Christ, don't wait until it's too late. If you've let yourself drift from Christ, turn back to Him. John Newton also wrote "until we are reconciled to God by the blood of Jesus, everything to which we look for satisfaction will surely disappoint us."

We might be convinced that this warning has no relevance to us. But as I worked with this text, I realized it applies to me more than I first realized. Isn't it amazing how these tenants act like they own the vineyard? They've been entrusted with a tremendous opportunity and resource by the owner. But then when it's time to give up the fruits to the owner they refuse Him. Without Him, there would be no fruit. Without him, they would have no living life. Yet they respond to His messengers by acting like they own everything. They respond to His patience and ultimately His trust by killing His Son?

Yet, we/I can do the same thing. We've been given a life; time; resources; opportunities - all from God – all because of God – Yet, when fruit happens, we can sometimes act like it's solely our doing – it's our fruit – it's our life and we'll do whatever we want with it. "Don't send us any of your stupid messengers God." Do you see how quickly that can happen? So we need to heed that we can adopt the tenant's attitude before we even realize it's happening.

Yet, I am comforted that the Lord took away the kingdom from a corrupted leadership and opened it up to a people from all around the world and from all walks of life. God's people around the world have been given the kingdom and are called to produce God's fruits in it.

So we started today by asking are you troubled or comfortable? To the troubled Jesus says "Come to me no matter what you've done or what's going on. I will be with you. God is patient and He waits for you." To the comfortable He

says – “Talk is cheap. You can’t depend on your promises from yesterday if there’s no repentance and walk with me today. My patience will one day run out. Don’t wait any longer before you face my judgment.” We need to acknowledge that the Christian life is hard and we can’t do it on our own. But by grace and help every day, we can go forward.

My Grace is Sufficient for Thee

Oppressed with unbelief and sin,
 Fightings without and fears within;
 While earth and hell, with force combined,
 Assault and terrify my mind.

What strength have I against such foes,
 Such hosts and legions to oppose?
 Alas, I tremble, faint and fall;
 Lord save me or I give up all.

Thus sorely pressed I sought the Lord,
 To give me some sweet cheering word;
 Again I sought, and yet again;
 I waited long, but not in vain.

Oh! ‘twas a cheering word indeed!
 Exactly suited to my need;
 “Sufficient for thee is My grace,
 Thy weakness My great power displays.”

Now I despond and mourn no more,
 I welcome all I fear’d before;
 Though weak, I’m strong; though troubled, blessed;
 For Christ’s own power shall on me rest.

My grace would soon exhausted be,
 But His is boundless as the sea;
 Then let me boast, with holy Paul,
 That I am nothing, Christ is all.

~ *John Newton, Hymn*
November 1775