

W@W121

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Read Mark 10:38-40 *"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." (NIV)*

James and John had just asked to be on the top table at Jesus' victory banquet: to be the most senior members of His government. But they hadn't got a clue! They did not realise that, for the Christ, the prelude to glory would be suffering. It was all there in the Old Testament, but they were not thinking biblically. Indeed, all ideas about Jesus that are not shaped by God's Word will inevitably miss the mark.

The questions about the cup and baptism should have got a "No" answer. The 'cup' was the metaphor for suffering and 'baptism' was about being overwhelmed - and the passion of Jesus was for Him alone to endure. It sounded brave (but in a foolhardy way) for them to volunteer to share it with Him; but they just showed that they had not understood God's salvation plan. Neither could they envisage the persecution they would personally encounter - so Jesus turns the tables in the conversation to warn them that although his suffering was unique to him, theirs would be unique to them. Importantly, Jesus refuses to enter any private bargain with even the closest of His followers. He will not decide anything independently of His Father; He cannot 'do a deal' outside of His Father's will.

This episode flags up two falsehoods which we might encounter. Firstly, thinking that somehow we can be equal partners with Christ because we are so special to Him - a cultish error (the saving work of the cross was for the Saviour alone ... we have no contribution to that at all). Secondly, thinking that the Christian path will avoid all suffering for us - this is an unreal 'glory trip' that will always end in disillusionment. Biblical thinking accepts that Jesus suffered uniquely to bear the sins of the world, and to defeat the power of Satan: then to accept that persecution, in some form, will always accompany true faith in Jesus, and try to deflect His church. The good news, is that suffering is not the end - glory is! And Jesus, who has got there first, is preparing a place for us!!

Prayer: *Father God. Forgive me when if I ever think that I can contribute to Christ's saving work; or that His suffering means that there are no troubles ahead for me. Help me to be thankful, every day, for the price that Jesus paid so that my sins can be forgiven. And help me to see opposition as another sign to encourage me that glory with You is ahead for me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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Read Mark 10:41-45 *When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (NIV)

When James and John pushed themselves forward to have the highest places of honour next to Jesus, there was a backlash from the other disciples. Why should they be disadvantaged? And they probably disliked the sneaky way that James and John got Jesus on His own so that they might secure a private deal. But their reaction displayed a heart problem for all of them: they all wanted to be in Jesus' honours list.

How worldly they were still! They thought that the greatest rewards would go to the most important people - those senior business managers who have many servants; the generals who command many troops. It is still the way of the world, reinforced by a salary and benefits package that is proportional to the person's commercial value. But Jesus cuts right across such thinking, "Not so with you!" Greatness in God's kingdom is assessed by how many you serve, not the number you command. Jesus had already demonstrated that - a principle that would lead Him to the Cross, serving the needs of sinners by His blooded sacrifice.

Just as Christ's purpose was to serve and give Himself for us, so He expects that we will live like that towards others. We may nod in theological agreement, but when the call to serve is inconvenient or at the wrong time, what principle guides our lifestyle decisions? The repeated use of 'must' in v 44 should grab our attention! Why 'must' the great be servants, and the honoured become a slave to everybody? Because Jesus said so!!

Prayer: *Almighty God. I accept Your right to command me to do great things; but I rarely want to do the little things that could be done by others less skilled or gifted. Please forgive me for not understanding Your command that I must be a servant of others for Your sake. Please help me to practice this Kingdom principle today, by changing my attitude to others and to your Word. For Jesus' sake. Amen.*

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Read Mark 10:46-48 *Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (NIV)*

Timaeus was a man with disappointed hopes. His name meant 'highly prized', presumably the joy of his parents. But his son (Bar-timaeus) was blind, a beggar. He was despised and ridiculed, a grown man treated like a child. Certainly not highly prized - at least, not by the social standards of the day! But when Jesus comes to town, even down-trodden Bartimaeus saw a ray of hope. Here was the Jesus everybody was talking about, the only man who really did make blind people see.

His call for help is interesting. Instead of asking for new sight, he pleads for mercy. Whatever his physical condition, he knew that he was undeserving of any favour from Jesus (who he called the Son of David - a messianic title). The blind man had more insight than those crowding around the Master: he knew that Jesus was the Christ; that He was holy and that that he, Bartimaeus, was unholy. That was why he did not dare to plead for healing, just mercy. The self-righteous crowd only saw a nuisance; but the beggar recognised no authority in their voices - he wanted Jesus to speak mercy over him.

Shallow religion still seeks its thrills in the crowd, but a deep hunger for God still calls out for mercy ([Luke 18:13](#)). And in Jesus' ministry, he kindly validated the spiritual healing, by restoring people's bodies and minds as well. However, easy-believe-ism and an insatiable grasping for divine fix-its has catastrophically devalued the gospel. The true message is not about what we can get from Jesus, but about 'peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ': and you cannot get that without first calling for mercy from Jesus!

Prayer: *Father God, Thank You for the bold simplicity of pleading for mercy. Forgive my churchianity games which have eclipsed Your command to seek Your mercy so that You can remake us - as useable instruments in Your hand. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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Read Mark 10:49-52 *Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (NIV)*

Jesus never dismisses a call for mercy. It was why He came! So despite the rude insults of the crowd, to silence the blind man, they changed their tune when Jesus ordered that Bartimaeus be brought to Him. They even told him to cheer up! Knowing that Jesus had personally called him, he rushed to meet Him. The Master's question may have seemed strange, "What do you want me to do for you?" Had he not previously begged for mercy? But now, being accepted by Jesus, was that not mercy enough?

Having received mercy, he now wanted grace. (Mercy is the withholding of what we do deserve: grace is the gift of what we do not deserve.) Bartimaeus had deserved to be shunned and rejected - but mercy brought him close to the Saviour. He had no right to ask Jesus for healing, but at Jesus' invitation he dared to ask. And the request was granted; so of course he left everything (his begging bowl heaped with abuse) and followed the Lord.

In these days of 'social evangelism' where we are encouraged to absorb unrepentant sinners into our Christian community, it may seem strange to suggest that 'calling out to Jesus for mercy' is an essential ingredient for conversion. But it is. Perhaps we even minimise our friend's need or even applaud how well they are coping ... when Jesus longs that they cry for mercy. Mercy and grace are the divine part of the gospel package. Only God can grant them, and He will only grant them to those who know their need enough to ask for them.

Prayer: *Father God. Thank you for the way your mercy and grace has changed my life. Help me not to minimise these stark gospel realities when talking to friends and colleagues. For Your dear Name's sake. Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:1-3 *As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.' "* (NIV)

Although we know this passage as the prelude to Palm Sunday, these disciples were living one day at a time. Even though Jesus had told them about His forthcoming death, they had little understanding of what was going to happen. So, one day, one instruction at a time, was enough. The orders were clear and precise. All they had to do was to follow them to the letter; the fact that they did not understand Jesus' plan or the purpose behind the request was irrelevant.

Theft of an animal was a serious offence for the Jews, so Jesus anticipated a challenge to the disciples who were to walk off with somebody else's donkey. The simple response was, "The Lord needs it ...". It was by these direct words that all was explained.

This message is hardly rocket science for Christians. If Jesus says it, then do it! Yet the usual human arrogance to demand explanations at every point before we will move, is a huge hindrance to faith. Such pride presumes that we have the knowledge to understand all the intricacies of the unknown future, and the wisdom to decide if God's instructions are right! What folly! Faith is not built on understanding the reason, but on trusting the person. Today's lessons in faith are learned well only if we take the Word of God as divine commands, and do them!

Prayer: *Holy Father. Please give me a fresh insight into Your wisdom, that You only command what is right, and my foolishness if I refuse to obey. Then, please help me to do what you say by the power of Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:4-6 *They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. (NIV)*

It should not surprise us that Jesus knew exactly what His commissioned disciples would encounter. God, in a human body, does not need to guess or remember how things were last time. He is ahead of every game and on top of every situation - before it happens. But we will do well to be amazed; to marvel that this God who visibly demonstrated His omniscience [all knowing-ness] for a few years, is the same God who sees us. Such amazement will keep us from complacency in our relationship with Him.

Jesus anticipated the challenges His disciples would face, but He also provided answers. Later, anticipating the severe persecution of the church, He promised that the Holy Spirit would instruct them (Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. [Mark 13:11](#) NIV). He did not expect them to be so bright and sharp witted that they would be able to deal with cynical and intimidating questions all by themselves: in the same way that the Lord Jesus gave the words to say, so the Holy Spirit would continue to do the same.

Many of our fears, as we consider evangelism, are about our lack of ability to answer difficult questions. Don't worry! The Holy Spirit will instruct you. So read the Book He inspired and listen to His inner promptings. If you want to be used by Jesus, He has promised that you are not on your own (cf [Matthew 28:19-29](#))!

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Thank You that You know everything about the future, and that I can be confident You will provide all I need ... including a suitable way to respond to people in Your Name. For Christ's sake. Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:7-11 *When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna! " "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!" Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. (NIV)*

So much Old Testament prophetic history is tucked into these verses! They reveal the identity of Jesus Christ. Jesus' choice of the donkey said He was God's King of salvation coming to Jerusalem (cf [Zech 9:9](#)): the cloaks on the road was like Jehu's proclamation that God had appointed him to be King (cf [2 Kings 9:12-13](#)): the chorus of Hosanna - meaning "save now!" - and blessings on Jesus, are from the messianic prophetic Psalm 118 (cf [Ps 118:24-26](#)).

It was so obvious that Jesus fitted the Bible's prophetic descriptions of God's anointed Saviour - that it was impossible to keep the lid on His identity any longer. The truth was simply bubbling to the surface; the popular acclaim was honest, and never a PR stunt. The big question behind much of Mark's Gospel is, "Who is this Jesus?" The answer is given on the first Palm Sunday - the King anointed by Father God to be the Saviour of His people!

It was important that the Divine Jesus was out in the open. As Paul said in [Acts 26:26](#), nothing was 'done in a corner'. The Gospel was not intended to stay a mystery, but a clear and open explanation of the grace of God, that fitted the prophecies and the Person of Christ perfectly. So why are so many Christians secret about their Saviour? Afraid? Jesus wasn't! If you know who Jesus is, then why not tell people? If was for them, as well as you, that He came to die!

Prayer: *Father God. Please give me an inner conviction that it is my responsibility to make Christ known to my colleagues and friends. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:12-14 *The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no-one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. (NIV)*

This episode is in two parts. We read the first bit today; and its sequel is in [verses 20-21](#), sandwiching (and amplifying) the account of the cleansing of the temple. It is really a parable, acted out, to show Jesus' power and authority to judge. Just before Passover, in March/April, fig trees should have green edible buds: these were not the figs that would be harvested later in the year. But they made a tasty snack - and were evidence that the tree would bear its full fruit in a few month's time. Jesus stopped to inspect the tree, it looked healthy, the leaves were rich and green ... but there were no tasty green buds at all. That tree was not 'fit for purpose'.

When Jesus cursed it, He demonstrated how His judgement would fall on Israel. Like the tree, His people looked fine, but were unproductive for God's kingdom. There comes a point when there are no more chances, and when Jesus cursed the tree, His word alone was enough to sap the life out of it. And that is what will happen to all who refuse to receive God's Christ!

As the disciples were intended to overhear, so are we. We need to understand that Jesus will judge powerfully, and when He speaks, it is always done. The outcome for the fig tree was to prove disastrous. So it will be, for all those who show no sign of spiritual fruit - no evidence of God's indwelling Spirit. That is why we are called to be Gospel people, men and women with the message of how to be saved from the wrath to come. Such Gospel proclamation is evidence that we, ourselves, have been convicted of sin and righteousness and judgement. As St Paul says, "Knowing the fear of the Lord we persuade others ..." [2 Cor 5:11](#) ESV). It is a responsibility we cannot ignore.

Prayer: *Holy God, I know that Jesus has the right and the power to judge all sinners - that is why I have come to Him for salvation. Thank you that others can hear the good news that will save them from the dreadful judgement, and that you have given me the privilege to tell them. Please be my helper as I do so. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:15-17 *On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'." (NIV)*

If anyone asks, "What makes God cross?", a good first answer is: "Taking God's holy things and using them for selfish purposes". The temple was intended to be the place where the world could see the greatness of God, and submit to Him. Instead, it became a commercial market. Not that God is against trading, as long as it is fair; but this was grossly unfair - on God! To take the worship of God as an opportunity for personal fame and fortune, really made God cross.

Jesus' accusation of robbery was not so much about corrupt business practice (although we might suspect that was going on), but about robbing God. Overturning money tables was a sign of God's judgement as they had refused to listen to the prophet Malachi ([Mal 3:8-12](#)) - *please click the link to see the passage*. Instead of bringing worship tithes into the temple for God, they were taking out money for themselves. God's intention was that the temple would be a place of blessing: Jesus said it was a disgrace. Instead of blessing, Christ showed how God's curse would fall - and fall physically, forty years later when the temple was razed to the ground (just as Jesus was to predict cf [Mark 13:2](#)).

Even Christians, through the impulse of their sinful nature, can do the same today. Sung worship can be a self-glorifying performance; and some preachers glow with their national or international reputations. Power hungry church officers (or their spouses), and egotistical church activists, all risk being in the same category as rebellious young believers whose Saturday night and Sunday morning do not match. Using Christ for our own ends, can take so many forms; because our sinful nature is almost infinitely devious. The important thing is to recognise it, and deal with it; before Jesus turns the tables on you.

Prayer: *Father God. Help me to recognise where I may be using what You have made sacred for my own advantage, and give me the grace to repent and change. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:18-19 *The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city. (NIV)*

The truth has interesting properties. Those who submit to it are blessed: but those who resist it, are not only cursed themselves, they want to destroy the truth-tellers. Whistle blowers are rarely appreciated. In this phase of Jesus' ministry he was calling time on centuries of religious farce, and graphically predicting the judgement to come.

At that the crowds recognised the authority of the Teacher, so the false teachers of Israel saw their authority ebbing away. A 'catch 22' situation had developed around the clerical elite: if they killed the popular Jesus, public disorder would threaten their carefully negotiated power base under the Roman occupation; but if they did not, their accepted powerbase among the Jews would disintegrate. So they looked for a way to kill him that would please both Romans and Jews - and keep them in power.

It continues to be a religious problem. Political scheming is no way to serve the purpose of God (nor are office politics at work!), yet it has become the habit of our age. Every such manoeuvre is a diversion away from teaching the gospel. The astonishing thing is that the gospel is designed to be amazing, and when true amazement takes hold, we cannot see or hold anything else. It makes you wonder if those engaged in power-politics have ever understood how amazing the gospel is. The remedy is to repent and then immerse ourselves in the teaching of Jesus - the amazement will refocus every other ambition.

Prayer: *Dear Father God. Thank you that the teaching of Jesus is designed to amaze me. Help me to let the wonder of His truth reset the focus of my ambition; in the family, the workplace and the church. May I be more concerned about how Jesus comes across than how to project myself. For Christ's sake, Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:20-22 *In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig-tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig-tree you cursed has withered!" "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. (NIV)*

Truth has a way of lodging in our hearts (even if we don't want it to stick) so that the God can use it to challenge us in the future. When Jesus cursed the fig tree, as a parable of how faithless Israel would be judged, Peter remembered. When they went down the same road the following day, he looked out for the tree. The text indicates his surprise that it had withered overnight.

He remembered Jesus speak with authority, he wondered what would happen and yet was amazed that God's word had such immediate effect! Why should Peter react like this? He had seen the blind with new sight and the paralysed with new strength, and even the dead with new life. But this was different. It was one thing to witness divine healing, but quite another to see the effect of the wrath of God at close quarters. Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that the flip side of salvation is judgement: and both come by the Word of God. So Jesus commanded that Peter must believe in the wrath of God as well as His love. It was an essential part of his training to be a church leader.

Without the certainty of God's judgement, there is little incentive to proclaim any gospel of salvation. If there is nothing terrible to be saved from, why bother? And that is why many fair weather believers have no instinct to persuade others of the saving gospel - they sort of believe that it really doesn't matter because the just God will not really punish nice people! Jesus had acted out the answer on the fig tree, and now Peter realised that the Son of God was serious. We need to believe in the real God too - the God whose terrible judgement is as certain as His wonderful love. Then gospel instincts can grow in our hearts.

Prayer: *Father God, Thank you for lodging truth in my mind with examples of Your powerful ways. Help me to grasp seriousness of Your final judgement, and to develop gospel instincts as I meet and work with non-Christians. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:22-25 *"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (NIV)*

This passage starts with a command, "Have faith in God"! Jesus was teaching Peter, and the others, not to be surprised that God's words are followed by action. In his future role as a leader of the early church, Peter would need to speak out God's Word - and expect that God would act in power. The key is in the kind of relationship they were to have with Jesus Christ.

Although Jesus has commended the father of a demonised boy for his weak faith (cf [Mark 9:24](#)), He now is commanding total, unswerving and undoubting faith. There was no need for tentative approaches to the throne of grace: the Lord expected His team to come with boldness and confidence. When we are assured that our prayers are absolutely in line with His will - the answer is given in power. This is not because we psyche ourselves up to believe something, but because we know that God has promised it - and we believe Him. It is not our prayer that 'works', but God who works powerfully in response to our believing prayer. If we believe, we will pray. Likewise, if we believe in God's forgiveness, we demonstrate our faith by forgiving others.

Tepid praying - mirrors lukewarm faith. Believing, is monitored by the things that demonstrate faith - obedience and trusting prayer. The old hymn has a good line, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey"! That is the theory; now today is the day for the practical class!

Prayer: *Almighty God, please teach me how to pray and live in line with Your will; and in the confidence that comes from growing in my relationship with you - knowing Your Word that reveals Your character. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:27-30 *They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?" Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism - was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!" (NIV)*

Power may be grasped, authority has to be given. Ultimately all authority derives from God: whether it is the right to rule a nation, to lead a family, parent a child, or serve the Lord - accountability goes directly back to God. The dilemma for the religious leaders, was not so much the miracles that brought Jesus popular acclaim, as the right that He assumed in doing them. Miracles could hardly warrant a death sentence, but claiming a demonic or divine authority could (the demonic was clearly evil and dangerous; the divine could only be blasphemous in their eyes).

The legal eagles were gathering round their prey. Their question was not about good deeds or miracles; but about the authority to do them. They thought they had the perfect question to trap Jesus, as we shall see tomorrow. But all their legal expertise was no match for God in a human body; of course. Jesus promised to answer their question if they would answer one of His. But He set them a question that they dare not answer, "Was John's baptism from heaven or men?" Jesus was not just clever in deflecting their enquiry: He wanted to bring home to them the fact that it was they who were trapped - not Him!

Whenever people try to get God in a corner, they find that He has already won the argument. At the end of every day, it is Jesus who is right. Whatever power we might have, think about the right to exercise it ... who gave you the right to spend money, to teach, to lead? All rightful authority comes from God, and all wrongful authority will be demolished by God: so we will all have to give our account to Him (cf [Rom 14:12](#)). Food for thought?

Prayer: *Almighty God. Thank You that the world will not be in moral chaos for ever, because You will exert Your full authority one day. Help me to hold my responsibilities carefully, looking forward to the return of Jesus as the Lord and judge of all. For His Name's sake. Amen.*

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Read Mark 11:31-33 *They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven', he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'" (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." (NIV)*

Have you noticed that when people bombard God with questions, designed to put Him under their control; He has little to say. But when God puts men on the spot, they debate it furiously. In their attempt to control God, they find that they are trapped. If these religious lawyers admitted that John had God's authority to announce Jesus as Messiah, the case against Him would immediately collapse. If they said that John was not God's prophet, the crowd would lynch them.

In the end they take the coward's way out: they plead ignorance and hand the conversation to Jesus to explain what He thought. Instead of telling them the truth about John, Jesus reverted to his deal with the lawyers - if they would not answer His question, neither would He answer theirs.

The arrogance of religious man in trying to get God on the ropes, is on the increase again. You don't have to be a Richard Dawkins to take a pot shot at the Almighty. Just get into a position where you think that you are right, when you are wrong - whatever argument you use will have to put truth in the dock. But even from the dock, truth will identify the real criminal. Sometimes we think that we have to defend the truth - but truth defends itself, like a lion!

Prayer: *Gracious God, thank you for the confidence I can have in Your Word of truth. Help me to be open to receive it and to live by it - with no anxiety towards that day when the Truth will return in glory. In His Name. Amen.*

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Read Mark 12:1 *He then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. (NIV)*

Everybody loves a story. This agricultural parable, in wine growing country presented a familiar picture: a new vineyard, a stone lined pit for treading the grapes, and a tower for shelter, storage and security. It was well designed to be a business success. According to [Leviticus 19:23-25](#) (click the link!), the vines should not be harvested (but pruned, so that all the energy of the plants went into making good vine stock) until the fourth year - when all the produced should be offered to the Lord. The commercial harvest was to come in the fifth year. So for three years, the farmer accepted a loss; and the following year he made a sacrifice. Tenant farmers were employed to do the work - at the owner's expense.

Much more than three years of Israel's history had been unproductive. The Old Testament period was designed to prepare the vine of Israel to be ready for Jesus - with His salvation, forgiveness, and promise of rebirth by the Holy Spirit. The religious leaders were the tenants in this story. They had the responsibility of looking after the spiritual life of the nation in God's physical absence. Instead, they allowed the temple to be a commercial market, and they behaved as though they were the owners (instead of being guardians).

This story is intended to focus on the role of Jesus in His Father's vineyard. But for today, there is a principle to examine. What have we been given as guardians or stewards - to look after for God? Families, wealth, our bodies and businesses ... have we stopped thinking of them as belonging to God? [1 Corinthians 6:20](#) (click the link!) reminds us that all we have is God's - not only because he made us, but because we have been bought back (redeemed) at a great price. If all we have and are belongs to God, is He honoured by our stewardship of them?

Prayer: *Father God. I have been entrusted with so much, and yet I have failed to honour You as I should. Please forgive me, and set my attitude right so that You will reap a harvest from my life. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 12:2-5 *At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.* (NIV)

No business can survive if it always makes a loss. If employees steal the assets and are violent to their boss, the company is in meltdown. Jesus tells such a story (but with an agricultural rather than city flavour). Clearly the situation is untenable, and any right-hearing listener would think, "Surely the owner must sort out these wicked men!"

In fact, Jesus was describing Israel, whose stewardship of God's land and people had been simply appalling. Kings had gone 'off-message', and prophets had been abused and eliminated. What hope could there possibly be for the nation? Indeed, what hope is there for anybody in the world? But instead of leading towards the powerful intervention of an angry company chairman, the story is moving to the death of his beloved son.

The astonishing thing about the gospel; is that God does not dominate His kingdom by force, but woos it's citizens by sacrificial love. This business model would not even get a pass at MBA - but it was God's chosen method to win the hearts of sinners, and convert them into saints. If you know that love, what a privilege! If you do not ... it would be foolish not to respond with willing gratitude.

Prayer: *Father God. Thank you for the extraordinary way in which You have chosen to bring me into Your Kingdom. I need to be grateful - thank you for your patient longsuffering with me. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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Read Mark 12:6-8 *"He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. (NIV)*

The story of arrogant and abusive tenant farmers comes to its next twist. The centrepiece of the owner's policy, to recover his assets, was to send his son; the personal family representative with all the authority of the owner. The son is described as the heir - the person who will benefit from the prosperity of the business. The farm labourers saw their opportunity to eliminate the inheritor and leave them with the owner's legacy. So, the plan was to kill the son, which they did, even throwing his remains off the property.

As Jesus told that story, its meaning should have bitten into the religious opposition. He knew their plans, and that He would be killed (outside the city wall too!), Jesus had seen right into their hearts and into the future. Such revelation should have called their consciences to pause for breath: but they were fixed on eliminating the Son of God.

Who wants Jesus today? Very few who have power or ambition or wealth: they have no interest in Him. But if He should come close enough to upset their ego-system, most want Him out of the picture ... either dead or trapped within archaic religious traditions where He can not interfere with real life. But real life is exactly what Jesus came to give, and for which He was willing to die. Real life is Jesus' business - indeed without Jesus, we can never experience what life is about. However this story does help to explain why Jesus (as opposed to religion) is the point of division, between those who love God and those who hate Him. Jesus encouraged His disciples who would face opposition, that really the attack was against Himself: *"The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil"* (John 7:7 NIV).

Prayer: *Dear Lord Jesus. Help me to understand that when people have a go at me because I love You - that they are really attacking You and not me personally. Please help me to be courageous at such times, and to pray for those people whose opposition to You and Your Word is so dangerously futile. In Your Name, Amen.*

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Read Mark 12:9-12 *"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes?'" Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away. (NIV)*

This is the climax of the parable. The belligerent tenant farmers assumed that once they had disposed of the owner's son, it would be game, set and match. But they had failed to take into account, the character of the owner. The landlord was a just man, and that was why he had exercised extraordinary patience. But justice demands that injustice is dealt with. After his son was killed, the owner was left with no option except to remove those who failed to honour him. They had used up all their chances. Judgement was inevitable; the privilege of developing the vineyard would be given to others.

Jesus made the parable so pointed by quoting [Psalm 118:22-23](#) (click the link) that the religious leaders could not miss its meaning. They knew it referred to the Messiah, and knew who Jesus was claiming to be. They also understood that the fate of the tenant farmers in the story, was a prophecy against them. So this galvanised their killing zeal. But while they had no fear of God, they were frightened of the reaction of the crowd. How short sighted. But those who cannot (or will not) see the truth, are indeed blind.

Proverbs 1:7 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The egocentric approach of every heart that rejects Jesus - is always unwise. It leads to destruction and much trouble along the way. Yet such people are often frightened of human rejection. They will do all in their power to gain respect, popularity and acceptance; as though this world is all there is. Those who fear the Lord need not fear any man. But those who despise the Lord live in fear of rejection. The diagnosis is clear - and the treatment is to come as a sinner to Jesus. That is the only way to lasting wisdom, wholeness and acceptance.

Prayer: *Dear Lord. Thank You that Jesus is the keystone of all Your purposes. Help me to keep on submitting to him, and to urge others to do the same, before it is too late. For Jesus' sake, Amen.*

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Read Mark 12:13-14 *Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (NIV)*

A lion may trap a gazelle and a fox may catch a rabbit, but only because they are more powerful and know how to lie in wait and stalk. Trying to trap God is not a bright idea! He is infinitely more powerful and knows every ambush (the Old Testament is full of such stories)! Yet (so called) clever people still think that can put God in a box and ship Him out of their lives: they want to find a reason for unbelief. Such people gain popular credit and sell books by the truckload; but they are transparent and nakedly destitute before their Maker.

So when the religious and political elite came to corner Christ, they used flattery (although, in fact, it was all true), However, it was flattery, because they did not believe the truth in what they said. It is always good to ask a question in order to learn; but it is cynically insincere when the motives are corrupt. Seeking the truth is not just a matter of questions, but the reason behind them.

So, today, many will throw a smokescreen of questions to deflect their conscience from responding to what they already know. [Romans 1:20](#) (*click the link*) says that everybody has enough information to know that God has all power and authority - so nobody has any excuse not to submit to Him.

Prayer: *Dear Father. Please help me to discern the motive behind people's questions so that I can lead them to Your truth, rather than confirm them in the folly of their prejudices. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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Read Mark 12:15-17 *Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him. (NIV)*

The Pharisees did not want to pay taxes to Caesar, the Herodians thought it was important: neither of them has any desire to honour Jesus as King. So they set a trap: if Jesus agreed with the tax, He would be discredited as God's spokesman; if He denounced the tax, it would be civil disobedience (and punishable by death). What Jesus saw in both groups was hypocrisy. He always knows when someone is a fake.

Of course, His classic answer defeated their plot. They could do nothing but be amazed at the way He answered. It would have been reasonable for them to hold up their hands and admit defeat. Intellectually, morally and spiritually Jesus was infinitely superior to them. But more than that: He was the embodiment of truth. He knew everything. They embodied untruth - their words did not match their motives, and their questions did not search for knowledge.

We should also be amazed by Jesus. What security there is in being known inside and out ... if the one who knows us, loves us ... and we love Him. But for those in rebellion (however well they polish their words), such transparency leaves nowhere to hide. His answer is also helpful to any Christians who are wondering about tax dodging!

Prayer: *Dear Lord. I am glad that You know everything about me. Give me Your wisdom as I live in a corrupt society, and help me to speak wisely to those who want to find a reason for their unbelief. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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