

## Week 25: Matthew 21:23 – 22:14

### Hook



**Main Point:** The kingdom of God belongs to those who believe in Jesus, not to the “religious.”

According to a 2016 survey, 67 percent of gym memberships go completely unused. Whether they use them or not, Americans pay an average of just under \$60 a month for their membership.<sup>i</sup> Gyms have built entire business models around the knowledge that the majority of members will not make use of the facilities. Planet Fitness, a discount chain, boasts, on average, 6,500 members per location while each location has a limit of 300 people.<sup>ii</sup> While saying that they will go to the gym and not following through may not be a healthy habit for members, gyms are prospering from it and seek to lure these very customers into contracts.

**Q: Are you a member of a gym? How often do you make use of your membership?**

**Q: What areas of your life do you often find yourself saying one thing and doing another?**

**Q: How do you combat the temptation of saying one thing and doing another?**

**Transition:** In today’s passage, Jesus will compare those who pay lip service to God with those who follow His commands.

## **Week 25: Matthew 21:23 – 22:14**

### **Book**

**Main Point:** The kingdom of God belongs to those who believe in Jesus, not to the “religious.”

#### **Matthew 21:23–32 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who *do* God’s will, not just give Him lip service.

**Q: Why didn’t the religious leaders want to admit that John or Jesus were sent from heaven?**

**Q: Why does Jesus tell them this parable instead of just answering their question?**

The link between last week’s passage and this week’s parables is the chief priests and elders asking Him by what authority He was doing “these things” – riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, clearing the temple, cursing the fig tree, teaching and healing in the temple. These three parables are all His way of answering that question. Jesus’ response to them was a standard rabbinic pattern: a hostile question followed by a counterquestion, admission, and final rejoinder. It was also typical of Greek rhetoric to silence your opponents with quick wit and wise quips. Only the most skillful rhetoricians could do this. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, we see Jesus answering challenges with wisdom and people being astounded by His answers and unable to reply. In fact, in the next chapter, Jesus gave such great answers that no one dared to challenge Him again (Matthew 22:46).<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus refused to answer them because their goal wasn’t to learn the truth about His claims but to make Him look bad. He wouldn’t play their game. They were caught in their own hypocrisy – though they claimed to speak for God, they did not recognize His prophets when they saw them (vv. 25–27). Jesus turned their question back on them with a parable, asking them, “What do you think?” in a typical rabbinic rhetorical style, letting the students discover the answer themselves rather than just telling them the answer. The parable revealed that the religious leaders were the ones who gave lip service to God but did not do His will. It also revealed their lack of understanding and pride. Even when they saw that others followed John, even when they saw lives changed, they clung to their pride and their power and would not change their minds (v. 32).<sup>iv</sup>

The parable contrasts lip service with delayed obedience. Which is better: for someone to say he won’t do his father’s will and then do it or for someone to say he will do his father’s will and then not do it? The religious leaders knew the right answer – the one who actually did the will of the father even though he said he wouldn’t. What matters is what you actually do. The second son represents the religious leaders themselves, those who say they follow God, but don’t do what He says. The first son represents the tax collectors and prostitutes, who initially

did not follow God but “changed their minds” (v. 29) when they met John or Jesus. This is the significant phrase of the parable, related to John’s and Jesus’ call of the kingdom, to repent.

The parable was simple; it was easy to see the right answer. Of course, the ideal would be a son who immediately said he would go work in the field and then did it, but delayed obedience is better than no obedience at all. This would have made the religious leaders even more angry at Jesus. He was saying that they gave only lip service to God, that they didn’t really follow Him. And if they didn’t follow Jesus, if they didn’t recognize Him as being from heaven (vv. 23–27), they didn’t really know or follow God, no matter what they said. As Jesus said to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus is the only way to God because He *is* God. Following Him is following God.

But not only was He calling them out for their hypocrisy, Jesus also said that those they hated and looked down upon were entering the kingdom before them! Those they called sinners had recognized Jesus and followed Him. They repented and turned away from their sin while the religious leaders thought they didn’t have any sin to repent of. This is what Jesus meant when He said He came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance – not that He didn’t come for the religious leaders because they were already righteous and didn’t need Him, but that we are all sinners; all of us need Jesus (Romans 3:23).

Jesus was calling out the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, but He was also teaching all of us something about the kingdom of God. No matter what kind of past we have had, Jesus is only concerned about how we respond when we are called. Do we repent, turn from our old ways, and follow Him? Or do we think we don’t need to repent? There are two ways not to follow Jesus: 1) to reject Him and continue in your sin and 2) to not think you need Him, like the religious leaders, which is also continuing in your sin. While this may have made those religious leaders mad, it gives the rest of us hope. The kingdom of God is for any sinner who repents. For the tax collector and prostitutes, the poor and the lowly, the rejected and the judged. It is open to anyone, regardless of your failures or your status in the eyes of the world. All we have to do is turn from our old way of life and follow Him. And no matter what our past was like, He will make us a new creation in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17).

**Q: When did you first recognize that Jesus was from heaven, that He was the way? What made you realize it? How did you respond?**

**Q: What would you say to those who believe they aren’t good enough for Jesus to love them and accept them into His kingdom?**

**Q: In what ways do we tend to give lip service to Jesus instead of truly following Him? In what ways is God calling you to repent and walk in obedience?**

**Matthew 21:33–46 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** The world has rejected Jesus, the cornerstone of God's temple.

**Q: Whom do the tenants in this parable represent? Why did they kill the master's son?**

Jesus continued with another parable that illustrates how they had rejected Him as a prophet sent from God – and more than just a prophet, God's own Son. As always, Jesus used illustrations from typical life; just like the parable before it, a master and a vineyard. In the Old Testament, Israel was often compared to a vine and God the vineyard keeper.

In Isaiah 5, God described how He took the vine from another field (Egypt) and brought it to His field (the promised land). As the master gardener, He did all the work to clear the ground and plant and cultivate the vineyard, even building hedges and a watchtower to protect it, and yet it only produced bad fruit. God did everything for them, and yet they still rejected Him and followed false gods. "What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" (Isaiah 5:1–4).<sup>v</sup> Jesus used the same details in this parable. The master planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, built a tower. Jesus' audience would have recognized the allusion to the passage in Isaiah. He was clearly talking about God and Israel here.<sup>vi</sup> But in this parable, Jesus said the master leased it to tenants and went to another country. This was pretty typical for wealthy landowners to leave tenants in charge of their different plots of land and come back later to collect their profits.<sup>vii</sup> The tenants represent Israel's religious leaders, so the evildoers in this parable are not the people of Israel, but her leaders.<sup>viii</sup> Jesus was referring to what God had said in the prophets, that the religious leaders of Israel had been like "bad shepherds," using the people for their own personal gain rather than leading them as servant leaders (Ezekiel 34).

The servants sent by the master to get his fruit represent the prophets, many of whom were rejected, persecuted, and even beaten and abused by the leaders of Israel (v. 35). As tenants, they should have recognized and respected the master's servants, but instead they rejected them. Instead of working the vineyard for the master while he was away, they exploited the vineyard's resources for themselves. Israel's past leaders had done this to the prophets, but Bible scholar Craig S. Keener writes that there are church leaders who do the same thing today: "Many ministers regard the church as 'their' field of ministry, rather than keeping in mind who their Lord is."<sup>ix</sup> When we start to think of the Church and our lives as belonging to us instead of seeing ourselves as stewards of all God has entrusted to us, we will begin to exploit our churches, our ministries, and our people for our own gain.

Specifically, Jesus was describing how the leaders of Israel had rejected so many of God's prophets (the master's servants) that He finally sent His own Son, believing "they will respect my son" (v. 37). But the tenants saw the son, the heir to the vineyard, as an even greater threat. They plotted to kill him so they could have the vineyard for themselves. Even more than just wanting the land and produce for themselves, beating and killing the master's messengers was a sign of how they felt about the master. In antiquity, the way you treated a master's messengers was the way you would have treated the master. Their treatment of his servants

revealed their hatred and brought shame on the master. Jesus was telling these religious leaders who claimed to speak for God and follow His law that in reality they hated Him and brought shame on His kingdom.<sup>x</sup>

This master was unusually patient with these disobedient tenants. If a tenant treated a master's servants this way, he typically took them to court or even sent a hit squad to take them out.<sup>xi</sup> Jesus' audience would have been surprised that this master sent another group of servants and then even his own son. This was too patient, even foolish, of the master.<sup>xii</sup> Such is the foolishness of the "overwhelming, never-ending reckless love of God," to quote worship leader Corey Asbury. God's patient longsuffering love for Israel is foolish in the eyes of the world. Just as in the marriage metaphor the Old testament uses to speak of God's love for Israel, a faithful husband who continued to forgive his adulterous wife would have been considered foolish and dishonorable. This master is too benevolent, too gracious, too patient, too kind.<sup>xiii</sup>

Though He had been referring to Israel's past leaders and prophets, now Jesus was talking about Himself and them, predicting His own death at their hands, which would happen only a few days later. Their rejection of Him not just as a prophet but as God's own Son, His ultimate representative, revealed how they truly felt about God. They might have said they loved and followed God, but they hated who He really was, as revealed in Jesus. God has been patient with Israel's leaders for centuries, but now that they had rejected His Son, He would finally judge them when He returns (vv. 40–41). This refers to the final judgment, often illustrated as a final harvest, as in the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24–43). When God returns for the final judgment, those who reject His Son will be condemned (v. 41).<sup>xiv</sup>

In this parable, Jesus finally revealed the Messianic secret. He was not just a prophet but God's own Son, and His rejection spells doom on the tenants of God's kingdom. In asking the religious leaders who challenged Him what the master would do, He allowed them to pronounce their own judgment.<sup>xv</sup> Their future judgment would not be unfair; it would be justified and righteous. Jesus quoted from Psalm 118, the same psalm from the Hallel that the people sang in praise on Palm Sunday. He challenged their understanding of the Scriptures again by asking, "Have you never read ...?" (v. 42). The religious leaders may have rejected and even killed Him, but He would become the cornerstone in God's real temple, His Church. As Paul wrote in Corinthians, we are God's field, His building, built on the foundation of Christ. We are His temple, with His Spirit dwelling in us (1 Corinthians 3:1–17).

In the same way Jesus said sinners were entering the kingdom before the religious leaders, He said here that the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to those who were producing His fruits, those who actually go out and work in the vineyard. Those who follow Jesus and bear the Fruit of the Spirit. With these two parables together, the religious leaders realized Jesus was talking about them, and ironically, they plotted to arrest Him —after He had just said they would kill Him, the Son of the Master. Because the crowds believed Jesus to be a prophet, the religious leaders didn't arrest Him right away, but plotted to do it in secret, which they did later, late at night in the garden of Gethsemane.

When we follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit dwells in us as His temple and works in us to bear His fruit. He is the vine, and we are the branches; through Him we bear fruit. It is not something we do in our own strength, but something the Holy Spirit produces in us (John 15). The parable doesn't say God will measure *how much* fruit we bear, as if he had a huge scale that weighs out the good things we have done or a massive Excel spreadsheet calculating our scorecard. It is only important that we are bearing fruit at all, that we have abided in the vine. If we are in Jesus, we should not fear Judgment Day; we should welcome it. It will be a day of condemnation for the wicked but vindication for the righteous. A day when those who follow Jesus will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant.... Enter the joy of your master," a line from a parable in Matthew 25.

**Q: Why did the religious leaders reject Jesus? What are some more subtle ways people reject Jesus today, even those who claim to know and follow Him?**

**Q: How have you seen the Spirit grow His fruit in your life? How has He changed your heart, your thoughts, your behavior, your desires, and your priorities as you have abided with Him?**

**Q: How does understanding this parable help us to explain God's judgment to people?**

**Matthew 22:1–14 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Those who reject Jesus will be punished in the final judgment.

**Q: Why didn't the invited guests go to the wedding? What does this represent?**

**Q: Why did Jesus say, "Many are called, but few are chosen"? What does that mean?**

In the ancient world, wedding feasts took a long time to prepare, so the invitation to which the guests would reply was given long in advance. Then, when the feast was ready, a servant was sent out to "invite" them again. Because wedding feasts took so much preparation, the guests were never really sure when it would be ready. In Palestinian Judaism, attendance at weddings was a social obligation for family, friends or anyone of your social class; people typically accepted the invitation whether they liked the host or not. It was a matter of honor and status more than anything. No one would refuse the invitation of a king, especially not the wedding banquet for his son! If you were honorable enough to be invited, you didn't say no. The guests in this story had replied yes to the invitation, but when the servant came to tell them it was ready, they would not come. As in the last parable, this is talking about the religious leaders who had said yes to God's promise of a Messiah but then, when He came, they rejected Him.<sup>xvi</sup>

Rejecting his invitation was a major affront to the king's dignity and honor. One might refuse the invitation of someone of lesser honor, but never a king. One might refuse the invitation of someone of the same social status if they were deliberately trying to shame or insult them. But for *all* the invited guests to refuse the invitation, and for no reason, would have seemed like a scheme to deliberately shame the king. Adding the violence of killing his servants made it a

revolt. This was a hyperbolic situation and would have been shocking for Jesus' hearers. This kind of disrespect to a king never would have happened in real life. For a king to extend graciously the honor of an invitation to a banquet and then be rejected as if his offer were meaningless was a huge breach of social order; it simply did not happen. These people would have faced severe punishment, perhaps even death, just for rejecting the king's invitation, but the revolutionary act of killing his servants would have certainly ensured the death penalty. Jesus' audience would have not flinched at the king's reaction at all. Sending his troops to kill them and burn their city would have been considered a just punishment.<sup>xvii</sup>

Painting the religious leaders as the characters in this parable would have sent them a very clear message about their coming judgment, just as the previous parable had done. It would have also painted a clear picture of exactly what they were rejecting. They would have been crazy to reject an invitation from the king to his son's wedding feast. No one in his right mind would do that! These religious leaders had no idea what they were saying no to when they rejected following Jesus. They were saying no to the kingdom of God! When they rejected Jesus, they were rejecting eternal rest and peace and joy and feasting at God's eschatological banquet table in heaven.

The king replaced those who rejected him with guests who may not have been as "honorable" in the eyes of the world, but who turned out to be more worthy than those who had originally been invited (v. 8). This is a clear parallel to what Jesus explicitly said in the last parable, that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom before these hypocritical religious leaders. In the parable in Luke, he specified that this second group of guests were the dishonorable – the poor, the crippled, the lame, etc. In this parable, it is "both bad and good" (v. 10). It's not about earthly status or honor level. It is simply about whether they accepted the invitation. That's it. That's all it takes.

But He adds this one twist at the end. There was one guest at the banquet who wasn't wearing wedding clothes. He received a severe final-judgment punishment as well. He was thrown into "the outer darkness," a phrase used for hell, especially when paired with "where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 13). What does this mean? Do we need some special garment to get into the kingdom? The wedding garment is not about our actual clothes. It's a symbol of purity and repentance. In Revelation, the Bride of Christ was given clothing of fine linen, bright and pure, "which is the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8). Though this may sound like works righteousness, it isn't really about their good deeds but about their faith, as it is faith that is reckoned to us as righteousness (Romans 4:9; 4:22; Galatians 3:6; Titus 3:8; James 2:23). When we repent and turn to Christ, we "clothe ourselves" with the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14); we put on His righteousness to cover our sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The wedding garment in this parable is a symbol of true repentance – not just lip service to God, not trying to earn His favor through our own righteousness, but turning away from our old ways and following Jesus. This is not just a warning to the religious leaders who openly rejected Jesus – the characters who rejected the king's invitation. It is also a warning to those who would try to partake of His banquet without repenting of their sins and putting on the new self

in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3). Keener writes, “Just as most Jewish leaders were unprepared at Jesus’ first coming (Matthew 23:13–33), some professing disciples of Jesus will be unprepared at His Second Coming (Matthew 24:45–51). Professing Christians who insult God’s grace by presuming on it without truly honoring His Son will be banished to outer darkness (Matthew 8:12; 25:30) and weeping with gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:42; 24:51; 25:30).”<sup>xviii</sup>

“Many are called, but few are chosen” is a warning to all of us. Don’t let the word “chosen” throw you off. It’s not about God picking and choosing the prettiest, the smartest, the coolest, the best behaved, or the ones who do the most good deeds. “Chosen” refers to the chosen nation of Israel. The Church is His new Israel, the true Israel, the true kingdom of God. The invitation is open to all! Jesus says to everyone, come to the waters and drink and eat without cost (Isaiah 55)! Come to me and find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:28–30). He goes out into the streets and finds everyone He can – the “good” and the “bad.” The invitation is open to anyone who will come. But few are “chosen” because few say yes to His invitation. When you look at it through the images in this parable, people would be crazy not to respond to His invitation. Who wouldn’t say yes to a huge feast at the king’s table? When you really understand what Jesus is offering, how could you ever say no? Yet many do. Like these religious leaders, they don’t see Jesus for who He really is. They don’t see the invitation for what it really is – an unbelievable offer of grace, life abundant, and eternity feasting in His perfect kingdom. The way that leads to life is narrow and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13–14).

**Q: What are some reasons people have given you for rejecting Jesus? After having studied this parable, how would you respond to them?**

**Q: Why do some people want to receive the gift of God’s blessing and grace without repenting, turning from their sin, and putting on new life in Christ? What would you say to those people, not just about judgment, but about why that’s not the best way to live?**



## **Week 25: Matthew 21:23 – 22:14**

### **Took**

**Main Point: The kingdom of God belongs to those who believe in Jesus, not to the “religious.”**

The feast is waiting, and the consequences for rejecting the invitation are dire. Pray that God would give you fresh perspective concerning the significance of the invitation and the responsibility of sharing it with others. Renew your prayers and efforts that those in your circle of influence who have rejected Christ will enter into a relationship with Him.

**Teacher:** Take this moment to provide an opportunity for your LifeGroup to practice the 3 Circles method of evangelism *or* conduct a time of prayer for the lost.

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Examine your own heart. Have you been like these religious leaders or these dinner guests in any way? Have you rejected Jesus’ message or not fully committed to following Him? Have you tried to receive His grace without repenting and following Him? Have you gratefully received Jesus as your Savior but not treated Him as your Lord? Ask God to search your heart and reveal to you any ways you need to repent and follow Him.

**PRAY:** For anyone you know who has rejected Jesus. Pray for their hearts to be softened toward the message of the Gospel. Pray for them to understand just what an amazing invitation Jesus is offering them. Pray for God to give you the right words to share with them in the right timing, to show them how Jesus has changed your life or for others to come into their life to share the Gospel with them.

**ACT:** Share the invitation. Choose (at least) one person you know who does not know Jesus and share this invitation with him or her. Be God’s servants who go out and invite people to come in and feast with the king! Explain to them exactly what Jesus is inviting them into and how much joy, peace and hope accepting His invitation has brought to your life.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2016/04/27/your-gym-membership-good-investment/82758866/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/12/30/373996649/why-we-sign-up-for-gym-memberships-but-dont-go-to-the-gym>

<sup>iii</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of The Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968).

<sup>iv</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>v</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>vi</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>vii</sup> J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1970).

<sup>viii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>ix</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>x</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989).

<sup>xi</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 BC to AD 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>xii</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989).

<sup>xiii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>xiv</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>xv</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972).

<sup>xvi</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

<sup>xvii</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>xviii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).