

This past week the news media published a story about a high school wrestler in Wisconsin who was recently suspended by a referee for unsportsmanlike conduct during and after a wrestling match. The wrestler's parents, who were in attendance, disagreed with the suspension, but since the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association doesn't allow appeals, they took their case to the county court. Once there, the judge – after hearing the family's testimony and a video of the match that was taken by the wrestler's mother – concluded that the actions of the wrestler didn't merit suspension, and lifted the suspension so the wrestler could continue his pursuit of reaching the finals in the state tournament.

In response, the president of the National Association of Sports Officials condemned the judge's ruling, saying the judge made took it upon himself to become, in effect, the replay official in a sport that doesn't allow the use of video to check officials' calls. "This is unprecedented," he said. "All of a sudden you're the referee? Have you ever refereed a match, sir? Have you ever been down there on the mat, in the heat of battle, sir?" He continued to say that the Athletic Association doesn't allow wrestlers to appeal referee's calls because it would create too many complications. "It's a Pandora's box. If they gave the right to appeal an officiating call, just imagine where this is going to go," he said.

I was drawn to read this story and share this story with you this morning for a number of reasons. The first is personal. Most of you know, and I have mentioned at times, about my struggles of growing up in a home that was tainted with an atmosphere of abuse. But I've also shared with you how God graciously drew me out all of that, so I might come to faith in Jesus Christ and give me a beautiful wife and beautiful children and beautiful grandchildren and a beautiful family of God - all are which are permeated with God's life, love, grace, joy, hope and glory – today and tomorrow and forever.

Now one of the ways that God drew me out of my early struggles in life was through wrestling. It began with when my Physical Education teacher in Grade 7 - Mr. Westland - told this chubby, timid, introverted kid that I should try out for the wrestling team - because I had already won all of my matches against the boys in the class. And so I did join the wrestling team, and I continued to do so all through Grade 11. Now I wasn't great wrestler, but I was good enough to win more matches than I lost. But what I got most out of wrestling was not so much about wins or loses – but rather building up my confidence and developing my character. Wrestling is, out of all sports, the most humbling. It's about going into battle with nothing more than your body. Just you against someone you don't know – in front crowds of people, big and small. If you do well, everybody knows it. If you don't do well, everyone knows it too. People cheer for you and people cheer against you – both at the same time.

Because of all this, you become part of the culture of wrestling – which is about respecting one another - both friend and foe. And while aggressiveness is a trait that is always encouraged in wrestling, so is encouragement and goodwill and honouring your teammates and those you wrestle against – as well as the sport itself; it's history and it's rules and it's referees and it's officials and it's place in life. But that seems to be changing. The story I just shared with you is not isolated at all. The unsportsmanlike conduct in this case was arguing with the referee, disrespecting his opponent and grandstanding. We don't have to look far to see why he did those things. His parents did the same by taking the Athletic Association to court - and the judge also did the very same thing when he decided he was the referee.

This is not new news to us. These kinds of things are an echo of our rebellion against God's authority in our relationship with God in the Garden. Though created by God to know God and love God and live with God and serve God, we chose to reject our dependence on God and our place in the family of God. This is why Jesus went to the cross. His sacrificial death on the cross in our place for our sins, provided a way for us to be restored back into a relationship with God in the family of God – so we might live for God, by humbly and sacrificially and dependently following Jesus and sharing Jesus.

As we glance across the landscape of our culture and society, it seems that today, more than ever, the idea of being against authority has become pretty much the norm. In fact, some would say that if you do not question authority, then you are part of a corrupt system seeking to oppress people. From schoolteachers to police officers to parents to referees to pastors - rebelling against the authority of any of these is considered by some to be a fundamental right of citizens in a free society. In the midst of the haze of the rights and entitlement culture we live in, we feel that we are entitled to speak into every decision that is made in life. We have convinced ourselves that our opinion, our voice, carries the same weight as everyone else - and that we have the right to do what we want. But while we may now think that we have the right to do so here on earth - it doesn't work that way at all in the kingdom of God.

This is what Jesus is going to tell us about in our text for today. He will expose the reality that rejecting and rebelling against authority is not worse than its ever been. This has been going on in the hearts of fallen humanity since the first sin in the Garden of Eden to when Jesus entered Jerusalem on his way to the cross to a wrestling match in Wisconsin to us sitting in this room together today. Today Jesus will not tell us something that we don't already know. What he will do - as he walks toward the cross - is to both remind us and warn us - that when we reject His authority and rebel against His authority and disobey His authority, we will suffer severe consequences. But when we respect His authority and honor His authority and obey His authority, God will bless us far beyond what we could ever imagine.

When we open text for today, it is the Tuesday of the week of Jesus' journey to the cross. He has entered Jerusalem with great fanfare and then he cleanses the Temple of those who are doing business there. He leaves for Bethany and when Jesus returns he curses a fig tree and its leaves shrivel up. If you remember from last week, Jesus did these things to expose the spiritual blindness, the inward corruption and outward fruitlessness of God's people - for the nation of Israel and for us here today. Matthew now tells us that Jesus goes back to the Temple, where he is confronted with opposition.

*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?" 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. The 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?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." 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." Matthew 21:23-27*

Returning to the temple in Jerusalem, the scene of the previous days disruption, the chief priests and elders seek to antagonise Jesus and his response to them illustrates and explains his cursing of the fig tree. They first ask him the question, *"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"* This was no casual question. This was being asked by men whose own authority had probably never been challenged. These were the religious leaders, priests, scribes and Pharisees - members of the Sanhedrin Council - whose authority amongst the Jews was supreme. Their antagonism to Christ had been building for some time and was now approaching a climax. They had seen him cleanse the temple and heard about his cursing the fig tree on the previous day - and now he had the audacity to come back. This was their church! It was their authority being undermined by his actions. Their coming to Jesus was no doubt something of an official visit, representing the authorities in Jerusalem, disturbed by his actions and the popular response to his ministry among the people.

Jesus answered their question about his authority with a question of his own, followed by two parables, so pointed in their meaning that Matthew 21:45 tells us: *"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them."* In responding to their questions about him, he exposed them as those from whom the kingdom of God would to be taken away - cursed and shrivelled up without fruit, and dead without life, like the fig tree which did not bear fruit.

Jesus responded to their question about his authority by asking them a clever question about the origin of the ministry of John the Baptist: *"Where did it come? From heaven or from man?"* This question placed Jesus' inquisitors in a dilemma. John had been executed sometime before, and as is so often the case, his death had enhanced his reputation. If they said John's ministry was not from God, they would provoke the anger of the people. If they said John's ministry was of God, they would have to logically accept the ministry of Jesus to whom John pointed, and for whom he claimed only to be a forerunner. In John 1:7-8 tells us: *"He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."* And so having discussed it amongst themselves, they realized the dilemma into which Jesus had led them, the priest and elders pathetically replied: *"We do not know."* Then Jesus said: *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."*

This issue of authority the chief priests and elders struggled with is difficult for us too. Rebellion against God's authority was humanity's first sin and continues to be our downfall. Our sinful natures do not want to bow to the authority of another, even if it's God. We want to be our own authority, and that rebellion in the human heart is the root of all sin. Romans 3:23 tells us we *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* We see that in that Israel's history is a cycle of rebellion and restoration (Judges 2:10–19; Isaiah 59:13; Numbers 14:18). When God gave the Israelites the Law, He was teaching the world that the universe has a chain of command. The God who descended on Sinai in *"thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast"* is in charge (Exodus 19:16). But while we humans may be the crown of God's creation (Hebrews 2:7), we are not the gods of it. Although we have the freedom to choose to obey the Lord or not, His Law still prevails. When we rebel against our God's sovereign right to be our authority - consequences will follow.

Within humanity, God has also established a chain of command, and rebellion against God's ordained order is sin. Romans 13:1–7 instructs us to submit ourselves to the governing authorities, as long as those authorities don't require us to disobey God's authority (Acts 5:29). Rebellion against God-ordained authority leads to anarchy and the dissolution of society. In the home, God's chain of authority is that the husband is to be the head of the family. The husband's responsibility is to lead his family by submitting to Christ (Ephesians 5:23). The wife is to submit to Christ by submitting to her husband, and children are to submit to Christ by obeying their parents (Ephesians 5:22; 6:1; Col 3:18, 20). Rebellion against authority in the family always leads to chaos and dysfunction within the home.

The same is true in the church. Within the church, God has also created order. He has appointed pastors and elders to shepherd and keep watch over the congregation (1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12; Hebrews 13:17). While elders or pastors are never to have control over anyone, they are given God's authority and should be honored and obeyed. Hebrews 13:17 says: *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."* Rebellion in church leads to division, strife and a loss of witness and effectiveness in carrying out God's mission (1 Cor 3:3–6).

Jesus saw this in the chief priests and elders who questioned him about his authority. While he did say to them: *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"* - he also shared three parables with them that would explain what authority Jesus had for cleansing the temple and cursing the fig tree.

*"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.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. 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. 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. Matthew 21:28-32*

The first parable Jesus shared with the religious leaders was the parable of a father and his two sons. The first of these two sons was sent by his father to work in his father's vineyard. The son initially refused, but then changed his mind and went. The second son was also sent to the vineyard. At first said he would go, but then he changed his mind and did not go. Jesus asked the question: "*Which of the two did the will of his father?*" Well, the answer was obvious. The one who did what the father wanted was the first son. To agree to go, yet not to go, is not go! To agree not to go, but then go, is to go! The language used and the reality experienced were conflict in both cases - but the actual experience of either going or not going took precedence over the promises made by each son and represented the reality of their obedience or disobedience. The pointed application of this to the Pharisees and priests who is that although tax collectors and prostitutes made no claim to any favoured relationship with God as the religious hierarchy did - they believed John the Baptist, repented of their sins, and were going "*into the kingdom of God before you.*" However, the priests and Pharisees, who gave all outward appearance of allegiance to God, did not repent or believe the preaching of John the Baptist.

The behaviour of either son in the story is not ideal. One would prefer sons who did what they said they would. But the point is, that it is not rhetoric but actual response that counts. It is not right belief that measures our response to God, but right behaviour. Like these priests and Pharisees, it is possible to reduce Christianity to a little more than the correct usage of theological language and concepts, so deceiving ourselves that because we speak the language, we experience the life. Old testament prophets warned of this. Jeremiah speaks of "*trusting in deceptive words that are worthless*" (Jeremiah 7:8). In the New Testament John warns: "*If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*" (1 John 1:6). The religious leaders of Jesus' day were those who said "I will" but didn't, and their use of correct language deceived them into false security. The two sons in Jesus' parable represented the two classes of people in Israel: the self-righteous religious people, and sinners. Jesus came to save the sinners.

*"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. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 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." 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'? Therefore I tell you, 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." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.*

Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus tells another parable that contains another question for Chief Priests and scribes. A landowner planted a vineyard and rented it to some farmers. When harvest time approached he sent his servants to the tenants to collect the fruit. The tenants seized his servants, beat one, killed another and stoned a third. He sent more servants and they treated them the same way. Finally he sent his son, but the tenants killed him too. Then came to question: "*When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?*" Those who were opposing Jesus replied: "*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.*" In their response they had unwittingly given Jesus the explanation of the own situation.

The “vineyard” spoken of here is its familiar picture of the Jewish nation. In Isaiah 5:7 the prophet said: “*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.*” Since the vineyard was the nation of Israel, the parable means that Israel had rejected the servants sent from God, prophets who demanded they give God His due, and finally God sent his son. He too was rejected. They vividly illustrate their own guilt by resolving immediately after the telling of this parable “*to arrest him.*” The fig tree of Israel is cursed. The small edible knobs that appear early on the fig tree as forerunner of the real fruit is absent. The acts of worship centred on the Jerusalem Temple are not preparing people for Christ, and they are to be cursed. The condemnation of Israel’s position is complete so “*the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.*” If the two parables at the end of the chapter indicate the rejection of God by the Jewish people, then who are the people who produce the fruit of the kingdom? Jesus’ next parable tells us.

*And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, ‘See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.’” But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.” Matthew 22:1-14*

Jesus now told parable about a wedding banquet planned by a king for his son. There are two aspects to the story. First, the king issued invitations to those eligible to attend but when the moment came for them to come, they refused to come, so he sent his servants to the streets to invite anyone who is available and willing to attend the banquet. There is the first aspect of the story. Second, when the king himself came to the banquet, he found a guest not wearing wedding clothes, and he ordered him thrown out into the darkness. The first aspect refers to the refusal of the Jews to participate in the kingdom of God, consistent with the previous two parables, which climaxed in the statement “*the kingdom of God will be taken away from you*” and the subsequent invitation to for anyone and everyone to come and participate. The second illustrates the fact that although the invitation is to all, attendance at the banquet requires being appropriately clothed. Let’s look at each one of these more closely.

It was the custom of the day to issue an initial invitation to a banquet, which would have already been responded to by invited guests. Then, when the meal was ready, the second invitation was delivered summoning the guests to attend. In this parable, the king sent his servant to those who had been invited to the banquet, and who presumably it already indicated their willingness to attend. But with the second invitation, they refused to come. This is a clear reference to the Jewish people, already in covenant with God. But, like the parables of Matthew 21 where the first, one son turned back on his promise to go to the vineyard, and in the second, the tenants of the vineyard refused to pay the agreed rent to its owner, instead killing the owners servants and son - so now, those who have initially covenanted to attend the banquet refuse to do so when the final invitation is issued. The invitation to participate in the kingdom of God is not certain. There have been earlier invitations and announcements through the law, the covenants and the prophets - but now Christ comes with the final invitation and with it an ultimatum, to come now, or you will be shut out from God forever.

The response to the invitation to the banquet for the invited guests was not uniform. Some responded with indifference, *“they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business.”* These activities were not bad in themselves, just more interesting to these people. Believing they had better things to do, they would not be bothered by this invitation. It is often not bad things that take us away from Christ; it is the arrangement of values that allows other legitimate things to become more important to us and more demanding of us, in the summons, the invitations and interests of Jesus Christ. This first group missed the feast through indifference. Others missed the feast through sheer rejection: *“The rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.”* They actively opposed the summons and flatly rejected the invitation by killing the messengers. It is a myth to assume that to destroy the messenger is to destroy the message. Not only is that the response of those in this parable, but Jesus stated it has been the response of the forefathers of the Pharisees through their history. To violently reject or to indifferently neglect is ultimately the same - they did not participate in the banquet. Both neglect and rejection were present among the Jewish people, though it was the Pharisees and religious leaders in particular who were guilty of rejection. As Jesus spoke to them, they were already looking for a way to arrest him and destroy him. In the parable the king burned the city of those who killed the servants, and Jesus is almost certainly referring to the destruction of Jerusalem which would take place in 70 A.D. We will hear more about that from Jesus in Matthew 23-24.

This parable reflects the reality that the Kingdom of God was being taken from those who had the first right to it, the Jews, and is being opened to all on the highways and byways of life. It's not only the tax collectors and prostitutes of the previous chapter who enter the kingdom of God, but also the Gentiles who were not in the scope of the earlier invitation. The invitation however, although widely extended, is conditional on appropriate clothing. In the second aspect of the story, the king comes in to see his guests and notices a man not wearing wedding clothes: *“How did you get in here without a wedding garment?”* For his neglect he was tied hand and foot and thrown outside into the darkness. The door of the banquet was open to anyone *“both bad and good.”* But whereas any beggar could be invited, he could not remain a beggar. He was to be clean and dressed. The *“wedding garment”* was not a particular kind of garment so much as appropriate clean clothing, preferably white. We see this in that scripture speaks of being clothed in such a way as to be acceptable to God. Galatians 3:27 says: *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”* In Isaiah 61:10 the prophet proclaimed: *“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”* This is our promise in Jesus Christ!

Most of the words we read in our text for today were the words of Jesus. The apostle John tells us that *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth . . . from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace”* (John 1:2, 14, 16). The Word of God has spoken to us today – Jesus has spoken to us today - with the full authority of God. Last week Jesus warned us and reminded us about the tendency for God's people to become spiritually blind, inwardly corrupt and outwardly fruitless. Today Jesus warns us and reminds us that when we reject or rebel or disobey the authority of God - and the authority of those whom God has put and allowed to be in positions of authority in the world - we are also rejecting and rebelling against and disobeying our most Sovereign God and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In John 15: 9-11 Jesus said: *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep (obey) my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept (obeyed) my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”* While the world we live in is fixated on rejecting, rebelling and disobeying authority - may we be fixated with respecting and honoring and obeying authority, so we might know the fullness of the grace upon grace and the truth and love and joy and eternal glory we are promised in Jesus Christ. Amen!