

The Challengers Are Challenged

Mark 11:27-12:12

Introduction

I have a question for us, is the head or the heart the biggest barrier to someone becoming a Christian / to someone committing their life to Jesus and trusting him? For you personally, if you remember how you first became a Christian, what was it that convinced you to trust Jesus with your eternal destiny and give meaning to your life today? Was there some strong intellectual argument or was there something which touched your heart?

Intellectual struggles with Christianity, the struggles that are centred in the head, include objections about Jesus as a historical figure, the question as to whether there is a compatibility between Christianity and science, and certain questions of philosophy such as if there is a good God who is all powerful how can there be suffering in the world.

Emotional struggles with Christianity, the struggles that are centred in the heart, include the challenge of being hurt by people in the church, the pain of having watched a loved one suffer and die, the fear of what other people may think if you were to become a Christian, the reluctance to submit to Jesus' lordship, and so on.

With the writing of Richard Dawkins and others who are described as "The New Atheists," you may be inclined to think that intellectual arguments are the more significant barrier to people trusting in Jesus. However, while such books like Dawkins', *The God Delusion*, make an impact and should be answered by Christians (and there are some excellent resources I can point you to if this is an area of concern for you), in my personal interactions with people I find that most of the time people use intellectual arguments to justify decisions which they've already made in their hearts. Think again about the question I asked you earlier, What was it that convinced you to trust in Jesus? There may be some here who were convinced by an intellectual reason but for most of us it was because we received love and found meaning, etc.

This morning we're going to look at some people who wanted to challenge Jesus but who ended up being challenged themselves. Despite their intellectual understanding of what was going on their hearts refused to be changed.

Problem With Mind Or Heart? (vv. 11:27-33)

The story is at the end of chapter 11 and follows on from Jesus clearing out the temple which we looked at before I went on holidays. Here the people who have leadership roles in the temple come up to Jesus and want to know what gave Jesus the authority to do what he had done.

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?'

Has Jesus been sent by a particular rabbi to drive out the merchants who were selling in the temple? If so, then the leaders would make a decision about that rabbi's authority and standing or has Jesus acted on his own behalf or with a prophet's authority as one directly called by Yahweh? This would appear to be something of an intellectual, non-emotional, question. Basically they want to know who is Jesus? However, as we are aware, when it comes to people who have a vested interest in a situation asking a question, the intellect is never the only part of our bodies engaged.

Jesus, as was common for rabbis, answers the question with a question. Interestingly though, Jesus' question does also contain something of his answer. Let's read what Jesus says, "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 of human origin? Tell me!'" So Jesus asks a question, but by referencing John the Baptist and the authority he had, Jesus is hinting that Jesus' authority is connected with John's authority. Do we have here a challenge but also an invitation from Jesus? These leaders had previously rejected John and Jesus' question forces them to confront that rejection but can also be seen as a fresh invitation / a fresh opportunity to receive Jesus and so not fail now like they had with John.

We read the leaders' reply in 31 to 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, "Of human origin" . . .' (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.'

What an anti-climax! No answer! So then, let's go back to my earlier question, Is there problem with their hearts or their heads? Does their their thinking and response indicate that they're struggling to answer because they don't know the answer in their heads or because they are afraid and don't want to face the consequences of their answer which is a problem of the heart?

As it has been said before, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Jesus asked his question in a way that invited these leaders to receive him in a way that they had failed to receive John. However, not because of the intellectual difficulty of the question but because they didn't want to accept Jesus' authority their hearts refuse to give an answer.

What does Jesus do in response? Jesus said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.' In the face of a stubborn and antagonistic group Jesus won't explicitly say where his authority comes from but he does tell a parable which gives more of an answer as well as serves as another challenge to the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders.

Rebellious Tenants and Rejected Son (vv. 12:1-8)

Earlier in the service we had Isaiah 5 verses 1-7 read for us and that was because it's clear that Jesus used the image from those verses, which describe Israel as a vineyard, in his parable. A few weeks back we saw that Israel was sometimes referred to as a fig tree and here we have the image of the vineyard.

In this parable Jesus describes how a man builds a vineyard, providing all that is necessary for it to be a good and proper one. The listeners would have also remembered Isaiah and so would know that the person who built the vineyard is God.

In Isaiah the vineyard failed to produce a good crop but in Jesus' story the problem is that the tenants who have rented the vineyard fail to provide to the owner and builder the percentage of the harvest to which he is entitled.

A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. 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.

It's helpful to remember here that parables are not allegories, like "A Pilgrim's Progress," where each part of the story has a particular significance. Parables normally have one major teaching point but certain parts of parables can have significance and more direct connections.

From this first section of the parable we can make a couple of brief observations. First, the emphasis on the tenants rather than on the vineyard can be seen as focusing this parable on the leaders of the nation rather than on the nation as a whole. Jesus' listeners certainly took it that way as we see later from their response. Second, the servants who are sent are a picture of Yahweh sending his prophets to the nation of Israel and her leaders (the prophets were sometimes described as "servants of the Lord" in the Hebrew Scriptures). However, these opening verses only serve to set the scene for the core focus of this parable.

'[The owner] 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.

The core of the parable is the rejection of the owner's son, a rejection that is so thorough that the son is killed and thrown out of the vineyard. In certain situations at the time of Jesus in Israel, when a property is left without an heir the tenants on the

property can claim it as their own if they can show that they have maintained and used it. This is the hope of the tenants here, to gain the property as their own. In terms of the parable though, the core emphasis is not on the desire of the tenants as much as on the rejection of the rightful owner and heir. This parable could be known as, “the parable of the rebellious tenants,” but it could also be called, “the parable of the rejected son.”

And once again, let’s return to my earlier question, in terms of the tenants and who they represent, is this a problem of the head or the heart? Are the tenants unsure as to who the son is? Do the tenants think that they doing the right thing in attacking the servants and now the son? No! It’s is clear that the problem here is a heart matter of greed. The tenants want the vineyard for themselves. What then is to be done?

Judgement Has Come (vv. 12:9-12)

We come to the part of the parable which many of us find difficult because we find such harsh verdicts to be at odds with our modern era. Let’s look at what is said: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” No, these aren’t nice words but let’s put them in their historical context where capital punishment was not uncommon. In particular, although this parable uses the image of the owner of a vineyard and his tenants, there is an element of kingship here and so there is also the idea of rebellion against a rightful ruler. Treason and rebellion were normally punishable by death and so the punishment would be considered appropriate.

However, the punishment is again not focus of this parable but rather the rejection, or more accurately, the wrongful rejection, of the son. This is why Jesus goes on to say, “Haven’t you read this passage of Scripture: “‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’?””

To reiterate then, this parable is primarily focused on the rejection of the son by the leaders of Israel. However, this rejection, and indeed rebellion, will not go

unpunished because the owner of the vineyard, God, will execute judgement on those murderous rebels and will give the vineyard to others.

How then did the leaders respond to this parable? We read their response in verse 12, “Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders 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.” Here again we note that the problem is not an intellectual one, the leaders recognised the meaning of the parable and understood that they were it’s target but they have a very emotive response. The leaders want to arrest Jesus because they don’t like what the parable means but they don’t because they’re afraid of the crowd.

In one sense this response doesn’t surprise us but we should remember that this wasn’t the only possible response they could have made. What would have changed if the leaders had realised that they were rejecting God’s Messiah, the One who had Yahweh’s authority to correct Israel’s failed leadership, and they had repented of their actions? This parable was a parable of judgement but it was also an invitation to change course. Sadly, no matter what was going through the leaders’ heads, their hearts refused to submit and so they continued to reject Jesus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let’s think about how this impacts us today. The most important application for us is that we need to make sure that we trust in Jesus and don’t reject him like the leaders of Israel did. It doesn’t matter how closely connected we are to the church as an institution, after all the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders made up the leadership of the temple, what matter is whether we’re going to receive Jesus with all the authority he has and put our trust in him.

Beyond our own response to Jesus, I wonder if we don’t tell our friends about Jesus because we’re afraid of not knowing answers to questions or objections they may have. May I suggest that while we should look for answers to people’s questions, most of the time people are more likely to respond if you address their hearts.

I'd like to encourage all of us to pray that God would soften the hearts of family and friends and people that we know so that they would trust Jesus. Keep getting to know Jesus better through reading about him in the Gospels and by speaking with him in prayer because as you love Jesus more deeply and trust him more fully then that faith changes our lives and it is that kind of faith which is often very contagious. This is especially the case when you combine such faith with praying that you would have the energy and wisdom to show God's love to others.

[Pray to close - Jesus is the One that we can build our life upon and we're going to sing about this now]