

No Surrender! The scandalous challenge of a unique authority

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 21. The title this morning is simple, No Surrender. Or, if you like, The Scandalous Challenge of a Unique Authority.

Last week we saw that Chapter 20 ends with the story of the healing of these two blind men that we read of again today. And, of course, the irony was that they are the only ones who see the real truth about Jesus.

That he is the Messiah, the Son of David, the great promised King. Yet, that he's a king not as the world understands, exalted and self-serving, but this is a king who stoops to serve even blind beggars by the side of the road.

And they also see what true discipleship means. They not only see who Jesus is, but they know what this means.

It means that they must submit everything to his authority now. Immediately, they received their sight. They followed him. And true discipleship is to follow him now.

[1 : 19] To submit to his control, to his authority now in your life. And that's what true reward really is as well. Having Jesus is the reward.

There's nothing greater than to be near him and to have him as your master. And that, of course, is what the world cannot see. That is what the world will not see.

Unless Jesus opens your eyes. The Pharisees couldn't see it. Their hearts were hard and impenetrable. As indeed, many very religious hearts can be.

And many others, like the rich young man in chapter 20, can't see it either. Because they're wedded to wealth, to possessions, to this world. Even the disciples can't seem to grasp it properly yet.

Their eyes are still on rewards and power. Thinking in such worldly terms. But the blind beggars, well, they can see.

[2 : 24] It's great, isn't it? Who says the Bible doesn't have a sense of humor? And here in chapter 21, this same theme of blindness and sight continues.

And things are coming to a climax. Because Matthew is very clear in this chapter that there is blindness of two kinds. There is blindness, like that of the disciples and the followers, that is still confused.

But it wants to see. It wants to understand. But there is also a blindness that is more sinister. There are those who cannot see. But even when light shines plainly to make them see, they refuse that light.

They will not see. They're determined to remain blind to Jesus. Even when his identity is made as plain as the nose on your face.

And that's what this chapter is all about. It's about the light that shines absolutely plainly, revealing without question who Jesus Christ is.

[3 : 38] And the reaction that that brings in the hearts of the men and women of Israel. It's a chapter that shows forth for us with absolute clarity the truth of what Jesus said back in chapter 13, verse 13.

Seeing, they do not see. Seeing, they do not see. And hearing, they do not hear, nor do they understand. For this people's hearts have grown dull. Because the truth is that some people, even when they're granted all the light in the world, all the evidence imaginable about Jesus' identity, some people choose, nevertheless, to remain blind.

They choose not to see who he is and why he's come. The question is why? The answer is, it's all about authority.

Because to see who Jesus really is means to recognize his authority. His unique lordship and rule over the whole world of the human heart and over the whole world of human society.

Unique identity for Jesus means a unique authority. An authority that demands complete surrender from man.

[5 : 03] Surrender in the world of organized religion and surrender in the world of personal obedience. And of course, that's the problem, isn't it?

That's the one thing that autonomous human beings, man in control of his own thinking and behavior and worship and destiny, the one thing he will never do.

The most basic of the instincts of the human heart is summed up by the slogan that you still see all over the murals of Northern Ireland. No surrender.

No surrender to any other god than the cherished god of our own autonomy, our own free choice, our own self-determination. And certainly, no surrender to the unique claim of Jesus Christ.

And human nature has not changed in 2,000 years. The issue then, as today, is still that scandalous challenge of a unique authority.

[6 : 15] And that's what this chapter is all about. Let's look at it under three headings. First of all, Revelation and Reckoning. The first 16 verses are all about the powerful revelation of the unique lordship of Jesus as God's Messiah, as his King.

And what Matthew is saying is that this whole episode is the climax of a ministry that has from the very beginning proclaimed powerfully to all Israel, Behold your King.

This is he of whom all the prophets have spoken from the beginning. All of Jesus' ministry throughout Israel has given incontrovertible evidence of his identity and therefore of his authority.

Verse 1 marks the end of Jesus' travelling public ministry. He has arrived at his destination, Jerusalem, to complete his work. In the past, we've seen that he's often been low-key.

He's told others to be low-key also, but now it's very different. It's a public proclamation to the city of Jerusalem. J.C. Ryle says this, It was not fitting that the Lamb of God should come to be slain at Calvary privately and silently.

[7 : 34] It was right that every eye should be on the victim. And you'll remember the apostles later on in the Acts of the Apostles in their preaching proclaimed this thing was not done in a corner. And the big point is this, Jesus is issuing a public challenge to faith, to the whole of Israel.

And he's still issuing a public offer of salvation to his chosen people. And it's all the more powerful because here it's acted out so dramatically.

He's acting out a prophetic fulfillment in the full glare of the whole nation. It's rather like today, something that goes on in the spotlight of all the networks, the BBC, CNN, Sky TV and all the rest of it.

This is a public act of revelation on the part of Jesus. And that's a significance you'll see in Matthew's quote in verse 5 of what was spoken to fulfill the words of the prophet.

Do you remember that's one of Matthew's catchphrases? Here he's quoting the prophet Zechariah chapter 9. A chapter all about God's promised king coming on a colt on a foal of a donkey.

[8 : 54] Everybody in that city of Jerusalem knew that prophecy and would recognize it. They would instantly understand its meaning. Remember these people learned off by heart great tracts of the Old Testament scriptures.

Remember this is a people suffering under Roman occupation, longing for God's promised Messiah. These messianic texts would be especially dear to them.

And Matthew is showing Jesus acting out that very prophecy. He shows him taking total control. He's quite deliberate in what he's doing.

Whether in verse 2 we're to understand that Jesus is exercising supernatural sight in sending them to go off for this donkey or whether he's prearranged that the donkey's owner will give it to him.

We don't know and it doesn't matter. The point is Jesus is acting deliberately. so as to clearly identify himself with Zechariah's words.

[9 : 56] And Matthew emphasizes that by his quote in verse 5. It's quoting Zechariah 9 verse 9. I want you to notice some things about this quotation. Particularly emphasizes, doesn't it, the humility of this king.

Behold, your king is coming humble and mounted on a donkey. He's not denying Jesus' kingship. In fact, he's rather emphasizing it.

He's speaking about its nature. Here's a king who comes not on a war charger but who comes triumphant as one who has already conquered, who's offering peace and mercy.

And yet, in order to offer that peace and mercy, he comes as a servant king. He's humble. Same word as Jesus says in Matthew chapter 11 where he says, come to me, I am meek, gentle, humble.

Reminds us of Isaiah's humble servant of God in Isaiah 42. Matthew again has quoted that of Jesus back in chapter 11. A bruised reed he will not break till he brings justice.

[11 : 07] And in his name will the Gentiles hope. He's a servant king. He's come to bring peace and salvation. If we notice the context of the quote in Zechariah, we find that it's all about salvation.

It's interesting, Matthew doesn't quote the whole thing. He misses out various pieces, I think, because he wants us to focus particularly on the donkey and what Jesus is acting out. But everybody knew that whole prophecy.

Everybody would make the connection. Let me read it to you from Zechariah. Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he, humble, mounted on a donkey.

He goes on, he shall rule from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth. Do you see? It's a quote all about salvation to the ends of the earth. But then he goes on further, as for you also, that's Israel he's talking to, because of the blood of my covenant with you I will set your prisoners free.

Do you see? This king will be a savior for the world but he comes first to Israel, to his covenant people. He's Israel's Messiah first.

[12 : 25] But the question is will she receive her Messiah? Another interesting thing about this quote is that in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9 it begins Rejoice greatly O daughter of Zion behold your king is coming to you.

But here it's different do you see? Say to the daughter of Zion Don't worry Matthew hasn't made a mistake hasn't got his quotation wrong he's lifted a line from another prophecy from Isaiah chapter 62 verse 11 it begins like this Say to the daughter of Zion Behold your salvation comes behold his reward is with him his recompense before him You see Matthew in replacing the word rejoice with say or proclaim he's emphasizing that this is a challenge to Israel Say to Israel proclaim here comes the Messiah God's king here comes the savior of the world here comes your salvation and the world's but he's coming first to you he's bearing salvation he's bearing reward what are you going to do?

how will you respond to this powerful incontrovertible revelation of the unique kingly identity of Jesus of Nazareth and that's the issue you see because with all revelation comes a reckoning every revelation of God to man is for a purpose it provokes a pointed reckoning with the hearts of men and women with churches with whole nations and here is Jerusalem being confronted with the unique identity of the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore being forced into a reckoning with the unique authority of the Lord Jesus Christ that aspect is especially clear in the second acted prophecy that we see in this chapter in verses 12 to 14 Jesus' demonstration in the temple the unmistakable revelation of Jesus' identity throughout his ministry has been proclaiming again and again this is the day of the Lord the kingdom has come the day of the Lord is upon you the great day that all the prophets spoke about more specifically

Jesus has several times alluded to the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi and of the fact that John the Baptist in part fulfilled Malachi's words do you remember in chapter 11 I will send my messenger before you who will prepare the way Malachi had said that that would happen to prepare the way before the great and awesome day of the Lord that the prophet Elijah would come and in chapter 17 Jesus says the prophet Elijah has come in the person of John the Baptist and what did Malachi say would happen after the preparatory one came Malachi chapter 3 verse 1 then the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple the messenger of the covenant whom you delight in he is coming but of course he goes on to say you'll have a terrible shock when he comes he comes as a refiner's fire he comes to cleanse and to purge and to purify

God says I will come near to you in judgment and who will be left standing when he appears because the day of the Lord says the prophet is a day of salvation and of judgment and it's plain as a pike staff to all of us let alone the people in Jerusalem of Jesus that that's exactly what Jesus is acting out here in this symbolic action in the temple his coming means a cleansing fire who shall stand when he appears the scriptures are full of prophecies about the latter days about the day of the Lord about God's salvation being displayed in a cleansing and a renewal and a purging of the religion of his people and of their temple just read the last eight chapters of Ezekiel read the prophecy of Zechariah the very last verse of the prophecy of Zechariah says no longer will there be a trader in the house of God and so here he is the Lord of the temple he doesn't ask permission from the priests he claims the temple as his home he quotes Isaiah 56 and says my house shall be called a house of prayer no longer will it be corrupted and defiled no longer can it be a den of robbers because at last the day of the Lord has come a day of salvation yes but a day of judgment a final judgment the day long warned about by the prophets all down the ages the day warned about very trenchantly by the last great prophet by John the Baptist the one who came as the Elijah before that great and awesome day do you remember what that Elijah was to do just let me read to you from Malachi chapter 4 behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction that Elijah he'll turn hearts he'll cause people to repent or else the whole land of Israel will be utterly rejected so the question is what was it going to be

[18 : 39] John had come and called to repentance what response had there been to his preaching because now the day of reckoning had come now the Lord himself had come to the temple what response that brings us to the second heading rebellion and rejection because the truth is that for the most part Israel as a whole had not repented rather just as all down her history she had responded with a perverse rebellion and a refusal to submit to the authority of God's word to her oh they loved God's temple they loved its show its ceremony its comforting presence but their hearts their hearts were far from God they totally ignored his authority over their lives they totally profaned God's temple they turned it into a den of robbers Jesus said it was an empty sham religion the kind of religion that loves the church and its architecture and its choirs but has absolutely no interest whatsoever in the word of God and the temple state simply reflected the state of the lives of the people that phrase a den of robbers comes from

Jeremiah's famous temple sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7 and 8 as God's prophet centuries before he stood in the courts of the temple and spoke for God change your ways says the Lord and I will let you dwell in this place amend your deeds don't think empty words will save you they had a mantra the temple of the Lord this is the temple of the Lord this is the temple of the Lord like using God as a lucky charm repeating the name of Jesus again and again or wearing crucifixes or St. Christopher's or pious platitudes about how you love the Kirk and God says that's no use listen to how God speaks through Jeremiah in Jeremiah chapter 7 verse 8 behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail will you steal murder commit adultery swear falsely make offerings to Baal and go after other gods that you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name and say we are delivered only to go on doing all these abominations has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes behold I myself have seen it declares the Lord you need to repent

Jeremiah goes on in the next chapter to say no one repents the priests and the prophets collaborate to say peace peace but there's no peace says God the truth is says the Lord in Jeremiah 8 verse 13 it's all empathy there's no fruit in your lives when I would gather them there are no grapes on the vine no figs on the tree even the leaves are withered even what I gave them has passed away from them that was Israel's constant history of people paying lip service to God guilt edged temple but hiding a barren and empty devotion and now Jesus has come and it's too late or it's almost too late John the Elijah had come but had hearts been turned well is there a welcome for the Lord Jesus the Messiah when he comes the answer is that even with incontrovertible evidence of Jesus identity in ways no Israelite could possibly fail to recognize even faced with a face to face reckoning with Christ as we see in this chapter their reaction is still one of rebellion and rejection verse 10 tells us that the city is all stirred up just as remember it was all stirred up in chapter 2 the news of the birth of Jesus verse 11 makes clear that the crowds for the most part were still totally blind the pilgrim band in verse 9 that are going before and behind Jesus they're all shouting out at the top of their voices he is the Messiah the son of David they're quoting

Psalm 118 Hosanna Lord save us it's words spoken to God behold blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord they're pointing to Jesus and they're saying this is him this is the one of whom all the prophets spoke but in verse 11 the crowds just say oh it's Jesus a Nazarene prophet he's not from Judah he's not of the royal tribe of the house of David he's not from Bethlehem he's not the Messiah he's just a Nazarene you see they're rejecting him without even bothering to look into the evidence they're not even bothering to get their mistaken facts right find out who he really is isn't it staggering but of course it's no different today is it the vast majority of the crowds of people in Glasgow reject Jesus Christ without even bothering to investigate the evidence without even bothering to come to a church to hear who Jesus is without even bothering to sit through a few weeks of a course like Christianity explored it's just Jesus the Nazarene but in verse 15 there's worse than just ignorance there's indignance when the priests and the scribes see all the wonderful things he did the undeniable evidence the incontrovertible proof of who he is they don't bite down and worship him they're indignant they're fuming they're outraged do you hear what they're saying yes says Jesus can't you can't you see that they're doing what Psalm 8 said they would do chanting the praise of the majestic

Lord whose glory is above the heavens these infants can see it and yet you teachers and religious people you're blind why this blindness the answer is because to see the wonderful things he does and to recognize who he is means that you must submit to his authority he's the Lord you see nothing has changed that's still the scandal of the gospel of the cross of Jesus his unique identity demands a unique authority and that means a submission a surrender to his authoritative control in your life to his authoritative word and command directing all your thinking all your actions all your priorities all your devotion and that's what we can't stand we don't like having somebody ruling our lives telling us our business telling us what to think telling us how to behave isn't that right faced with that kind of demand we say no surrender and that's displayed isn't it so clearly in verses 23 to 32 in Jesus encounter with the priests and the elders the officials of Israel's religion they can't stomach the challenge of his clear and obvious authority so they challenge him verse 23 by what authority are you doing this and who gave you it how dare you claim to tell us what to do do you know who we are we're the religious establishment you can't push us around and again really nothing has changed it's just the same today so often in the church establishment isn't it we're the church we decide how to interpret

[27 : 31] God's word that we rule over God's word and we therefore have the authority to change it and omit what we don't like what no longer fits it's really just the same as the secularists who reject Jesus altogether how dare you tell us what to believe and how to behave Jesus isn't unique he's just one of many he's just a Nazarene who gave you the authority over us Jesus it's just the same and Jesus responds well he's not evading the question he's refusing to be relativized in that way he's not in the dock no he's going to ask the questions they're the ones who are in the dock the dock of God so he turns the table on he puts them on the spot let's get to the heart of the issue says Jesus and he does it in these two questions do you see first one in verse 24 I'm asking the questions here's the first what about

John was he true or was he just a phony it's a brilliant question you see they're caught they knew that they'd rejected John they admit it verse 25 they hadn't believed him but of course they're pathetic politicians they're concerned with their public image they can't say he's real otherwise they'd be admitting that Jesus must be who John said he was but they can't say he's a phony because they'll lose all their public respect so they say we don't know it's pathetic but you see they're totally exposed aren't they as ever agnosticism is just a cloak for unbelief the truth is they're plain unbelievers they've admitted it in verse 25 Jesus says it in verse 32 because they refuse the implications to have to bow the knee to the authority of Jesus the issue is not where Jesus authority came from the issue is will you submit to it and their answer is no surrender and so

Jesus says well I'm silent then because the truth is seeing you will not see and hearing you will not hear you've made your choice to reject to refuse but he asks another question to them to finally nail them or rather in fact they're hoist on their own petard aren't they what do you think he says verse 28 isn't that brilliant what do you think he tells them a story about religious style but lacking any substance and the punchline verse 31 which of the two actually did the will of the father and even they can't get that one wrong you can't say we don't know to that without looking like utter fools and Jesus rams home the rapier thrust to the heart doesn't he it's about you you're exposed publicly you talk about God's temple and his kingdom but you see nothing you're blind and you're blind because you're rebels because you're enemies you will not obey because you do not believe because you're apostate you said it yourselves you rejected

John and his message but those who are revolting sinners in your sight the tax collectors the whores they received John they listened to his message and they did respond and they did repent and they are entering the kingdom before you before you religious people and even now he says in verse 32 when you've seen with your own eyes everything that John said would happen the promise being fulfilled right in front of you even now you still won't change you still won't repent you still won't believe you're hardened and bitter you're relentlessly perverse in your unbelief and they were and it was it was fatal unbelief wasn't it it was that that led ultimately to the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus and such unbelief such willing perverse blindness about

Jesus unique identity because of a perverse refusal of his authority must inevitably ultimately lead to a reciprocal rejection of such unbelief by Jesus such rejection of Jesus is inexcusable and therefore ultimately his judgment must be unavoidable and that's the awful message of verses 18 to 22 the parable of the fig tree the acted parable of this fig tree verse 17 says that when Jesus was faced with this intransigent indignance of his enemies he left them and he went out from the city these are terrible words these are fearful words back in chapter 16 when Jesus was rejected and called this generation an adulterous generation we read that Jesus left them and departed and verses 18 to 22 about the fig tree is just a picture of what that means what it means to be abandoned by Jesus

[33 : 13] Christ Bethphage was a fig growing area the word means house of figs Mark's gospel tells us it wasn't yet the time for figs it was only the springtime and of course the main crop of figs comes in the autumn but some winter figs do reappear after the main crop and if they survive the winter and remain on the trees often they begin to ripen in the spring as the leaves begin to grow in the sunshine they're thought of as a treat Isaiah 28 verse 4 speaks about the delight of the first ripe figs before summer so maybe Jesus saw this one tree perhaps in leaf ahead of the others and he was hoping to find some of these first ripe figs but no there was nothing at all a tree which promised much but only disappointed just like Israel so often in the prophets likened to a fig tree tended by God but as we read in Jeremiah when God sought out the fruit there was nothing even the leaves were withered

Israel was a tree privileged tended by God set apart to be the very first fruits of God's salvation before ever any of the Gentile nations saw it but instead of fruit she was barren and fruitless despite all the blessings of God down the ages his word to her despite all the warnings of God down the ages his words of the prophets calling them to repent despite the son of God himself in the midst giving incontrovertible revelation as to who he was what does he find not a house of prayer but a den of robbers not a passion for God but empty religiosity not fruit just spurious leaves no real faith just just unbelief and therefore for

Jesus final judgment is tragically inevitable there's simply no other possibility Jesus wept over Jerusalem he longed to gather them as a hen gathers her chicks but nevertheless the hand of God's judgment must fall because unbelief means rebellion against God and his authority and God's kingdom spells an end to all such rebellion it's a very serious business you see the great question posed by the revelation of Christ's lordship is this is there real faith or is it just unbelief and that answer is revealed by the question is there fruit or are there just leaves that's Jesus point in verses 21 and 22 the disciples miss the symbolism that's the whole point of the miracle but they're they're taken up with the power and how it happened they're still so worldly and they're thinking and Jesus ignores that as if to say never mind how you should be asking why this fig tree is withering see the issue see that it's all about whether there's real faith or whether there's unbelief if there's real faith he's saying in verse 20 it'll be visible there'll be great things being done for

God like mountains moving like prayers being answered there'll be fruit wherever there's real faith if Israel had had real faith if Israel had greeted her Messiah with faith the whole world would have been rocked get the point says Jesus it all hangs on faith real faith moves mountains real faith causes earthquakes real faith changes everything that's true isn't it where there's a revelation of Jesus identity and his lordship where there's a great reckoning with his authority then there's total upheaval isn't there because there's surrender to Jesus authority you see it in the lives of individual men and women when Jesus comes to cleanse and renew and take his rightful place in his own temple of our lives to make us holy to make us radically new in our discipleship and following him isn't that true where there's real faith where there's real surrender to Jesus he turns our lives upside down but still today there are those who when they're faced with the revelation about

Jesus are determined to remain ignorant without even looking into the evidence he's just a Nazarene there's others who see and who know that the evidence is incontrovertible they're gripped by it they can't deny it and yet they refuse to believe because they refuse to surrender may take refuge in agnosticism saying I don't know like the priests but don't be fooled Jesus has exposed that if that's you he knows what you mean is I do know but I don't like it and I won't have it no surrender that's what it really means friends that's somebody here this morning remember the fig tree rebel against the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ persist in rejecting his unique authority and you will in the end destroy yourself there's no place in the kingdom of God for unbelief it's a word of stark warning to people today just as it was to those priests that Jesus spoke to them but I can't end without saying this it is a word of warning but it's also a word of wonderful encouragement and invitation it's also a chapter about repentance and rejoicing despite the rejection of

[39 : 44] Jesus by the majority and the establishment and the culture just like today by all the great ones who think themselves first in the world's eyes there's wonderful wonderful encouragement here for all who will welcome Jesus who will come to him in prayerful repentance who will as verse 22 says who will ask in prayer with faith they ask and they receive who are they well not many of the great ones of the world sadly but verse 9 tells us they're the ones who go before and behind Jesus who want to be near him for whom his authority and control in their lives holds no threat at all the healed blind beggars the infants brought by their parents verse 14 the blind the lame the children singing all the ones who will come near to Jesus just to be near him to sing Hosanna Lord save us to sing blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord which just means Jesus we love you we want you those who once were very very far away and very blind whores prostitutes tax collectors all those whose lives had been in a total mess but when

Jesus comes to them and says I want to cleanse the temple of your life and I want to make you someone that I can be at home with and they say yes Hosanna Lord save me yes Lord I surrender to you that's who they are and Jesus says all such who receive him who repent they enter his kingdom now it's a present rejoicing as well as an eternal salvation friends don't be scandalized by Jesus unique authority don't say no surrender rather rejoice in the repentance that he offers you rejoice to be among the little ones under his total rule for that is the way and that is the only way to fruitfulness in his kingdom coming to

Jesus in faith and asking him be Lord in my life I do surrender and that prayer offered in faith is always always answered whatever you ask in prayer you will receive says Jesus if you have faith let's pray heavenly father we thank you that you have not left us in the dark but that you have proclaimed publicly to the whole world the glory and honor and the authority of your son the Lord Jesus Christ you have made him to be the judge of all the earth and the savior of all who will greet him with a cry

Hosanna Lord save us grant that we should never be those who refuse to bow the knee to him but rather may we with rejoicing join those who go into your kingdom and who rejoice in the joy of being near you now and the assurance of being with you forever we ask it in Jesus name amen