

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 21:23-32

Year A - Proper 21, Text: Matthew 21:23-27 (28-32)
Year A - Proper 21, Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Matthew 21:23–27 describes the first of five controversies (21:23–22:46) between Jesus and the religious leaders of Judaism (primarily, the Sadducees of the Sanhedrin), presented in the form of questions and answers.

Verse 21:23: The religious leaders ask, “By what authority are you doing these things...” Most likely, the reference to “these things” pertains to Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his attack on the Temple’s “salvation marketing system” in overturning the tables of the money-changers, and His healing actions in the temple. All of this is described in the previous verses of chapter 21.

Verses 21:24–25a: Speaking of “by what authority” ... Jesus responds to their question with a counter-question — a practice that was common in rabbinical debate. His question relates to the source of John the Baptist’s authority. Was John’s authority of divine or human origin?

Verses 21:25b–27: The religious leaders know full well that Jesus has cornered them! If they respond that John’s authority was of heavenly origin, Jesus will say to them, “Then why did you not believe him?” If they say that John’s authority was of human origin, the crowds will respond in anger, for they regarded John as a prophet.

So they show themselves incapable of speaking with authority, with the result that Jesus refuses to discuss with them the source of His own authority.

Verses 21:28–30: The parable that Jesus tells in these verses could point merely to the difference between saying and doing — a theme of great importance in Matthew’s Gospel. However, it is given a more specific application by the addition of verses 31–32.

The two sons represent, respectively, the religious leaders and the religious outcasts who followed John’s call to repentance. The religious leaders condemn themselves by the answer they give to Jesus’ question.

Verse 21:31: bearing in mind that “the Kingdom of God” is a reference to the present reality of faith in a person’s life, Jesus states, “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” Most likely the meaning is, “They enter. You do not!” It was sinners who believed John’s message of repentance and forgiveness, but the authorities didn’t believe they were in need of such a transformation.

Verse 21:32: “John came to you in the way of righteousness...” Several interpretations are possible: John himself was righteous, that he taught righteousness to others, or that he played an important role in relation to God’s plan of salvation pointing the way to Jesus (in whom our true righteousness is found).

On the Blind and the Lame

Back in Matthew 19:1, we read of Jesus leaving Galilee, and then of him standing on the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem in 21:1. After entering the Temple, Jesus attacks its “sin management system” or “salvation marketing system” (21:12–13). Immediately after doing that, Jesus heals the blind and the lame (21:14). (Note: After capturing Jerusalem, David had the blind and the lame put to death; see 2 Samuel 5:6–10.)

With regard to the blind and lame: The Qumran community (Essenes), where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, believed that when the Messiah came, He would host a banquet. Who would participate? The Essenes taught that no Gentile and no Samaritan would be present — only the Jews, who kept the Jewish laws in the very precise, narrow fashion that these Essenes prescribed, would eat at this table. Furthermore, no one with any physical imperfection or impediment would be welcome. The text reads:

Then the Messiah of Israel shall come and the chiefs of the clan of Israel shall sit before him,

each in the order of his dignity, according to his place in their camp and marches And no one is going to be allowed in who is smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish. (Messianic Rule, 1QSA, 2:11–22, tr. G. Vermes)

The radical Jesus heals those whom the Essenes, and others within Judaism, despise!