

Jesus: Prophet & Provocateur (21:33-46)

If you've got a bible, turn with me once again to **Matthew 21**. Something you should know about me is that **I love stand-up comedy**. A lot of people have *TV shows* they like to watch over and over again—I have *comedy specials* I watch over and over again. And some people upon knowing that will ask, “well wait—don't the jokes get less *funny* when you already know the punchlines?” And the answer, at least for me, is *not even a little bit*. In fact, sometimes I think that when it's *good* comedy, the jokes get better each and every time you watch.

And part of it is that **I actually enjoy the craft** of stand-up comedy. I think *comedy*, at its best, can actually **do way more** than make people laugh. I actually think it can accomplish something that almost can't be accomplished any other way: I think it can actually *challenge* people's assumptions about the world. Sometimes, if you can get people *laughing*, you can also get them *thinking*. **So think of comedians today like Bo Burnham or Sacha Baron Cohen or Dave Chappelle. People like Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert. Or even back in the day, comedians like George Carlin and Richard Pryor.**

In no way am I endorsing everything those comedians say—far from it. But **I do think they possess a skill that is increasingly rare in our day and age. Comedians like that don't just entertain us; they sometimes make us think.** They make us *laugh*, but they also sometimes poke and prod at our sensibilities. They *provoke* people. They bring up cultural hot topics that, in any other setting, would have people at each other's *throats*. But in the context of comedy, they use humor to lower people's defenses, and at least occasionally, *challenge* them to think differently about the world.

I have **this theory** (which I'm pretty sure I heard from someone else), that **comedians are one of the last public examples we have of prophetic speech.** And I don't mean “prophetic” as in they can tell the future. Although that would be exciting. **I just mean that they can offer incisive, piercing truth into our culture at large.** They cut through the noise and expose *inconsistencies* in the way we think. And sometimes, even make us *laugh* at those inconsistencies. **Comedy is one of the last settings remaining where we will sit captive and let the person on stage take aim at us a little bit.**

And **because of that, it's no surprise** that these types of comedians *do occasionally find themselves in hot water* with the general public. **Dave Chappelle has triggered protests with his stand-up. Sacha Baron Cohen has been sued multiple times. George Carlin, back in the day, was notorious for offending pretty much every sociopolitical group there was.** Prophetic, provocative voices like this *rarely* go unscathed, especially when they're on Netflix. **They, at times, are just as likely to provoke anger in people as they are**

to provoke *thought*. That's part of the *risk* of prophetic speech: most people don't *like* to have their assumptions about the world *challenged*. Most of us would rather *keep* believing what we believe and think we're completely right in believing it. But the best prophetic voices aren't *content* to let that happen.

And **I bring that up because** I think it gives us a little bit of a modern framework for one part of how Jesus saw *himself*. Jesus too was a fan of *prophetic* and *provocative* speech. He wasn't a *comedian* (although he did sometimes use humor). But he did love to *challenge* people's preconceived notions about the world. **He found clever ways to get in past people's defenses and make them think critically about their most deeply held assumptions.** And sometimes, he caused them to *reconsider* those assumptions. ~~And then other times, he just made people really, really angry.~~

But one of the ways Jesus regularly accomplished this was through **parables**: short, illustrative stories he told about the kingdom of God. At one point, earlier in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus actually explains how his parables provoke *some* people to think and grow and learn, while they make *other* people more and more frustrated, and set in their ways.¹ **So while Jesus' methods were different from that of comedians, his intentions were actually very similar: to poke and prod at people, and challenge them to think differently about their world.** And I think we can learn a lot from how Jesus does that.

So this morning, we're going to look at **one such parable** from Jesus, in **Matthew 21**. If you missed last week, Jesus is in the middle of an interaction with the religious leaders of his day who, to say the least, are not his biggest fans. And in the middle of *that interaction*, he tells them *this* parable. Pick it up with me in v. 33:

33 "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

So **the arrangement Jesus describes** here was actually pretty *common* in the ancient world. A wealthy landowner fronts all the investment and labor to establish a vineyard, but then rents its daily *operation* out to some farmers. The *farmers* would pay for the right to run and operate the vineyard. But since it still *belonged* to the owner, he had the right to come and collect fruit from it. All a very *normal*, expected situation.

¹ See Matthew 13:10-17

It's *also* worth knowing that **this parable isn't completely original to Jesus**. He has actually borrowed many of the details from Isaiah chapter 5,² in the Old Testament. *And there, we actually get a sort of glossary for understanding what various things in the parable represent. In Isaiah 5, we're told that God himself is the landowner, and the nation of Israel as a whole (God's people) are the vineyard. Which would imply that the tenants/farmers in Jesus' story are the religious leaders of Israel—those tasked with caring for and tending to the health of the vineyard. In other words, the very people Jesus is telling this parable to.* Everything make sense so far?

So **at this point in the story**, the owner (God) has sent some of his servants to collect the fruit from his vineyard (from the tenants). At which point *this* happens, v. 35:

35 "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.

So we don't know why exactly, but these farmers react *violently* to the servants the owner sends. They beat them up, *murder* them, *stone* them. // *So this part of the story we kind of have to piece together from biblical history, but it's fairly clear that these servants, sent by the owner, represent the Prophets. That is, the men and women throughout the Old Testament sent by God to point out Israel's sin and call them to repentance.* But almost *always*, when God *sent* these Prophets, they did not get a warm reception. They were despised, mistreated, even sometimes beaten and killed by people that didn't like what they had to say.³ People, *shockingly*, did not want to *hear* that they were in the wrong and needed to repent. So they would choose *violence* against the Prophets instead of listening to them. Much like what happens to the *servants* in this passage.

But what's *surprising* in the parable is that **the owner doesn't give up** on the farmers after they *respond* this way. He actually makes a *second* attempt—v. 36:

36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.

Same strategy by the owner, **same response** by the tenants. They beat them up, murder them, commit violence against them. So *next*, the owner is going to try a **slightly different strategy**, v. 37:

² Specifically see v. 1-7

³ For example, see Jeremiah 20:1-2, 1 Kings 18:4, 2 Chronicles 24:20-21, and cf. Matthew 23:30-32.

37 Last of all, he (the owner) sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

Now, if the landowner is God, who would you guess that the son represents in this story? Jesus. ~~Yep, didn't have to do much work at all to figure that one out.~~ Plus, that's just always a safe answer when a question gets asked in church. Say "Jesus" and in some roundabout way, you're probably right. So Jesus, at this point in the parable, fast-forwards his story to **present day**. Right now, in this *moment*, God has sent his own son to the nation of Israel. Specifically to the religious *leaders* of Israel: the chief priests, elders, and teachers of the law. Surely, the owner says, *if I send them my son, they will respect him*.

Now, to those just listening to the story on its own terms, this would have been a very **bizarre response** by the landowner. What kind of landowner would send his own son to a group of farmers who have just *beaten* and *killed* servant after servant after servant? At this point in the story, the landowner doesn't just come off as *patient* and *forgiving*; he honestly comes off as a little *foolish* and *naive*. Surely by now he sees that these farmers are corrupt to their core; that he can't trust them. But that, evidently, doesn't stop him. He now sends them his son.

But, you see, there's a reason for his persistence. The vineyard is *his* vineyard. Remember: he planted it, he established it, he made it what it is. And he's not willing to bail on the vineyard just because of a few wicked farmers. Because who is the vineyard in the story again? Israel. God's people. God does not bail on his people. So the owner persists. He tries time and time again, and his efforts are opposed by the tenants, time and time again. Jesus is recounting the story of Israel in parable form: God sent his Prophets, repeatedly, to call people to repentance, and repeatedly, they will not listen.

So now, in this moment, Jesus says, this whole story is coming to a dramatic conclusion. God has persisted and shown so much patience that he has now sent his son, Jesus, to the leaders of Israel, to point out their sin and call them to repentance.⁴ ...And how do they respond to him doing that? Well, pretty similarly to the tenants in the story. Verse 38:

38 "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' **39** So they took him (the son) and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴ See Matthew 21:12-17

It's **difficult to even understand the *rationale*** here by the tenants: "let's kill him and take his inheritance"? I mean it's not like the son was carrying his inheritance *with* him. **You can't just *kill someone and take their inheritance, especially if you're not even related to the person giving the inheritance.*** And even if the "inheritance" they mention was the *vineyard itself*, that wouldn't make sense *either*. **What kind of landowner is going to give a *vineyard* to a group of tenants that just murdered his son?** ~~As if the owner is gonna be like, "well, since I don't have a son anymore, I guess I'll give everything I have to his assassins."~~ None of their logic here makes *any* sense at all, right? But then again, that's kind of the *point*: their actions *are* completely illogical. **They are driven by self-interest, self-righteousness, greed, and *contempt*. All of that will make people do a lot of illogical things.**

But in their blind contempt for the owner of the vineyard, they *murder* his son. **Just like these religious leaders are already plotting to do to Jesus.** Verse 40:

40 "Therefore, Jesus says, **when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"**

So **at this point** in the passage, Jesus **finishes his parable** and posits a question to his *audience*. Which, if we remember our context from earlier, who is his audience? *The religious leaders. The chief priests, elders, and teachers of the law.* Who are *they* represented by in the story? *The tenants (farmers), who end up killing the owner's son.* But it would appear that these religious leaders aren't *tracking* with the *meaning* of the story Jesus told, quite like we are. I say that because of how strongly they answer Jesus' question, *what will happen to the tenants?* Verse 41:

41 "He will bring those *wretches* to a *wretched* end," they replied, "and they add, he will rent the vineyard to *other* tenants, who *will* give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

So **by telling the story the way he does,** **Jesus actually prompts the religious leaders to pronounce their own sentence of condemnation.** The *word* they use in their answer, ("*wretches*"), was an incredibly strong word. It was used to describe people who were so evil and morally depraved as to be entirely *worthless* altogether. Someone who is better off *dead* than alive, because of how morally *bankrupt* they have become. **That is the word the religious leaders use to describe the characters in the story that—unbeknownst to them—represent *themselves*.** They apparently don't *realize* that yet...but **Jesus is about to connect all the dots** for them. Verse 42:

42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never **read in the Scriptures** (as we mentioned a couple weeks ago: a *wildly* offensive thing to say to a group of people who have devoted their lives to studying and interpreting the Scriptures: “have you *never read in the Scriptures,*” Jesus says...); “***The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?***”

Jesus quotes a *psalm*⁵ that the religious leaders would’ve been very familiar with. It was a psalm about a guy who was being hunted down by corrupt leaders who wanted to kill him for no apparent reason. Seems somewhat relevant to Jesus’ situation at this point in Matthew, doesn’t it? It’s *also* a psalm about how God was going to *replace* the current *corrupt* leaders with a new *appointed* leader (again, pretty relevant). **Jesus reminds the religious leaders in front of him about *that passage*, and says to them, essentially, “that’s a passage about you. You are now the ones on the wrong side of what God is doing.”** Verse 43:

43 “***Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.***”

So Jesus is speaking with *plenty of clarity* now. *Game over*, Jesus tells them. *You have rejected every patient attempt the Father has made to call you to repentance. You’ve rejected every call to repent of your sin and injustice and corruption. You have rejected and silenced all the people he sent to you. So now, the kingdom you think you are in charge of is being taken from you and given to people you think don’t have any clue about it.* It’s all over for these religious leaders. And then he calls back to the *cornerstone* metaphor he used a moment ago, v. 44:

44 ***Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.***”

Jesus says *anyone who rejects him*, God’s *cornerstone*, will be crushed by it. **There is only one name, one avenue, one way for people to enter the kingdom of God: the cornerstone, Jesus.** And if you have decided to reject *him*, there’s nothing else that can be done. You have pronounced your own judgment, you’ve signed your own death warrant. It’s over. God the Father is the most patient, enduring, long-suffering landowner you’ll ever meet. Sometimes, to the point of *absurdity*. He will try, time and time again, to get you to see what you need to see. *Own what you need to own. But there will come a day when he says, “that’s it. I’m done.”* Let’s close it out, v. 45:

⁵ Psalm 118, specifically v. 22

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' **parables**, they **knew** he was talking about **them**. So now they're tracking. And no surprises here in their response: they do precisely what Jesus' parable *predicted* they would do: try to eliminate Jesus: v. 46... **46** They **looked for a way to arrest him**, but they were **afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet**.

Jesus **has now described** what these religious leaders have *done*, he has *predicted* what they *will* do, and soon will be proven *correct* in his prediction. Not only have they *rejected* the cornerstone, they are now looking for a way to *eliminate* him from the picture entirely. But they hesitate to do it, because they're nervous about how the crowds will respond if they do.

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Alright, that's our passage. So **what can you and I glean** from a story like this? Honestly, probably a *lot* of things. But I've got one big idea I want to set before you this morning. I think this is a passage, among other things, about **the power of provocative, prophetic, speech**. We talked as we began this morning about *comedy as provocative speech*. And **how that kind of speech, as the word suggests, provokes people**. It pokes and prods at people's assumptions about the world, and about *themselves*. It challenges the listener to *think* differently about things.

Now, **people may respond positively** to that (by *reconsidering* their assumptions), or *negatively* (by *dismissing* or *attacking* the person speaking). But **regardless of what the response is, the nature of provocative speech is that it does prompt the listener to respond, somehow**. It is very difficult to respond *neutrally* to someone who speaks like this. That's why provocative speech is so powerful. **And that is very much how Jesus speaks** in this passage, and honestly, an awful *lot* of the time during his ministry. He *provokes* people. He pokes, he prods. He ruffles feathers. That's what he does. / And **some people respond to that by leaving everything to follow him. While other people respond by wanting to arrest and kill him. But not many people respond neutrally to it all**. His words don't really allow much room for that.

So **here's where this gets practical** for us. I think, **that as followers of Jesus in the 21st century, we need to recapture the use of provocative, prophetic speech**. We need to *recover* a willingness to *provoke* people to action, in healthy sorts of ways. Now for *most* of us, that's not going to happen on a stage or in a Netflix special. **For most of us, it's going to be in everyday relationships with other followers of Jesus**. Remember who *Jesus* was speaking to in the passage: those who *claimed* to know God. He was speaking to those who *claimed* a knowledge and an *understanding* of the Scriptures. People who called themselves *God's people*. **Those were the people that, Jesus felt,**

most needed to be *provoked* in their assumptions about the world. And those were the people that Jesus *chose* to provoke, time and time again, during his ministry.

And I would submit to you that **as the community of Jesus, there are times that we too should be doing that with one another.** Hebrews 10:24 puts it like this. We'll have it up on the screen. Speaking to followers of Jesus, it says...

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...

“Spur one another on...” As in **the thing you do to a horse,** where you low-key *stab* them in the side to get them to move. Did you guys know the bible tells us to do *that*, figuratively, to one another? **The Scriptures tell us that there are times where what is needed is for us to spur one another to action.** There are times where we will need to *provoke* other followers of Jesus such that the other person *has* to *respond*, one way or another, to the things that we say.

Now, obviously, **there is a sinful way** to do this...where we are agitating others just for the sake of agitating them. *And there's a way to do it too often,* such that we are *constantly over-aggressive* in our conversations with each other, in a self-righteous sort of way.⁶ But what Hebrews is talking about is a *holy* expression of it. **That we should constantly consider how we might spur one another on—provoke one another—to become more of who God made us to be.** And *if* the language of Jesus *and* Hebrews are any indication, *that* will be at least somewhat *unpleasant* when it happens. **Just ask any horse who has been spurred on.** Being *provoked* to action is sometimes deeply *uncomfortable* when it happens. But it's *also, sometimes, deeply* needed.

So listen: one of the **things I absolutely love about our church** family is that nearly every new person who comes around talks about how *warmly* they are welcomed in, how *encouraging* people are, how *supportive* people in our church are to them. And let me be very clear: **I don't want any of those things to change about our church, ever.** But at the same time, here's what I know about following Jesus. **Just like there are times where we need to be welcomed and encouraged and supported...there are also times where we need to be spurred on. Provoked. Challenged. Confronted. Spoken directly and incisively to. Encouragement is absolutely vital—to be sure. And evidently, according to Hebrews, so is spurring each other on.** So this morning, I want to give us *permission*, from the Scriptures, to at least *occasionally* do that.

⁶ See, for example, the warnings in Galatians 5:13-15.

Let's say, for example, there's a good friend of yours, who follows Jesus, but who is just really, really *harsh* towards their spouse or their kids on a regular basis. Or, let's say there's someone in your *LifeGroup* who has really unhealthy, really *ambiguous* relationships with members of the opposite sex. Or, let's say there's another believer who is making a mess of their life due to greed and materialism, but doesn't see it as an issue. Or any number of other situations like that out there. But let's say **there's another follower of Jesus, that you know fairly well, who is currently letting unhealthy behaviors go unaddressed and unnoticed in their life.** Those are situations that, I would argue, Hebrews is talking about: where we may need to *spur* one another into action.

So with **that type of situation in our minds**, I want to give you **some guardrails** for how you might speak *into* those situations provocatively and prophetically, in a way that is *helpful to the other person*. In a way that embodies the posture of the kingdom and *not* the posture of self-righteousness. If you're brand new to the idea of speaking this way to other followers of Jesus, I pray this gives you some practical guidance on how to get started. If you've been following Jesus for a *while*, hopefully a lot of these are just good reminders to you. But I want to give you **four components of provocative speech** for followers of Jesus. **I made them all start with P because that felt like a thing that a real preacher would do.** You ready? These will be fairly rapid fire so dial in with me for a few minutes. First component...

Preparation

Provocative speech and spurring one another on should be something you *prepare* in advance to do. **Specifically**, it should be something you prepare for by **praying**. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that a follower of Jesus should "talk to God about a brother *more* than they talk to a brother about God." I think that's a fantastic operating principle.

Chances are, if you have not *prayed* about the thing you are engaging or confronting another follower of Jesus on, you're not adequately *prepared* to talk to them about it. Preparation should probably *also* involve seeking wise counsel from someone else who loves Jesus to make sure you're thinking about the situation correctly. In at least those two ways, you want to *prepare* well for these conversations. *Second...*

Precision

The goal in these conversations **is not** to confront every area of the other person's life that you currently see as a problem all at once. ("Here's a bunch of things you're bad at—just thought you should know!") Again, the word for *that* is self-righteousness. And even if it's *not* self-righteousness, it's certainly not *helpful*. When you're engaging someone else on something they need to see, *precision* is key. Tell them the *precise*

thing you're concerned about, a few of the *precise* ways you've seen it show up in their life, and the *precise* reason you are concerned about it. Make what you're referring to *crystal clear*, as best you can. **To put it another way: in these conversations, you want to use a scalpel, not a hatchet.** That's how *good* provocative speech operates: with *precision*. *Third...*

Patience

I want you to **think back to the parable** Jesus told in our passage. The landowner, in the story, was *unbelievably* patient. He sent *one* representative, after another, after another. He didn't send *one* of them, and then say, "well I guess the tenants are just *unrepentant*—heck with 'em then!" Nope. He *persisted*, time and time again—over and over, he called them to repentance. **So can I just ask: are you *patient* with these types of conversations? When someone doesn't respond well to something you bring up: do you go, "okay, seems like they're not ready to hear that yet...I'll try again sometime soon"? Or do you go "well, I kinda sorta brought it up once, and they were just too arrogant to hear it—so I'm done trying!"?** I would encourage you, instead, to be *patient* with these conversations. *Patient* with your initial confrontation, *patient* with the other person's response, and *patient* with their process of repentance. ***Patience is absolutely key when engaging other people on difficult things because we serve a patient God, who is patient with us.*** Make sense? Okay, *lastly*, remember your...

Purpose

If you actually want to be *helpful* towards others in these conversations, you absolutely *must* remember the purpose of the conversation you're having. The purpose *isn't* to prove them *wrong*, or to prove *yourself right*. The purpose *isn't* to make them stop doing something you just happen to find *annoying*. The purpose *isn't* to demonstrate that you are a more mature follower of Jesus than they are, because you spotted something in their life that they were unaware of. **The purpose is to help the other person own their sin and become more like Jesus.**

Think back to the image of "*spurring*" one another on. You're not *spurring* just to *spur*; you're *spurring* so they *move* in a particular direction. The *purpose* is that *all* of us, day by day, would move in the direction of becoming who God made us to be. The *purpose* is that we would be watching out for each other and *helping* one another not be blinded by the *deceitfulness* of sin. And through that healthy confrontation, that each of us would become more and more like Jesus as a result. That we would love the things he loves, pursue the things he pursues, and *embody* the things that he embodies. That's our *purpose* with these conversations.

James 5 says it like this:

*My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back (meaning, by talking to them about it), remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*⁷

I love that passage because it **helps us see the importance** of these types of **conversations**. When we engage in uncomfortable conversations with other followers of Jesus, we are “bringing a *wanderer* back,” and “saving their soul from *death*.” / That language is *also* helpful because it gives us *lenses* into what is happening when we choose *not* to have these conversations. When we see someone we know and love barreling towards *death*—and we choose *not* to say anything about it—that is in essence to not *care* about that person in that moment. It’s to love our own comfort and convenience *more* than we love *them*. **And that posture fights against the very heart of the gospel message.**

I don’t know if you’ve ever thought of it this way. But **the gospel comes to all of us** in the form of *loving confrontation*. That’s what the gospel message *is*. **The gospel tells us that the way we are currently living isn’t working, that we can’t be good enough to earn acceptance from God, and that the only way we can obtain it is to be freely given it by grace.** That is a message of *confrontation* if I’ve ever heard one. But it is *loving confrontation* in that it provides a clear *solution* in and through Jesus. *Jesus* saw *our* wandering, and he brought *us* back. *He* saved *us* from death and covered a multitude of sins.

And **so the best type of confrontation looks and feels like that.** It’s not just “hey you’re doing this wrong.” It’s “here’s why *sin* is bad, here’s why *Jesus* is the solution, and here’s how I’d like to walk alongside you as you discover *all* of that.” When we engage in loving confrontation with each other, we are choosing to *embody* one vital component of the gospel. We are joining *Jesus* in his efforts to make all things new.

Let’s pray, and then I’ve got some immediate application for all of us.

⁷ James 5:19-20

