

THE OVERWHELMING WEIGHT OF GOD, PART 11: BOLDNESS

Matthew 21:1-27 (NASB)

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Shortly after riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to the acclaim of the Jewish crowds shouting Hosanna! Jesus entered the temple and, apparently, began to shout: Hayahh! It is hard for most of us to picture the Lord Jesus taking bold, energetic action to rectify the great wrongs that were taking place in the temple. It was not simply that the holy marble paving stones of the temple were getting covered with animal droppings, or that a place of worship and meditation had been turned into a busy marketplace. We have no reason to think that Jesus had any reason to object to the businesses *per se*.

But they were in the wrong place. And they were being run by collusion with the priests who would only accept the sanctuary shekel for offerings, and who would only accept so-called perfect animals for sacrifice. Jewish people would travel from far away to offer sacrifices and whatever they brought would be rejected. Then officially-approved replacements would be sold to them at outrageously inflated prices, with a likely kickback to the temple. Jesus called it, in a word, robbery.

There were probably two separate occasions where Jesus shouted Hayahh! and disrupted all of these ungodly activities. One is at the beginning of John's gospel and the other three gospels record one at the end. The point was the same each time, and the action of Jesus was about the same. Can you imagine a pastor or any Christian today disrupting the religious world with this much boldness? Can you admit that there is a little voice inside you saying: *He should not have done that. I'll never do that.*

And so the church faces the most powerful forces raised up against the knowledge of God with pea shooters. We confront evil without resolve, or we just don't confront it at all. The entire category of actions at the level of boldness we see in the perfect example of our Lord have been ruled out in advance. We think that it is simply not part of a Christian's identity to be so bold.

Once when I was in seminary in California I played frisbee golf with a school friend of mine from our days growing up in New Jersey. At one point, I was behind a few "strokes" on a particular hole, and to make up for my bad playing I endeavored to throw it hard enough to make up at least one stroke. I whipped it pretty much as hard as I could and got a good throw out of it, shouting loudly in the process. My Jewish friend looked at me and said: "You can't throw like that. You're a man of the cloth. You're supposed to be a wimp!"

He was, of course, joking. But is that what we think? That Jesus was a wimp, and all of his followers are supposed to be weak and passionless like him? What a convenient lie from a lost world which does not want any problems from Christ's followers! How did we come to think this in light of what we read in the gospels?

We could do the following study in many places in the gospels, but we shall use Matthew 21 as a representative sample of the boldness of Jesus Christ. I like to call this "the assertiveness chapter." But even more important than the example is the dynamic. Why was Jesus like this, and how can we make ourselves able to be the same way? We already know that simply seeing his example will not be

enough.

BOLD TO BE YOU

A curious feature of Christ's ministry was his reticence to be proclaimed the King of Israel—even though he is, in fact, the Messiah, King of Israel. There are no doubt many good reasons from a tactical point of view. He would not be ruling on an earthly throne until his millennial kingdom, and he did not want to confuse people. But near the end of his earthly ministry he concluded that it was time let the revelation of his kingship come out among the people, and so we read: **"When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them.'** This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: **"SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, 'BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.'" The disciples went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!' When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, 'Who is this?' And the crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee'" (Matthew 21:1-11).**

Jesus permitted something many people of his day found inappropriate. Messianic acclaim was being given to a flesh and blood man. The people knew where he was born, and it was none too regal. And yet. How could it be inappropriate if he was and is exactly who he said? There could be nothing wrong with accepting acclaim because the carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth, really is the Messiah according to the sovereign will of God.

And that is how we find out who we are as well. A long list of things which make up our individual identities are completely out of our hands. No one chooses the family of their birth, the time, their race, their country, or their initial social status. Even economic and educational opportunities are not much under our control. The Apostle Paul preached this message to the Greeks: **"He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children'" (Act 17:26-28).** If you want to know who you are at the core, you must look to the sovereign purposes of God. You and I are created by God at a particular time in a particular place that we might seek him, and every breath we take is a gift from him.

So Jesus never woke up and thought: *I am the Messiah of Israel, but I don't feel like the Messiah today, so maybe I'm not the Messiah...* How often have we thought: *Well, I know I'm good at math, but I wish I was a soccer player.* But what boldness we gain from the knowledge that God's sovereign creative purpose is displayed in our lives. Jesus was bold to be who he was and to let others see him—on God's timetable—as Israel's king.

Many people are afraid to let others know who they are deep inside, wondering if anyone would still like them, respect them, or love them if their true self was known. Hiding has become an art form for many people. Adam and Eve revealed this as their first impulse after falling into sin. Can you imagine the level of self-deception required by the attempt to hide from God himself? But if we believe that God has made us who we are, we can live boldly: This is who I am—thank the Lord!

But the most important application of Christ's willingness to be the King of Israel at the Triumphal Entry is our status before God. Are you willing to be known as a Christ-follower? As an ambassador for the King of Kings? As someone committed to a holy life? As someone committed to believing the Bible? You will if you think: In Christ this is who I am by the sovereign purpose of God.

BOLD TO ACT FOR GOD

The next episode in this chapter is the Hayahh! moment we spoke of at the beginning: **"And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, 'It is written, "MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER"; but you are making it a ROBBERS' DEN.' And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became indignant and said to Him, 'Do You hear what these children are saying?' And Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF"?' And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there"** (Matthew 21:12-17).

We are not justified in simply mimicking Christ. He actually is the Messiah, and we are merely followers. But as the perfect example for the believer, it is fair for us to think that we should be bold to act for God. When a great wrong is being perpetrated in Christ's church, are we silent and passive? If we are, that may mean that we really don't believe what we say we believe.

And as Jesus experienced when he healed people in the temple and was bold to receive glory from children, there will always be those who become indignant. I cannot tell you how many times I have received indignant slapback for doing the most straightforward acts of pastoral leadership. But I am a pastor by the purpose of God. If I am not bold to do the work of the pastor in spite of the slapback, who will do it?

If you are a husband or wife, father or mother, you are that person because of the sovereign purpose of God. Be the man or woman of God you were made to be with boldness! Jesus interrupted the radical misuse of God's holy temple because he knew the sovereign purpose of that temple. It was supposed to be a house of prayer, and it was anything but.

We are justified in bold action for God when two requirements are fulfilled. First, we must have great clarity that we know the will of God in a particular area. Secondly, we must be willing to accept the consequences. We have never been promised freedom from suffering for insisting on the will of God. Be honest: Will you or won't you do things which you know are the will of God but which might bring you trouble? Are you accustomed to calculating how much to act on the will of God based on how

much suffering it will cause you? That pattern may result in a comfortable, socially-acceptable form of Christianity, but that result is not much like a servant of the Christ who took bold action based upon the sovereign purpose of God.

BOLD TO SPEAK AND PRAY IN FAITH

The chapter moves to one of Christ's two miracles of judgment: "**Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, 'No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.' And at once the fig tree withered. Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, 'How did the fig tree wither all at once?' And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive'**" (Matthew 21:18-22).

Let me say right away that this was not a vindictive act. God's created purpose for fig trees in leaf is that they bear figs in due season. It is proper to expect fruit from a fruit-bearing plant. The church is also a fruit-bearing creation of God according to his purpose. And so are we as individual believers. Although some commentators argue that this miracle of judgment was not a reference to Israel, I can't see how it cannot be. It does not mean that God was done with Israel, but he ceased, by a bold act of power, to continue giving life to the dead thing. The specific Jewish people alive in Christ's day, representing the bulk of national Israel at that time, experienced the withdrawal of God's life principle. He has no motive to bless unbelief. It's not his purpose.

And then Christ made the most unbelievable set of promises that if we speak and pray with bold faith that divine power will be released on the earth. Miracles will happen! Some will be first order miracles which directly supersede the normal processes of life as established by the Creator. Many more, it seems, will be second-order miracles where the most unlikely things take place to fulfill the purposes of God. And Christ grants us this ability.

Now this is not a silly thing, where we spend this privilege on Turkish delight candy. As D. A. Carson wrote: "Though exercised by the believer, such faith reposes on the will of God who acts" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*). As we find ourselves moving into the sovereign purpose of God in some area, we discover this capacity. And it only happens if we speak and pray boldly according to his purpose.

So what have you got going in your life or family or church that needs a miracle, or at least something most improbable? Christ is urging you never to assume that anything is impossible with God! And he is urging you to seek out the mind of the Lord, and as you do, begin to speak and pray in bold faith. Remember, God has no motive to bless unbelief, but to those who trust in his sovereign purposes, he is eager to display his power in blessing!

BOLD TO STAND IN CHRIST

The next section in this chapter shows Christ standing up to a withering challenge to his authority: "**When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will**

also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?' And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven," He will say to us, "Then why did you not believe him?" But if we say, "From men," we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.' And answering Jesus, they said, 'We do not know.' He also said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things''
(Matthew 21:23-27).

John the Baptist preached the authority of Christ. If they accepted John's teaching, they answered their own question about Jesus' authority. But beyond that, this was not an honest question. Jesus had done long teaching segments on his authority from the Father. This was simply a form of verbal jousting to gain them ammunition to use against him.

So Jesus, bold in his standing before the Lord, chose not to answer. He answered every valid question ever posed to him, but displayed his boldness to rest in the sovereign purpose of God for his ministry by declining to answer this one.

Our standing in God is, in the same way, not based upon people's good opinion of us. We are granted by Christ's example the option to choose not to answer invalid demands just to please people. Many people, such as these Jewish leaders, can never be pleased anyway.

In mentoring men into the ministry I try to ferret out what they think comprises their establishment as ministers of Christ. Some feel inadequate because they may not have had formal education and training for ministry. But colleges, universities, and seminaries cannot confer standing for ministry in the name of Christ. Churches and denominations ordain and properly so, but only as an affirmation of what God alone can do. If God has called and empowered you as his servant—you are his servant! You have the only standing that really matters. And so I always press this reality on the developing pastors: You stand because God makes you to stand. Every other prop is a fake, and is not to be trusted.

That is true of every believer, as well. As we discern God's sovereign purpose in ministry, as we discover our spiritual gifts, as we recognize divine burdens for ministry, we also discover our standing in Christ. The only basis for any ministry is divine enabling—Christ is in you! The Holy Spirit is working through you. So be bold to stand! Never apologize for what you think are your lack of qualifications. You have Jesus. You have what you need.

I do not say that as you minister that you shout Hayahh! But you may need to, and if you do, don't mumble. Your boldness has no foundation in human approval, but it has an unshakable foundation in the sovereign purpose of God for you and for all believers.

The world grows darker with every minute as we advance toward the end of days. Spiritual bondage becomes ever more strong. Evil becomes emboldened and more prevalent by the day. The followers of Christ were not sent out to yield every time the battle threatens. Be bold! It is God's sovereign purpose for you.

[clip from *Gospel of John* by Visual Bible International, 0:16:21-0:19:37, Jesus_cleanses_temple.avi, 3:16 min.]