

Matthew 21:1-15

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[0 : 0 0] Today is a special day. This is a special day for a number of reasons. It's Sunday. It's the first day of the week, a day when we remember and celebrate that Jesus, who died for us, for our sins, rose again, triumphant from the grave, and is alive today. We follow and serve a risen Savior. The first day of the week is also for us, a day of rest and renewal given to us by our generous God, and we trust that it will serve that purpose for all of us, even today. But it's not just any Sunday, if we can speak of any Sunday as just any Sunday. It is special in terms of the church calendar because, as we've already mentioned, it's Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday, we are invited to join with the festive crowds in Jerusalem proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and King and focus our attention on the unfolding events of Easter week. And today is also special because today we will baptize

James Joseph Boyd, David and Cassius, firstborn son. And no doubt there are other reasons that you could add to that list that make today a special day. I want to focus on a verse that is relevant to the baptism of a child and the upbringing of covenant children, but which at the same time helps us to mark Palm Sunday and the events that surround that pivotal day in the life of Jesus. And the verse that we're going to focus our attention on is a verse that we read and that we find in Matthew chapter 21 and in verse 15. We won't be thinking exclusively about this verse. We'll make reference to some of the verses that come before and follow it, but in particular our attention will be focused on this verse.

And we can just read it again. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant. Indeed, of all that verse, our focus will be particularly on the words of praise, voiced by the children, recorded by Matthew, Hosanna to the son of David. Now, the connection between the verse and the baptism of a child that will be part of our service this morning is simple enough. In the verse, we witness children taking their rightful place in the temple praising God. And let's be very clear about what the children were doing. The children are not just messing around. They're not just being children, shouting and screaming and running around. They are praising God. And how do we know that?

Well, because Jesus tells us so. In verse 16, in the verse that follows, you have the religious leaders complaining to Jesus. Do you hear what these children are saying? They asked him. And what is Jesus' reply? Yes, replied Jesus. Have you never heard from the lips of children and infants? You, Lord, have called forth your praise. And so very clearly and very explicitly, Jesus identifies what the children were doing as genuine and heartfelt praise of God. And this is the matter that I want us to focus our attention on. Children praising God. Now, to explore this scene of praising children and the lessons that we can draw for Christian parents and indeed for the wider covenant community that we form a part of and that as such a community, we have a shared responsibility for our children. A particular responsibility, of course, on the parents, but a responsibility shared by us all as we try and draw out the lessons. I want to pose four questions concerning the praise that is described in this verse. First of all, I'm going to ask the question, here's where we will focus most of our time and attention. Why are the children praising God? Why is it that they're doing what they're described as doing?

Then we'll notice much more briefly or pose and answer much more briefly the following questions. Secondly, what is the content of the children's praise? The actual words that they use to praise God.

[4 : 58] And then we'll pose the question, how are they praising God? And here the reference really is more to the manner of their praise. And then finally, who expresses an opinion about the children praising God?

And we'll see that there are opinions about it recorded in the passage. But as I say, all of those four questions, our particular attention and most time will be spent on the first. So, if you see that the time's passing and I'm still on the first question and you're trying to think, oh boy, he's still on question one and there's four, don't be overly concerned.

But before we pose and try and answer these questions, we need to set the scene of what's going on. Now, in Matthew's account that we read, the impression given is that the events at the temple take place on the same day as Jesus' triumphal entry. But Mark's account make it clear that these events, the events in the temple, took place on the following day. So, if we just turn to Mark chapter 11 and verse 11, I think it's entirely reasonable to consider them as part of the same events. But in terms of the timing, it's clear that what happened in the temple was on the following day. So, in Mark chapter 11 and verse 11, you'll notice in the previous verse, you have the crowds singing, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And then in verse 11, we read, Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. So, he entered the temple courts. He looked around at everything. But since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

And then in verse 12, the next day as they were leaving. And then in verse 15, on reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. So, here in Mark, the verse that I've just read clearly is referring to the events that are described in Matthew 21 from verse 12. But Mark makes it clear that it was on the following day that this occurred.

And the shouting of the children, the praising of the children is in the context of the cleansing of the temple, Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers that we read in the passage.

[7 : 19] And we think about that because that's the occasion where we find the children behaving in the manner that they do in the context of this cleansing of the temple. Contrary to perhaps the impression that we might have, the cleansing of the temple was no random or capricious outburst by Jesus. He didn't go into the temple and see what was happening and in a fit of rage responded in the manner that he did.

That might be what might appear to be what is happening. But far from being a random event, this is an event that was both prophesied by God and planned by Jesus. And of course, these two intertwine. In Matthew chapter 11 and verse 10, if we just turn to that very quickly, we'll notice how Jesus is identified as the messenger spoken of in Malachi. We read the passage in Malachi where the prophet anticipates the coming of God's messenger to his temple. And in Matthew chapter 11 and verse 11, Jesus is identified as that messenger. In verse 10, this is the one about whom it is written.

Matthew 11, Matthew 11, verse 10, this is the one about whom it is written, I will send my messenger ahead of you and he will prepare your way before you. So there very clearly there is this acknowledgement of Jesus as the one who would come in fulfillment of the prophesy in Malachi. Now what we read in Malachi, and we won't read it again, and we're not suggesting that what is said there is exhaustively fulfilled in the events described in our passage in Jesus entering the temple and cleansing the temple.

But without doubt, the cleansing of the temple identifies Jesus as other events also identify Jesus as God's messianic messenger who came to judge and refine and cleanse as well as to save and redeem. What happened that day was prophesied by God. But not only prophesied by God, but at the time planned by Jesus. We read there in Mark chapter 11 and verse 11 how following his triumphal entry, he made his way into the temple courts and we're told that he looked around and then he left. And it seems entirely reasonable to conclude that as he did so, he was determining and planning what he would be doing the following day when he went in and overturned the tables of the money changers and those selling doves and all that we discover about that in the passages that speak of it. So that's the occasion, that's the context in which we find these children shouting out Hosanna to the son of David.

But how does Israel respond to God's messenger? Well, we're told that the chief priests and teachers of the law were indignant by the presence of Jesus and by the actions of Jesus healing the blind and the lame in the temple. And no doubt their indignation had been growing over the course of some time in the face of all that he said and did. So far from welcoming God's messenger, they despise him.

[10 : 56] And it is a solemn scene that we find there in the temple. And yet, in the midst of the darkness, in the midst of the blindness, in the midst of the doom and gloom, there are voices raised in praise of God and his messenger, of God's Messiah. And they are the unlikely voices of the children. It is the children who shout for joy, Hosanna to the son of David. So let's focus on the children and try and answer the questions that we mentioned just a moment ago. The first question then, why are the children praising God? Or why are the children praising God in this way or with these words? And let me suggest two complementary answers. They very much go together. We don't need to choose one or other. But let me suggest that the children are doing two things. First of all, they are copying. And secondly, they are confessing.

And let's think about each in turn. First of all, the children here are copying. Who are they copying? Well, they're copying the grown-ups from the day before. We read the whole of the passage in Matthew 21.

And as Jesus entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, what do the crowds cry out? Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And then the following day, in the temple, the children are present. What do they cry out? Hosanna to the son of David. They'd heard what the adults were crying out. And they copy the words that they had heard. A day has passed, but they remember what had been cried out the day before.

Now, some might dismiss their praise. When we acknowledge that that's what they're doing, they're copying the adults. We might say, maybe we ourselves might be tempted to say, well, they're just copying what they've heard. We might even say they're parroting without understanding words that they had heard shouted out. And well, they're just saying the same words.

But of course, in God's purposes, copying has a very important part to play in discipleship. Remember how Paul urges his readers to follow my example as he followed the example of Christ.

[13 : 30] We find that in his first letter to the Corinthians at the beginning of chapter 11. And there Paul is establishing, if you wish, a model of discipleship of how we grow as Christians, how we learn to be disciples of Jesus. We follow the example of Jesus. And as we follow the example of Jesus, in the measure that we follow the example of Jesus, and others can follow, yes, even our example, and learn and grow. It's a process of copying what we see in others. Now, we have to be careful who we copy and what we copy, but copying has a part to play in our Christian growth.

And if it's true for adults, as Paul clearly considered it was true for adults, it's certainly true for children. And so, I think we can draw lessons for covenant parenting. After the sermon, when we are participating in the sacrament of baptism, the following question will be posed to David and Cassia. I'll just read the question that I will ask them and that they will answer.

Do you promise independence and God's promised help by your prayers, teaching, and example to bring up James in the instruction and discipline of the Lord? There's different elements involved in bringing up a child, but one of the elements, one that is explicitly highlighted in the question that we'll pose is this matter of our example. Children are incorrigible copiers. We wouldn't want them not to be.

It's part of who we are. And this copying is often, perhaps nearly always, unconscious. Now, I'm on the wrong side of 50. As I was scribbling this down, I thought, well, is it the wrong side, or is it the right side? I'm not sure. You take your pick. But anyway, let's say I'm on the wrong side of 50. And I left home about 35 years ago. But I am often reminded that my way of speaking and my mannerisms are just like my father. Now, is that deliberate? Those of you who know my father will probably be able to nod and confirm that that's the case. Now, did I decide that I wanted to be like him? Far from it. I probably would have tried to be different. We all like to be different. But it's just something that happens. It's the way it is. We subconsciously, unconsciously, whatever the language or appropriate language is, we copy those who we are with. And very especially when we're children, our parents. Now, when we think about our responsibilities as parents, as a congregation with children in it, one of our responsibilities is to instruct them by our example. What example do we give? What will our children copy? Will they copy our good example? If we limit ourselves to the matter of praising God, of course, this could be developed and we could apply this and give examples of this in so many ways. But if we focus on the matter to hand, this matter of praising God, I ask you, if you're a parent, but not only the parents present, it is important for us to be clear that the responsibility for children in the church is the responsibility of all. It's a shared responsibility, though particularly a responsibility for parents. Do your children, do our children see us praising God? Not just here on a

Sunday, but during the week. Do they hear you voicing words of praise to God in song, in prayer, and indeed in conversation. In conversation, do you acknowledge God and praise God and thank God? Is that what they see? Is that what they hear? Because what they see and what they hear is what they will copy. And if they don't see it, then they don't hear it, then they won't copy it. Will they copy our bad example? Let me just think about that and explore that question by referring to the passage and an intriguing detail in verse 13. In verse 13, we read, it is written, this is Jesus speaking, it is written, He said to them, and my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers. Now, you wonder, where is He going with this? Well, just bear with me. Jesus describes the temple as a den of robbers.

[18:19] Now, I think it's often assumed, and I think I've always assumed, that Jesus here was referring to the money changers, those selling doves, those whose tables He's overturning. And we immediately imagine that the robbers are these people, that they were maybe overcharging, they were oppressing the people because of the monopoly that they had on these sales and on the exchange of money that was required there in the temple. Now, it may well be that Jesus is referring to them or has these people in mind.

But it's also quite plausible that Jesus is principally referring not to what was going on inside the temple, but what to the worshipers. All of the worshipers, or at least many of them, were doing outside the temple. Notice that the reference is not only to those selling, but also to those buying. So, they would be, in the traditional understanding, the victims.

But they're all indicated as in some way guilty. And I think part of what Jesus is saying is that here you are, you come to the temple, you worship God, you offer your sacrifices, and all seems to be well, and yet when you leave this place, you behave completely differently. You ride roughshod over my commandments. You're robbers, robbers worshipping God. So, not just the money changers, not just the people who in the temple were making lots of money, but the worshipers themselves. There was this hypocrisy that characterized the whole exercise. And he says, it's a den of robbers. It's robbers who come to worship here, not people who are loyal to God and faithful to God. If you were, then during the rest of the week, you would not be robbing, you would not be oppressing, you would not be lying and stealing and cheating, as so many of you are. Now, why do I draw attention to that detail? Well, because I think it constitutes a challenge for parents. Many of you have made the promise I referred to a moment ago. And the question for you, for us, is are you, are we, by your example, drawing your child closer to God or driving your child away from God? See, our children are the first to identify hypocrisy.

We can hide hypocrisy from pretty much everybody else, but we can't hide it from our children, because they see us in church and they see us at home. They see the way we speak to fellow believers, and it's all nice, and it's all polite, and it's all lovely, but then they see us at home when we're squabbling, and when we're sarcastic, and when we're cynical, and when we're harsh, and we're impatient.

They see it all, and it's all being processed, and it's all being worked out, and conclusions are being come to. Why do the children praise God? Because they are copying what the adults do, and that's good, but it's also sobering to be reminded that the example that we give will, in significant measure, determine how our children grow up, and the measure in which they will embrace, and the manner in which they will embrace the faith. Why are the children praising God? They are copying, but I also said there was a second element, and the second element that I'm suggesting is that they are also confessing.

[21 : 57] Now, I use the word in the sense not of confessing sin, but of confessing your faith, professing your faith. To describe what the children are doing as only copying is to fail to do justice to what is going on. They are copying, and that's good, but they are also confessing. Their words, Hosanna to the Son of David, and perhaps they went on to say the other words, though it's not recorded, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Their words express their own heartfelt praise of God, and we know this, as mentioned before, because Jesus tells us. When the religious leaders complain, we've already noted how Jesus responds and says, no, this is God's intention. God has determined that children, indeed these children who you are criticizing, should praise God even when you remain silent.

And so they're not just copying, though that in itself would be a good thing. They are also confessing truth concerning the person of Jesus. Now, this should not surprise us. What did Jesus pray to the Father as recorded for us in Matthew chapter 11 and in verse 25? Let me just read that. Jesus is praying, and listen to what he says in his prayer. At that time, Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. Now, I'm happy to acknowledge that the language of little children perhaps can be applied more broadly to even those who are older, but who are humble or uneducated or would be deemed to be incapable of understanding like the wise and the learned. But it certainly also includes actual little children to whom God has revealed a truth and who are capable of receiving and understanding and responding to that truth. Let me say one final thing in answer to the question, why are the children praising God? Undergirding all that is described of the children praising God, we have the eternal purposes of God. And this is explicitly highlighted by Jesus in the manner in which he refers to Psalm 8 and verse 2 that is quoted there in the passage. The praise of children and infants is ordained by God. That's why these children praise God.

That's why our children are to praise God, because God has so determined that they should do so. Let's move on much more briefly to the following questions. What is the content of the children's praise? Well, the content is there for us, clearly enough. Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna literally means save, but it had become just an expression of praise, not just an expression of praise. It had evolved into an expression of praise. Hosanna to the Son of David, a title that points to Jesus as the promised King of the Lion of David, the promised Messiah. He is the Son of David, and yet he is greater than David.

This is the content of their praise. The object of their praise is Jesus himself. It is directed to Jesus as the Son of David as the Son of David. Notice how Jesus' defense of the children's praise is drawn from Psalm 8, as we just noted a moment ago. And in that Psalm, when we read the Psalm, and we read the first two verses of the Psalm, it's very clear that the praise being spoken of is praise that is rendered, that is offered to God.

Now, by referring to the Psalm, Jesus claims for himself a status far higher than only that of the Son of David. In the Psalm, the praise of children and infants is directed to God, and the implication here is that Jesus is saying, these children, what are they doing? They're praising God. They're acknowledging God and praising God as they direct their praise to me. And perhaps the religious leaders picked up on some of that, hence their great indignation. It reminds us of the words of Jesus on a prior occasion when he provocatively declared, I tell you that one greater than the temple is here, and here he is in the temple, and yet one greater than the temple, one worthy to be the object of praise due only to God. Now, do the children understand all the implications of the words they use when they perhaps overheard Jesus answering the question that the religious leaders were posing to him? Did they understand that answer? Well, no doubt, in great measure, they did not.

[27 : 11] But that does not detract in any way from the claim made by Jesus that this is genuine and God-honoring praise that they are engaged in. How are the children praising God? The third question. And I think here really about the manner of their praise. We're told that they were shouting in the temple. Now, we've thought about that already with the children. What a scandal. How I'm becoming of such a sacred place.

We don't need to dwell on this detail. Suffice it to say that it paints a picture of exuberant and unashamed praise. The children don't care what other people think about them.

They don't care if people are muttering or tutting or disapproving. Is this true of us? Is this how we praise God? Are we embarrassed to praise God? Would we be embarrassed if others heard us praising God?

With joy and exuberance and enthusiasm? Is this how we praise God? And picking up on what I said a few moments ago, remember that our children copy us. But then finally, the fourth question. Who expresses an opinion about the children praising God? Well, the passage records two opinions or reactions.

First of all, and we've already noted this reaction, the chief priests and the teachers of the law were indignant. Now, when we think about their indignation, it is quite striking to note that the cause of their indignation was twofold. They were indignant at the wonderful things that Jesus did. There in verse 15, but when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did, presumably a reference to him healing the blind and the lame, and the children shouting in the temple courts, they were indignant. So, there's these two causes of their indignation. And so, the children are in good company as objects of the grown-ups indignation. But then the second response or reaction is that, of course, of Jesus. Jesus, as we've noted already on a couple of occasions, is asked for his opinion, and he gives it. And how does Jesus describe their shouting? Well, he is very clear that he considers it to be a delightful and God-pleasing shouting praise. He describes it as praise, the praise of children and infants. Indeed, the word there, infants, there in Psalm 8, refers to a child at his mother's breast, a child who is not even capable of speech, and yet capable of praise in the view of Jesus and of the psalmist who pens the psalm.

[30 : 16] Hosanna to the Son of David. The children were shouting in the temple. And our prayer as a congregation today, very especially for James, but also for all the infants and children of Bonacord, is that they be shouting children, directing heartfelt and exuberant praise to Jesus. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for all that we learn concerning your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. We thank you that he is indeed the Son of David, but greater than David, the one who was able to declare himself as greater than the temple. We thank you that you are the God who reveals these truths to little children, to the unlikely, to the unworthy, to the uneducated, to those who, in the eyes of the world, may be thought to be of little importance. We thank you that you and your grace have revealed these truths to us. And we pray that you would make these truths clear to our children and to our children's children. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.