

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

Listen Up Or Lose Out

Written By

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In the hit movie *Gladiator*, Russell Crowe plays the loyal Roman general Maximus Decimus Meridius, who is betrayed by Caesar's ruthless, overly ambitious, and power-hungry son, Commodus. After he murdered his father during a private conversation, he seized the throne, murdered the family of Maximus, and then reduced the battle-tested general, who was a threat to his throne because of the allegiance of the army, to slave status.

Maximus sought to exact his revenge by fighting his way up through the gladiatorial arena. His goal was simple. Get close enough to the emperor to take the evil, blood-thirsty, unmerciful man out. Bondage and death reigned because of his heartless reign, and Maximus embraced his duty to rid the empire of such a sordid, brutal ruler.

To watch Maximus fight is to watch the intensity of the gladiatorial battle increase with each engagement. The heat and hardness is really turned up when he, along with his loyal gladiatorial brothers, enters the stadium in Rome. Everything is thrown at them from individual opponents to wild, hungry lions and chariots equipped with razor sharp blades protruding from their wheels while sporting riders and drivers with bows, arrows, and spears. The movie truly builds to a breath-taking conclusion as right and wrong battle it out in the dusty, blood-stained arena.

In many respects, this movie gives us a glimpse of Christ's last week on earth as He, the ultimate spiritual gladiator, took on the world, the flesh, and the ruthless emperor of darkness we call the Devil. At first, the engagements and battles to thwart the progression of Jesus

toward fulfilling His divine mission were limited and unassuming. Yet, as Christ continued to prove His deity and messiahship through profound teaching and miracles, gladiatorial opponents grew more skilled and sinister, ranging from angry Pharisees who wanted Him stoned (John 8:59), to demons who afflicted their powerless human hosts but who eventually lost their nerve in His holy presence.

During the last week of Christ's earthly life, the gladiatorial battle between light and darkness, truth and error, righteousness and unrighteousness, holiness and sin, spiritual life and spiritual death ramped up to a fever, ominous pitch. First, Jesus crossed swords with the religious elites by accepting the worship of the Passover crowds as the triumphant and prophesied humble messianic King of Kings (Matthew 21:1-11). He won this round. Second, Jesus went on the offensive in the arena by cleansing the Temple grounds of all those priests and businesspeople that had turned this house of prayer into a money-making enterprise. He won this round too when the dust settled. Third, Jesus proved His prowess as the messianic Savior by reversing blindness and lameness with a mere word. His gladiatorial opponents in the seen and unseen were helpless to stop Him. Again, He won this round, but that didn't mean His sinister and blood-thirsty opponents were through trying to take Him down.

With the battle of all battles on Golgotha, the Hill of the Skull, just four days away, Christ's godless gladiatorial enemies surrounded Him, again, in the arena called the Temple. It was a Tuesday when they drew their swords of pride, prejudice, and theological perversion in a desperate bid to wear Him out so they could hopefully land a decisive and deadly blow. They were about to find out that this warrior was, and is, the warrior of all warriors, truly the only One capable of defeating and destroying not just their devilish religion but all false religions based on works righteousness, along with the reign of sin and death. Further, with a couple of well-aimed thrusts of His sharp sword, they would also learn that they, along with their father, the Devil, were no match for His reasoning and logic. Truly, no one, in the seen or unseen world, would be capable of keeping Him from winning the battle of all battles to secure life and forgiveness for sinners.

Matthew 21:23-32 walks us into the area of the Temple for a view of how Jesus defended His person and work against those who sought to eliminate Him. Believe me, people still attempt to attack Him and anyone who'd dare fight and stand alongside Him in the area of life. Should you be His follower, His gladiator, chances are good you know what I'm talking about. You have crossed swords on more than one occasion with people who want, more than anything else, to rid the world of Christ and His life-giving, morally protective teachings. Anymore it seems like the battles are growing in number and intensity. That's where an analysis of this portion of Matthew's gospel is most instructive. From Christ's action in this arena before a massive crowd we discover the answer to a most important question for present day spiritual and godly gladiators:

How Can You Effectively Defend Christ's Person & Work? (Matthew 21:23-32)

Two techniques are readily visible from this particular spiritual gladiatorial event between Jesus and the religious elites of His day. Before we analyze them, let me point out how the fight to finish Jesus moved from one attack to another. This first attack challenging the authority of Jesus, was followed by two powerful, pointed parables designed to destroy the thinking and

erroneous theological position of His opponents (Matthew 21:28-46). In the end, Christ's adversaries will be left virtually decimated and speechless. A second wave of attacks followed another prickly parable (Matthew 22:1-14) in the form of three disingenuous barbed questions posed by the religious authorities who are incensed at Christ's teaching and debate prowess. Christ effortlessly handled all the menacing maneuvers with His out-of-this-world thinking (Matthew 22:15-40), leaving the misguided religious leaders with no ability to defend themselves. Jesus is left standing in the area as the divine messianic authority and the victor over false religious teaching.

With these combat scenes in mind, let us first see how Jesus defended His divine person and work in the first engagement:

Utilize Deflective Questions (Matthew 21:23-27)

This is what Jesus did on this occasion because He dealt with a hostile crowd with a proven track record of verbal combat bathed in inexorable, unshakeable, and blind unbelief in Him as the Messiah. Matthew takes us back to the day the religious elites stood toe to toe with Jesus and went on the offensive with a seemingly logical question:

²³ 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?"

Talk about bravery and courage. According to Luke's parallel account, Jesus purposefully entered the Temple precinct's, where He had previously castigated the greedy religious authorities, to preach the gospel of grace to the people who were steeped in the gospel of the Pharisees, a gospel which relegated their attainment of entrance into God's kingdom to faith in God coupled with a perpetual, slavish observance of the endless religious rules, regulations and rituals (Luke 20:1). Christ's action makes you ask yourself: Am I brave and courageous with the gospel? In our ever darkening culture we all need to be, and when you are, Jesus will be with you and give the words which need to be spoken.

Back to the battle.

The chief priests and the elders, who probably officially represented Israel's Sanhedrin (equivalent to our Supreme Court), were responsible for vetting teachers and rabbis.¹ For these

¹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: In NT times the high priest was the chief civil and ecclesiastical dignitary among the Jews. He was chairman of the Sanhedrin and head of the political relations with the Roman government. It is not clear just how far he participated in the ceremonies of the temple. No doubt he alone entered the holy of holies once a year on the Day of Atonement, and also offered the daily offerings during that week. What other part he took in the work was according to his pleasure. Josephus indicated that the high priest officiated at the Sabbath, the New Moon, and yearly festivals (Josephus Ant. iii.10 [237-257]). The daily *minhâ* (Lev. 6:12ff) that he was required to offer was not always offered by the high priest in person, but he was required to defray the expense of it. This was a duty which, according to Ezekiel's vision, was to be performed by the "prince." The Jews had many contentions with the Romans as to who should keep the garments of the high priest. When Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Romans, the robe of state also fell into their hands. The general dislike of the high priest was demonstrated during the war of A.D. 66-70 when the Zealots controlled Jerusalem. Many members of the family of the high priest were expelled from Jerusalem and some were killed before they could escape. A high priest was chosen from among the ordinary priests—Phinehas ben Samuel, a stonemason by profession and a relative by marriage to the family of Rabbi Hillel. He was the last high priest; the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem in A.D. 70 ended the necessity of such a figure.

leaders, Jesus taught with no official training in their rabbinical schools and no official backing from them, the purveyors of Jewish religious thought based on the Torah and the prophets. Hence, from all outer appearance it looked like they were just doing their job at protecting the people from religious crackpots and charlatans. Such, however, was not their intention. They attempted to ensnare Jesus when, in fact, they already had the answer to their question from a prior encounter with Him on the Temple mount.

According to John, sometime before this encounter, Jesus took them on during the October Feast of Booths (John 7). During this exchange He informed them that He was, in fact, the light of the world (John 8:12), He proceeded from God the Father (John 8:42), and He was the eternal I AM, or the God of the burning bush from Exodus 3 (John 8:58). He backed up these divine/messianic claims by healing a man blind from birth (John 9). Yes, they knew exactly who Jesus was and where His authority came from, but they willfully rejected Him and the evidence because they loved their darkness more than the light.

In their disingenuous questioning they sought to discredit Christ in a two-fold fashion. If He said His authority came from men, then they could disagree because they hadn't empowered and approved Him. If He said His authority originated with God, they had Him because He claimed divine status. This is just amazing. Despite all their other encounters with Him where He decimated them, they still thought in their own pride they could defeat Him on the verbal battlefield. And so it is with sinners who are opposed to Christ, His gospel, His truths, and His people. In the end, their pride will crash on the rocks of divine reality.

Christ's reply to these evil men masquerading as godly men is masterful:

²⁴ 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." ²⁵ "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?'" ²⁶ "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷ 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."

Jesus' question placed the religious leaders in a dilemma they couldn't possibly solve without losing face and/or acknowledging the divine authority of Jesus. I'm sure there were shocked at how quickly and easily Jesus moved from being possibly in trouble to being in total control of the entire assault they launched.

As Matthew states so clearly, the dilemma was readily apparent. If the religious elites agreed that John's authority to baptize converts based on his gospel of repentance was from God, then Christ could charge them with not bowing to God's will. If they said John's authority came from men, then they'd have to answer to all the people standing around them who believed John to be the first powerful and God-ordained prophet in four hundred years. Further, if they agreed that John's authority came from God, and John had tied the purpose of his ministry intrinsically to the person and work of Jesus, the Savior and Messiah (John 1:29-34), then it became quickly apparent that Jesus' authority also derived from God.

With the tables now turned on them and no way out of the verbal dilemma which would allow them to save face and keep their priestly power and position, they, who were responsible for vetting true and false teachers/prophets, they, who always had some definitive thing to say when it came to Judaism, all of a sudden had nothing to say. In Greek their answer is most emphatic:

Οὐκ οἶδμεν

“We don’t know” (with the negative coming first and thereby demonstrating their utter frustrating with having lost another round in the arena with Jesus)

Their silence condemned them for the spiritual cowards and charlatans they were. Their silence demonstrated they, of all people, weren’t really interested in spiritual truth but in religious power and protecting themselves at all costs.

From this hand to hand combat, we gain much needed insight for future skirmishes we will have as follower of Christ’s

Realize Some Questions Need Study. Translated, some questions need answering when they come from folks who are truly searching for spiritual truth in a world chock-full of untruths. Jesus answered the opening question of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:9), and went on to disclose His identity to her as the Savior. When the same religious authorities hauled Peter and John before their Council after they healed a lame man in the Temple after the resurrection of Jesus, and asked them, “By what power or in what name, have you done this? (Acts 4:7), Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, answered courageously by pointing them to the resurrected Savior (Acts 4:10-12). When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved after God sent an earthquake and opened the doors of his prison, they answered that question without hesitation:

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved ... (Acts 16:31).

Yes, some spiritual questions need answering, which means you should be studying those answers.

- If God exists why is there so much suffering in the world?
- If God exists why did He permit evil?
- If God knows everything then how do we really have a free will?
- If the Bible is God’s Word, why are there so many versions?
- If the Bible is God’s Word, why did God annihilate all those non-believers in the Old Testament?
- If God is a God of love does this mean that people who believe in other religions are gladly accepted by Him?

Peter puts our obligation as Christ followers and supporters in perspective:

¹⁵ but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the **hope** that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; ... (1 Peter 3).

We are always to be ready to make a defense of the gospel hope, and we are to do it with the right spirit. Never should our opponents be angry at us for how we spoke to them. If they are angry about anything, and they will be at times, it should always be toward the light we share with them. Let this all sink into your soul. When sound spiritual doctrine is attacked, when Christ's person and work is assaulted, sometimes you need to engage based on what you've learned and studied. Are you prepared? What are you doing to get prepared?

On the flipside, from Christ's encounter with the religious elites, we learn a second principle:

Realize Some Questions Need Silence. Because they had repeatedly rejected His prior miracles and teaching, because they only sought to undermine and subvert Him, because they had proven through their godless actions they had no intention on investigating the truth or falsity of His claims, He reached a point where further conversation was futile. They were the blind leading the blind, and as He said elsewhere, there comes the time when you let them walk off into a dark, dangerous pit (Matthew 15:14).

The same truth is applicable to us today. Listen to Paul, a man who certainly knew how to field probing spiritual questions. Speaking to Pastor Timothy about how saints should handle situations like this, he states in second letter to the young, maturing pastor:

¹⁴ Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to **wrangle** about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers (2 Timothy 2).

In other words, if all a person wants is a fight, if all they want to do is engage in endless debate about the meaning of this philosophical position or that scientific theory, if all they want to do is pick apart the meaning of this Bible passage verses that Bible passage or the like, there comes the time when you simply say, "I think the time for discussion is over." Put differently, you don't have to entertain and answer all questions fired at Christ and His gospel. Sometimes you offer deflection by stating you have talked long enough about said subject, or, as in the case of a debate I watched years ago with Dr. Duane Gish, Ph. D. at the University of the Pacific in California, you ask a well-trained deflective question which leaves your opponents with nothing to say.

At one point in his presentation, Dr. Gish, a Berkeley educated scientist (Ph. D. in biochemistry), opened the floor for questions. Science professors were seated all around the auditorium, flanked by their loyal graduate students. Being afraid to take on the well-educated, highly articulate Dr. Gish one on one, the professors sat in silence. Finally, one sitting near me encouraged one of his brave graduate students to pose a question for him to Dr. Gish. From the nature of the question, it was clear he, the evolutionist, thought he had the good doctor.

Without missing a beat, Dr. Gish fumbled through his slides (this was before Power Point) and found one of a beautiful and rare butterfly. He brought it up on the screen and then discussed the process of how this butterfly reached this stage. After a discussion which was, for the most part, over my head, he deflected the science professor's question with a question: "Since none of these highly intricate developmental stages could have happened in various stages over

eons of time without prohibiting the butterfly from becoming a butterfly, how do you think this occurred?"

The room, which was full of more science degrees than you could shake a stick at, was so quiet you could have heard a butterfly flying across the stage. Dr. Gish had merely stepped into the sandals of Jesus when dealing with a different kind of question, but still the approach is the same. Whether the assault is against the person and work of Christ, or against the creationist viewpoint as espoused by the Scriptures, sometimes you need to answer the question, but at other times silence is warranted to hopefully wake up the spiritual sleeper.

Jesus could have left well enough alone, but since He was fighting against hardened unbelievers, men steeped in false religion, He ramped up His offense in the ensuing verses. Again, it takes great sensitivity to the Spirit of God to know when to pull back and when to push forward. Are you listening? Are you willing to listen? At this point, listen and learn from your Lord.

Utilize Reflective Questions (Matthew 21:28-32)

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, went after these men, even when He knew they hated Him, and how He did it is most interesting and instructive. I boil His approach down to three apologetic movements:

Paint A Scene. First, while they were still dumbfounded at the fact had lost round one, He pressed them with a seemingly innocuous story.

²⁸ "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' ²⁹ And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. ³⁰ "The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go.

At this juncture, Christ was in full control of the conversation. He asked them what they thought about a particular family scenario. A father merely wanted his two sons to work in his vineyard. One son sounded so belligerent and obstinate when he said, "I will not work in your vineyard." Later, he repented of his hard-hearted words against his father and chose to work. The second son sounded most loyal and devoted. He immediately told his father he could be counted on as a field hand; however, he never showed up to work. He was all talk, but no action.

Don't you know the religious leaders started to see where this innocuous story was headed? They all knew that God likened His people to a vineyard in Isaiah 5, but they had historically been known for destroying the vineyard for a variety of evil reasons. Somewhere during this story time with Jesus I'm sure they started connecting the theological dots.

Posit A Question. Jesus moved from an interesting story to a full-court press by asking the religious leaders a very important question about the actions of the two sons:

³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?"

A child knew the answer to this question, but I'm sure it was an answer they didn't want to make, but they really had no choice. So, gulping hard ...

They said, "The first."

I'm sure they wanted Jesus to stop talking, but out of love for them, out of a pure desire to break through their unbelief while also warning them off the consequences of continued opposition to His person and work, He turned up the heat with the obvious options from the story.

Present The Options. Note. Jesus didn't grant these religiously educated men academic a polite pass on the lesson. He didn't pull back from the truth they needed to hear to be saved lest they be offended. He didn't soften the logical conclusions so they'd be able to feel good about themselves. He didn't back off because they were pious and basically good guys, at least in their eyes. He didn't tolerate their view of spirituality and religion. He didn't give them an exit so they could save academic face. He didn't commend them for working at observing all their religious rules, regulations, and rituals. No. He leveled with them because eternity was at stake:

Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

Don't you know this last sentence met with stone silence?

Who was son number one? Who was the son who did the will of his father? According to Jesus, the beloved son, the son who would enter the kingdom was the one with a sordid, stained spiritual track record, the son who was hated by the religious elites. The cold, sober theological fact is divine sonship, heavenly kingdom status is all about profession and obedience, and it typically comes from the most broken, dysfunctional, sinful people in society. Folks like this lined up to hear John the Baptist's message of repentance and forgiveness based on grace and faith in the Savior, Jesus. Folks who weren't welcome in the Temple, folks who were sneered at by the more pious and enlightened, folks who weren't welcome at religious functions because of their sinful status and opposition to all religious teaching and authority were the ones who entered the Messiah's kingdom because they didn't just have faith in Him, but their lives demonstrated, to varying degrees, they were, in fact, sons.

Son number two were the finely dressed, well-versed, religiously works-laden spiritual leaders of Israel. They talked as if they knew the Lord of the vineyard, but they didn't. They talked a good spiritual game, but it wasn't the vineyard owner's game but one they invented. They talked the talk but didn't, as we say, walk the walk. They said they were sons of God, when they were nothing but sons of the Devil, and their opposition and hatred of Jesus, the Messiah, validated that premise.

Son number one heard the preaching of John and repented and chose to follow God by faith. Son number two heard the same preaching and chose to reject it outright, and to, then, ultimately reject the teaching of the One John pointed to: Jesus, the Messiah. With these closing words from Jesus in this section it was quite clear that the religious leaders stood condemned. Put differently, Jesus minced no words in telling them their unbelief would cost them heaven.

Pragmatically, we must step back and gain instruction from Christ's method here. With those trapped in unbelief, you must, at times, be willing to paint a scene, to posit a question, and to, then, draw the logical spiritual conclusion.

When I spoke to the students at Robinson High School in February of this year to the Theory of Knowledge classes about whether you can trust the New Testament translation, I had your usual unbelievers in the crowd. Granted, they were nowhere near the level of the Pharisees, but it was unbelief nonetheless. To counter that unbelief, I first painted a scene to them about the mathematical improbability of Christ fulfilling sixty highly exact ancient prophecies.

Next, I posited a question? What is the probability that one man could fulfilled these sixty exact prophecies. Better yet, how could one man fulfill just 8 of these prophecies? I showed how the probability of Him fulfilling eight prophecies is one in 10^{17} power.

I showed how this is represented by covering Texas with silver dollars two feet deep, placing a dot on one silver dollar which you arbitrarily threw somewhere in the state, and then asking someone to walk throughout the state and reach down and somehow pick up that particular silver dollar on the first try. The point is clear: That could never happen, and if it did happened it would be highly miraculous. To push the point further, Christ's fulfillment of 48 prophecies is equivalent to 1 in 10^{157} power. No man could ever do this.

This logically leads to presenting options: Christ's fulfillment of these prophecies was just an amazing set of anomalies. Right. Or, Jesus was really who He said He was: God in the flesh. Obviously, the historical fact that Christ picked up 60 "silver dollars," as it were, is proof positive He was the divine Messiah, as foretold (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; Micah 5:1-2). See how naturally the positing of the question leads to a presenting options? Since He was/is the Messiah and Savior, those who believe in Him will be saved just as He said. The opposite is true as well. Those who, like the Pharisees, rejected the clear, indisputable evidences for His person and work will not be kingdom members.

Which son are you? It is the question each person must answer for themselves. Thank Jesus for fulfilling His difficult divine mission so that broken, dysfunctional sinners ... like me and you ... can and will find eternal, transformative grace at His throne. Thank Jesus for showing us how to defend His person and work so we, as His followers, can effectively point spiritually lost people to the only One who can find them and make them sons. May we, now, be prepared, as He was, to go to our own temple platform for the purpose of preaching and proclaiming the life-giving gospel.