

The Promised King, Our Cornerstone (Matthew 21:23-46)

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[0 : 00] Turn your Bibles to chapter 21. We'll be reading from 23 to 46, and they'll be reading from the NIV version. Jesus entered the temple courts, and while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him.

By what authority are you doing these things? they asked. And who gave you this authority? Jesus replied, I will also ask you one question.

If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism, where did it come from? Was it from heaven or of human origin?

They discussed it among themselves and said, If we say, from heaven, he will ask, then why didn't you believe him? But if we say, of human origin, we are afraid of the people.

For they all hold that John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We don't know. Then he said, Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

[1 : 11] What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, Son, go and work today in the vineyard. I will not, he answered. But later he changed his mind and went.

Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, I will, sir. But he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?

The first, they answered. Jesus said to them, Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness.

And you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. 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.

[2 : 12] When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants. They beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.

Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. They will respect my son, he said.

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. So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, they replied, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.

Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the scriptures, The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

[3 : 14] 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. Anyone who falls on the stone will be broken to pieces. Anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd, because the people held that he was a prophet.

All right. Thank you, Eden and Mariah. Give him a round of applause. That was a pretty good reading.

Fantastic. And it is God's word, isn't it? And it's a fantastic part of God's word. So, lovely to see you all again. And let's pray as we try and reflect on this fascinating exchange, but a very challenging part of God's word as well.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you. You show your divine authority in so many different ways in this passage.

[4 : 21] And whatever we think of you, Lord Jesus, would you just help us to humble ourselves before your word? Would you rebuke us if we need to? And would you help us not to reject you as the cornerstone of our lives?

We thank you and we pray all these things. In the mighty name of Jesus. Amen. There was a moment last week where we were talking about what people enjoyed doing in the holidays, and some people were talking about gaming, and I was like, ah, well, I like gaming too.

Except in my day, we didn't have just computer games. We also had these old school games on a board. So I wonder if you guys remember this game. Guess who? Who's played this before?

Very simple, right? Okay, let me describe the game for those of you who have never played this kind of game before. You have a whole bunch of faces, right? And you're trying to guess the other side.

They have one card in front of them, and you're trying to guess who they've got, right? And so you just need to ask a lot of questions, right? Is your hair brown? You know, no. Is your nose big? No. Is it red?

[5 : 22] That sort of thing. And you're just eliminating, you know, different people on your side of the board until finally you guess who, right? And the moment of the game, obviously, when it ends is when you finally turn the card around, and then you wouldn't need to guess anymore, right?

That's the end of the game. And I want to suggest to you here in Matthew's gospel, right, Jesus' card is face forward for us. There's no need to guess who he is now, right?

As before Matthew 21, people were still asking, who is this guy, right? And even Jesus himself was saying, well, I'm going to reveal all in good time.

From here on, he identifies himself as the Savior promise and fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures, right? There's no doubt Jesus, even as we heard in this passage, is acting like a king. He was acting like a king even last week in last week's passage, right? But a king that defied our expectations, a king who rode into Jerusalem, not on a battle horse, but humble, right?

[6 : 24] Riding a donkey, a colt, to the people he intends to deliver and save. We're back in the temple today. That's where our scene starts, this magnificent place where God's people would meet for worship from all over the country.

And suddenly, questions are in the air. Guessing games are happening, right? Remember the day before, right, Jesus came into the temple.

He kind of did this dramatic property inspection, if you remember. Chasing out all the ungodly money-making that was going on. And really just rebuking the fruitless worship, way of worship, that the nation of Israel were getting up to.

And while he was there, he was healing the blind and the lame. He was welcoming the praise of children to him. This is Jesus showing, announcing who he was.

The king of kings. Full of divine God's authority. And remember the scene as well, right? He was explained to his disciples that all this temple worship, right?

[7 : 29] With all its pomp and ceremony, it was just like fig leaves on a tree that was bearing no fruit. All these religious works in the temple had no true power or authority.

All these sacrifices, rules, they were not able to truly save people from the inside out. And that's why Jesus has come. And it's after all this that we enter the scene that we just heard read so well, starting from verse 23.

And so there's a couple of guessing games I want to suggest. And in our passage, there's three scenes. And there's so three different kinds of guessing games.

And so firstly, I want us to consider there's a guessing game going on here about Jesus' authority from verse 23 to verse 27. Right? You see that here, right? Jesus entered the temple courts.

And while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. They asked, by what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority? Here are the religious leaders.

[8 : 33] Perhaps there was a bitter, jealous spirit that was sitting under their questions to Jesus. Right? What authority do you have to teach here? Because it certainly didn't come from us, is probably what they were thinking.

Here are the religious political elites of the time, walking around like the preaching police, openly accusing Jesus of being a troublemaker. And perhaps the loss of profits, okay?

Maybe they were in charge of, you know, putting all these people that were exchanging money. And maybe they would have made a profit out of that too, and they've lost all that. And so here they're challenging Jesus directly.

But pay attention to how Jesus replies. He knows that they are looking for some proof to accuse him. They want him to say something that they, as the religious leaders, can then trap him and say, Aha, you're doing something that is not allowed.

False teaching or blasphemy, right? Or saying something against God. Something that actually fell under their responsibility. Remember, the Jews are sitting under the Romans, right?

[9 : 38] So the Romans looked after a lot of government and stuff, but the Jewish religious leaders could look after religious issues. And in this case, a teacher that was a troublemaker.

Jesus knows all this. And so rather than just give a direct answer, he replies with a counter question, doesn't he? Right? In our passage, this is not Jesus dodging an answer.

Rather, he knows that asking them about John's baptism is going to bring to mind the correct answer. Right? So it's an indirect way of directly getting to the heart of their problems.

Who is John the Baptist that Jesus brings up here? We encountered him first in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 3. And so when Jesus says, you know, John's baptism, where did it come from?

He's immediately bringing to mind a very well-known person. Now, unfortunately, dead. But this person was introduced to us, preaching in the wilderness, announcing a coming king.

[10 : 42] Announcing that after him, even though crowds were flocking to him, wanting to be baptized and so on, after him, there was going to be someone even better, more mighty, more powerful. Or someone, he was even unworthy to even untie his sandal straps.

And it seems like even after he was murdered by King Herod at the time, this message that John the Baptist had of repentance and faith and trusting in one greater than him, it seems to have taken hold among the Jewish people.

Enough people knew about John's message. And so Jesus is smart when he says, where did John's baptism come from? Heaven or from people? That's a smart play. You see, if the priests accept that John's authority, right, preaching and everything came from heaven, then they need to accept the person that John wanted to point to, i.e. Jesus.

Right? And remember, Jesus and John, they interacted directly, right? On that day that Jesus came to John, John said, I'm going to, you know, you want to be baptized by me?

No way. I should be baptized by you. But in the event, he was baptized in the Jordan that day. And at the moment of Jesus' baptism, crowds of people heard the voice from heaven saying, this is my son whom I love.

[11 : 59] Right? Even back then in Matthew chapter 3, there's no need to second guess Jesus' authority. And this is all being brought to mind again, as Jesus mentions John's baptism.

If the Pharisees accept that John's mission was divine, then they must accept that Jesus' mission is divine as well. But these leaders being the leaders, they were not prepared to do so, right?

So these chief priests, these elders, they reply, we don't know. It's a bit of a cop-out answer. And, I mean, it's a bit shameful for these religious teachers to say, we don't know, right?

But it's a gotcha moment, isn't it? They would rather suffer this humiliation of saying, we don't know, than openly admit Jesus' divine authority. And Matthew's recording this scene, I think, for at least one reason.

One is to show how foolish these chief priests and elders were. To show how they were not in control of the narrative. The King of Kings is here so clearly before them, and you're asking for a CV, really?

[13 : 10] It's a challenge to us as well, to not do this when it comes to the Lord Jesus. Whatever your opinion about him today, I don't know all your stories, but maybe you're here and you've loved Jesus for many years.

Maybe you're here and you're still on the fence. Let us not do this when it comes to the Lord Jesus. The Bible actually gives us no wiggle room about his identity. Certainly not by the time we get here.

He's not just a nice guy. He's not just someone who gives out good moral lessons and then we take it or leave it. No, he has authority from heaven. When he speaks the truth to us through his word, to deny him, to kind of put him aside, is to look as foolish as these chief priests and elders.

We can also, though, as a church, learn from Jesus the value of asking good questions rather than going straight to an answer. A hands up who is always quick to give an answer when someone asks a question or a problem comes up.

My hands up because I'll admit it. It happens to me. We love just giving an answer straight away, don't we? Some people of us get paid for it, right? But when it comes to defending the Christian faith in a world that's hostile to God, maybe not giving an answer straight away is a wise thing to do.

[14 : 32] Never underestimate the power of a question, right? Of course, the Bible does tell us there are times we need to be ready, right, to give a reason for the hope that is in us, 1 Peter 3, verse 15.

We do it with gentleness and respect, sure. But sometimes giving a direct reply will cut short an opportunity to keep talking, right?

Proverbs 27, verse 4 says, Don't answer a fool according to their folly, or you will be like him. It sounds direct, but it reminds us sometimes, you know, like Jesus, not answering straight away. Asking the right question can be a better way forward. So here's a guessing game about Jesus' authority. We see that interaction.

What happens next? Well, from verse 28 onwards, he leaves more questions for the temple crowds and for us reading in to ponder. And here, I want to suggest, is a guessing game about what true repentance looks like.

[15 : 35] Here's a guessing game about real repentance. From verse 28, Jesus says, What do you think? To introduce a new way of asking these questions. And he actually introduces here, and then further on, two stories or what we call parables in the Bible.

We haven't talked about parables for a while, but in Matthew's Gospel, it is full of parables. The most parables we find are in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus loved to teach in these parables or stories. They disarm us, don't they? We had a visiting speaker. Her name was Christine Dillon. And she loved to tell stories. She shared once, stories, they're easy to digest, like soup. If I give you a logical statement about Jesus, you could take it in.

But it's kind of like eating, I don't know, fudge or something. You've got to chew hard on it. It takes a while. But for Christine, he was saying, Stories are like soup is really easy to take in.

But then stories teach as well. Whether they're 10-second snapshots of someone's life on social media, we love stories, don't we? Whether it's a novel that you're immersed in for hours, we readily engage with stories.

[16 : 44] Jesus knows this. And so in the rest of this chapter, we get two snapshots of this specific kind of storytelling. But in the Bible, parable stories, actually stories or sayings were the point.

They're trying to teach a point about God's kingdom fulfilled in Christ. I'll say it again. In the Bible, parables are stories or sayings that tell a point or make a point about God's kingdom fulfilled in Christ.

And in fact, in Matthew chapter 13, when he first started talking in parables, he shared with his disciples why he taught in parables. He said this, Matthew 13, 13. This is why I speak to them in parables.

Though seeing, they don't see. Though hearing, they don't hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. Again, Jesus is pointing back to the prophets of old, storytellers of old saying, the way I'm teaching in stories and parables, I am fulfilling God's promises for this king, this servant.

Jesus teaches the parables again here because now before him are people, though seeing, they don't see. Though hearing, they don't hear or understand. And there needs to be a division.

[18 : 00] He needs to show who are truly listening and truly receive God's grace and who are the ones who seem to be religious but actually have hardened their hearts to heaven's kingdom.

Parables have that kind of effect. If you don't get it, you don't get it. If you do get it, well, maybe God's kingdom is within you. And here in this first parable, often called the parable of the two sons, we see a very simple story of what real repentance looks like in God's kingdom.

I think it's easy enough to understand the father here represents God. And then there's two sons.

The first son, who appears disobedient but turns around, Jesus then identifies as the tax collectors

and prostitutes who appear unrighteous.

But they end up embracing Jesus and turning to God. They're the ones who, like John the Baptist called out, repent and believe in the kingdom of God.

They're the ones who do it. Even though their lives initially were upside down. The second son in the parable, Jesus seems to say, represents the chief priests and the elders.

[19 : 09] They appear to have embraced God's law, and yet they act, they accuse, they talk in ways that are opposite to God's way of forgiveness. Opposite to his righteousness.

So despite appearances, it's these who are the rebellious ones, who are actually turning their backs on God. And I think the point of a parable like this is to remind us, we have to go beyond what comes out of the mouth.

First appearances. We need to look at what truly happens in the heart. Repent and faith, that's where that comes from, from the heart. In order to discern whether someone truly belongs to God's kingdom.

It's very easy to mistake the Christian faith as all about just doing the right things, saying the right things, wearing the right clothes or something. Following the right rules.

We will be utterly mistaken. The Christian faith is built on repentance, turning away from sin, but at the same time, putting your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 15] Repentance and then faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's not just an action that others see. It's something that happens on the inside. It's to literally change your mind about the world, about God, and to turn towards him as your savior.

And you might have, as you heard the story, and Jesus explained it, wondered, how can it be possible that tax collectors and prostitutes, right, but Jesus using them as a shorthand for some of the worst of the worst in society, how could they enter God's kingdom ahead of those who, you know, did all their homework, who are always nice on the outside?

Because these are the ones who truly know their need to turn to God. They're the ones who truly repent. I mean, think about Matthew's own story, right?

Matthew wrote the Gospels. He's a tax collector. He starts off the story, chapter 9, working for the enemy, right? Gathering money for the Romans, and yet he gives up the wealth and comforts from that career to follow Jesus for far greater blessing.

Well, have you heard the story of Rahab? Rahab, a woman who worked as a prostitute, a shameful job, selling herself, feeling hopeless about her family, and yet when word comes that the God of Israel is coming to judge, she believes.

[21 : 40] She trusts in this victorious and powerful Yahweh. She acts in faith. And she's counted in the Messiah's family line, isn't she? And now Jesus and his authority has come to bring an upside-down kingdom to all the Matthews and Rahabs among us.

In God's kingdom, it's those who know that they're weak, those who know that they need God, those who are hungry for righteousness, they're the ones who will truly flourish.

The good news of the Bible is totally upside-down, isn't it? How could it be that the way to heaven is to put all your worldly achievements to one side and say, none of that matters before God?

To count everything you find your worth in as loss, to instead just receive Jesus' perfect life and death. And that's the only thing that gets you in a right relationship with God.

Yet as Jesus teaches in Acts, we're meant to recognize his authority. We're meant to submit our lives to him. No matter how outwardly impressive you look to others, if in your heart you've not submitted your life to Jesus, then the Bible says you're far from entering God's kingdom.

[23 : 02] And we have to be honest, not every celebrity or classmate or neighbor who says that they're a Christian will be part of God's kingdom because it's not about outward expressions and declarations.

Right? Jesus is clear even when he explains a parable. Godly first impressions don't tell the full story. It's those who repent and believe him. Those who admit that they are sinners in need of a savior.

Those of us who believe in Jesus as the one who can rescue us. They're the ones who are wonderfully welcomed into God's kingdom. They're the ones who enter into God's kingdom ahead of all the hypocrites.

And so maybe Jesus has a simple question for us in the middle of this parable. Who are you in this story? Which son do you most likely represent?

Are you the first son? Alright? Didn't say yes in public to the father but you know changed their mind later. Literally actually when it says change his mind it's the same word that Jesus then uses to say repent in the original.

[24 : 14] Literally he repents in secret. He turns back to do God's will. Is that you? Or is your life more like the second one? Yes I say all the right things. Yes sir but actually inside you you haven't repented.

We've heard the guessing games about Jesus' authority. He's followed on with a bit of a guessing game about what true repentance looks like. And finally briefly we see from verse 33 onwards a guessing game about rebellious rejection.

Now this is a longer parable right from verse 33 and I think Jesus explains it all the way down to the end of the chapter. In this longer parable we're back in a vineyard. A vineyard was a very common symbol for the nation of Israel.

So this is a parable about Israel first and foremost. Right? And so Jesus is talking about Israel as a whole. And the context you know we're talking about vineyards and a tenant and we might not understand all the context we don't ourselves have vineyards most days of the week.

Most people back then didn't really own their own property as such. Right? There might be a few wealthy landowners but most people would probably work on someone else's property in the same way as these people did.

[25 : 35] And so landowners would rent out their farms to tenants and ask for some of the harvest back as rent. Now over the summer if any of you have been blueberry picking you're kind of just doing the same for these wealthy landowners or blueberry farms.

Right? And then you might give them back some money or a share of it. So you're kind of doing their job for them. Imagine today though that instead of giving money for the blueberries you kind of I don't know went and beat up the blueberry farm owner.

Imagine today of instead of paying rent on your house you said let's attack the landlord and then we don't have to pay rent. Or instead of handing you assignment as requested you said let's poison the teacher.

It's just horrifying isn't it? It's meant to shock us what they're doing here. And initially I think the chief priests and elders because they're so thick they feel the same way at first.

Oh my goodness. When Jesus asked them guess what the owner of the vineyard should do?

They're so clueless. They assume it's about someone else. Verse 41 He's going to bring those wretches to a wretched inn and give it to other tenants.

[26 : 43] You can see that they're assuming it's not them. But here is a parable Jesus tells himself in verse 43 that is directed at these religious leaders.

It's them who are in the story. They are the first group of tenants. You see God had entrusted these leaders with his vineyard. With the care, the spiritual care of the people of Israel.

Jesus is connecting their disobedience and their rebellion to the whole nation of Israel's story. Israel was so treasured by God, saved for a purpose to be holy.

And yet when God sent prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah to his people to call them back to living by his will, Israel rejected them just like in the story they rejected all these servants. And then when John the Baptist, the latest in the line of prophets comes to tell them about the way of God, they rejected him too.

and then they send the, and then they see and they're sent the son of God, right, eventually. And yet he receives the treatment here that the son in the vineyard story gives, doesn't he?

[27 : 58] And really the chief priests are right in saying that the only right response would be to hand over the vineyard to faithful tenants instead. All these years God has patiently sent the nation of Israel servant after servant to collect his fruit, just like the landowner in this parable.

And time after time they have denied him. And so Jesus' big reveal is this, Jesus said to them, verse 42, have you never read in the scriptures, the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone or cornerstone?

The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. And actually this is Jesus' big reveal. This is where he flips his own guess who card. because he's quoting the lyrics of Psalm 118.

Psalm 118 is a wonderful psalm. You can read the lyrics yourself. In this psalm it talks about this cornerstone. A cornerstone is kind of like everything in a building relies on this piece.

It could be in a wall or an arch. And this cornerstone represents in this song a king who was first rejected by all the worldly powers around him and then turns out to be the missing piece that everyone needed.

[29 : 09] So as they sing or as he quotes these lyrics it would bring that connection back and it wouldn't be lost in the religious leaders. Jesus is the rejected king who will prove to be the cornerstone.

Now first Peter 2, this is Peter, he, the apostle Peter, he quotes the same psalm and he shares the following thoughts. Now to you who believe the stone is precious but to those who don't believe the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Again quoting the same psalm. Can you imagine this? The God of the universe who owns the entire world has sent his son and would you reject him?

Would you throw him out and even kill this innocent man? But guess what? That's what sinful humanity does. Because guess who these leaders later mock and beat?

Guess who they hand over and cry out, crucify him? Jesus knows all this. He's the sovereign Lord. He knows what the days ahead in the story of Matthew's gospel will bring.

[30 : 20] And so while he can do it, he is telling the crowds, guess what happens to people who just keep passing off God's opportunity to repent and believe? believe, it can only end with them being crushed, verse 44, before the cornerstone.

Sadly for a privileged people of Israel, they had a time of opportunity to recognize the Messiah. Eventually it came to an end, right? It was actually sadness, right, to how God's old covenant people responded.

Indeed, actually really historically 40 years after Jesus' death. The Jewish nation was judged. Their temple was destroyed. The kingdom of God was taken from them and handed over to both Jews and Gentiles in a new spiritual Israel.

A people of God under a new covenant bought by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. And for all of us here who aren't Jewish, and I assume that's all of you, this message of the parable, though, I think applies to us too.

Are we not a privileged people as well? Have we not just had immense riches? Some of you who have grown up in church or some of you who have lived such rich lives with many opportunities to hear about Jesus to many opportunities to repent and believe.

[31 : 43] When will you stop giving up that opportunity? Will you let it pass and one day the time of opportunity will end? Maybe you're here and you think it's the same old, same old.

Can you consider how privileged you are to be able to hear about Jesus in the first place compared to the millions of people who have never heard of his saving power?

How many more opportunities do you need to bow the knee to the Lord Jesus? Jesus? Because maybe one day your opportunities to repent will end as well.

Would you submit to Jesus now if that's you? Would you repent and believe in Christ as your cornerstone? Do you even do it today? If not now, then when?

And I get it. It can be hard to live for a kingdom you can't see on a world map. It can be hard to live for a kingdom you can't look up in a phone directory.

[32 : 51] But Jesus is clear. God's kingdom is no longer found solely among one privileged in group. It's found among his church, the people of God. And if you're here and you don't feel like you were born in the right family, you're here, you feel like I don't have the right credentials to be included, to be accepted.

If you're here and you feel like I don't have the right friends, here is good news. Here is good news. In Christ, belonging to God's kingdom doesn't depend on your skin color, doesn't depend on how religious you can be, doesn't depend on what part of society you have come from, doesn't depend on how you think or act.

The good news is that in Jesus, when we trust in him, you can receive by faith an eternal cornerstone to build your life upon forever.

forever. The good news is that if you trust his death and resurrection for your whole life, for forgiveness of your sins, he offers all who believe a secure identity, one that will never break, can never be shattered.

He can make you into part of a chosen people. He can make you into a new holy nation. He can make you into a people who knows the grace and mercy of Christ. Isn't that wonderful?

[34 : 09] people, would you come to this kingdom? Would you even this year let the guessing games end about Jesus? Would you just let the word of God here speak to you, question you, challenge you, invite you?

Will Jesus be the cornerstone of your life rather than the stone that crushes you? Would you welcome the son as your savior and lord rather than be shattered by him as your judge when he returns?

He said, we see the stone the builders rejected, praise God, has become the cornerstone. So let's turn to him and let's give thanks and pray. Lord, we sometimes feel like these religious leaders, resistant to Jesus and yet afraid of what people will think.

Or maybe, Lord, you know our hearts and we are wanting to take a step of faith, but we're just not sure. Could Jesus really bear the weight of all the problems of our life?

Could he really be a cornerstone? Wherever people are at, Lord, would you speak to them today? Would you reassure them that Jesus truly is the one who has made a way for us?

[35 : 37] Have a right relationship with God to be able to come to him together, to be able to be part of an eternal family? We thank you, Lord, and we ask, Lord, that even if there's anyone here who does not know Jesus as their cornerstone, would today be the day of their salvation, their rescue, their refuge.

We thank you, Lord, and we ask that you continue working our hearts as we continue journeying with our Lord Jesus as he continues to walk to the cross in the story of Matthew's gospel.

We thank you, we ask and pray and we beg all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.