

"It's Not a Game"

Text: Matthew 21:23-27

"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen." ¹ Peter 5:10-11

Dear Fellow Christians:

I'm sure most of you remember the expression "mind games." You used to hear it all the time, not so much anymore - although I'm sure there's is a new and updated phrase that means the same thing, since the thing itself is obviously alive and well. "Mind games" describes the use of words or actions intended to manipulate feelings or actions in someone else. In other words, someone would do or say something more or less just to get a response, often just because they could, and almost always to some less than wholesome end.

The question our text raises this morning is whether or not Jesus did that sort of thing and, in a broader context, if God routinely does so in his dealings with human beings today. Does God play games with us? The question, as we will see, is actually much more important than it might at first appear.

The text that forms the basis for our study this morning is found in Matthew's Gospel, the 21st Chapter:

ESV Matthew 21:23-27 And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

This is God's Word. Surely the very words that God chose to reveal to, and preserve for, all mankind are worthy of our careful study and

meditation. Jesus himself said, **"Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it (Literally: guard and treasure it)."** We want that blessing, therefore we begin our study of God's Word with this prayer, **"Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"** Amen.

God doesn't play games with mankind. Yet before we go on to prove that, it's important to establish the fact that the devil most certainly does. In fact when it comes to mind games, Satan is a master. It started already in the Garden of Eden. The devil's obvious goal was to destroy God's beloved creation by provoking Adam and Eve to sin. Since he knew that he couldn't just sidle up to the perfect couple and say, *"Hey, I just damned myself for all eternity by rebelling against God. Care to join me?"* His solution was to play a mind game with Adam and Eve to mask his ultimate goal. Note well the pattern of his manipulation of Eve. First, create the false image that God is overly restrictive: ***"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"*** Eve was more than happy to come to God's defense and to set the record straight: ***"We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"***

Have you ever tried to tip something over that was just too heavy to topple with one great heave? What do you do? You rock it, using the gathering momentum to your advantage. This was what Satan did with Eve. Satan: *"No trees?"* Eve: *"All trees, except one."* Satan: *"Why not that one too?"* Eve: *"God said not to."* Satan: *"Here's why he said that – because he doesn't want you to have everything that he has."* From that point it was just a matter of allowing the momentum of the desire that he had successfully created in Eve's heart to run its course. Note again that it was neither the truth nor forthrightness that got Eve to that point. It was the game, the lie, by which Satan played her.

Does any of that sound familiar? It ought to. The devil uses the same process on each of us, every single day. Here's an example:

Satan: "Did God really say that once you get married you can't have any other friends?"

You: "I can have all the friends that I want; I just can't be intimate with anyone other than my spouse." Satan: *"So then it really wouldn't be any big deal if you were to look up your old high school 'friend' on social media and to reach out, just to see how things are*

going?"

And from there he just allows the natural momentum that he has created to run its course – and you don't even recognize that you've been played.

The disconcerting truth in all of this is that we allow ourselves to be played all the time, to be manipulated and to have our thoughts twisted and redirected, and never even seem to catch on to the game. Our God very much wants to fix that problem – because he's seen how that game usually ends.

With that we return to our text for this morning. The setting is that Jesus had just entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and had, for the second time, just thrown the money-changers out of the temple. That's why the chief priests and elders came to Jesus and asked him the question we just heard in our text: **"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"** Obviously the Jews were playing another of their games with Jesus. In fact they did little else. *"Tell us, Jesus, should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" "Help us out here Jesus. Can a man divorce his wife or not – because Moses told us we could?" "Say, Jesus, we caught this woman in the very act of adultery. Should we obey the law and stone her to death, because that's what Moses told us to do?"* All were games. All were traps laid for Jesus with ulterior motives. Jesus' enemies didn't want guidance. They didn't want to learn and grow and establish a closer walk with their God. They wanted to silence the voice of Jesus – the voice that condemned them for their work-righteousness and rejection of the Savior that God himself had sent. Virtually every interaction with Jesus was a game designed to cause him to say or do something by which they could condemn him or diminish his popularity – the latter enabling the former. They knew they couldn't kill Jesus until they destroyed his popularity.

It's the same today with much of the interaction between unbelievers and believers - games designed to trip up, discredit, ridicule. Never to learn or grow. *"So you're telling me that my friend, who happens to be a kind, gentle, Hindu family man, is going to hell because he doesn't believe what you do about some Jewish guy that died a couple thousand years ago?"* That's not really a question, is it? It's an accusation. A mind game designed to make you doubt the Word of your God, or to compromise what God has said.

So also in our text, Jesus' enemies are again playing a game. On the surface they appear to be asking a reasonable question. Given their

position and job description, they appear to be doing the right and reasonable thing. In reality they are playing games on several different levels. First of all, what Jesus did – now for the second time – was to correct a public disgrace and obvious sin. The offense of the money changers was readily apparent to all. Even if they had been honest businessmen, which they weren't, the fact that they were conducting business within the confines of the temple was an abomination. The idea that these men who came to Jesus were just trying to do the right thing is just silly. They were wolves.

In fact the true motive of Jesus' enemies becomes obvious when we consider what his two possible answers could have been: *"I have this authority because I am the Son of God"* or *"I have no authority to do what I did."* If he gave the first answer, his enemies would have charged him with blasphemy. If the second, they would have charged him with insurrection or, as they later did, **"as one who stirs up the people."**

We get what the godless do. The question we are asking this morning is whether or not *God himself* plays that sort of game *with us*. Is Jesus, for example, playing the same sort of game when he replies as he does to the question asked of him by his enemies: **Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"**

What Jesus is doing here is no game. God doesn't play games with man. Heaven and hell are too real, too important. They are always a stark reality. What then was Jesus trying to accomplish by asking the question he did? Nothing less – *never anything less* – than the rescue and salvation of human souls. His mission in life was to open heaven's door to every single human being. Eternity is not a game.

Take a closer look at Jesus' answer. He knew full well that the Jews could not and therefore would not give him an answer. By asking it he accomplished at least two things. First, he refused to provide them with the evidence they dearly wanted to convict and condemn him to death. Second, by his answer he reached out to them with the means of grace.

Despite his understanding of their intent, Jesus still wanted to be **"more than a conqueror"** of his enemies. He wanted to save also them. **"God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to**

come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:3-4) By answering as he did, Jesus forced them to reevaluate the message of John the Baptist. Make no mistake. John's message resonated with all that heard it. In their hearts they were well aware that the words John spoke to them were absolutely true. Both their natural knowledge of God and their individual consciences attested to it. John's message was: ***"Repent! For the Savior is coming."*** They had obviously rejected that truth, but Jesus knew that the law proclaimed by John was the necessary preparation for the gospel. The law that John brought was meant to crush the people under the weight of their own sins. This was to prepare the people to hear the gospel that Jesus brought: ***"That sin that's crushing you? I've come to take that away."*** In his own words: ***"I have not come to destroy the world, but to save it."*** By answering his enemies the way he did, Jesus was bringing the power of God's Word to bear upon their souls.

Jesus never pretended that eternity was some sort of a game. Nor did he ever run from a question or respond with political doublespeak. Heaven and hell hung in the balance for these souls, and Jesus demonstrated his love for them by answering as he did. He wanted them to turn, to believe, and to be saved.

Now carry this forward. Our Savior also demonstrates this same love for *you* in everything that he continues to do on your behalf. Though it may seem at times that God plays games with us, that's simply never the case. Man's understanding is probably tainted here by mythology, where "the gods" are portrayed as routinely toying with mankind for their own amusement or entertainment. Our God is far too serious for such things. In fact nowhere in Scripture is our God portrayed as anything other than serious, loving, merciful, and focused. But how then do we explain the otherwise inexplicable? How can we explain the seemingly unending succession of bad things that happen also to Christians, as, for example, to our brothers and sisters in Nepal – things that seem to make no sense? Our human minds tell us that the only two options are that God is playing games with us, or that all is just chaos with no controlling force.

There is a third option, which by definition we cannot possibly fully comprehend: God alone can understand how ***"for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."*** God alone – never man – is capable of grasping the whole picture of human existence. Knowing what he alone does, it is therefore God alone who can be trusted not to toy with us, but to arrange all things in this life so that we are, first of all, brought to

saving faith, and then carried safely through this earthly existence to the life that he has prepared for those who believe in him.

It was, after all, no game when Jesus left the perfection of heaven to be born as one of his own creation. It was no game when he lived an absolutely perfect life, and then gave that life as the only viable payment for mankind's sin-debt. So also it is no game when God the Holy Spirit, even today, reaches out – also through you and me – with the means of grace to convert and save sinners by bringing them to faith in this simple truth: *man is not saved by what he does, but by grace through faith in what Jesus has already done for him.*

Far from some silly game, *this* is life and death. This great calling – to share with an unbelieving world how alone they can be saved – is exactly what life on earth is all about. In the end – and the end will come – nothing else will matter. All will be swept away and each soul must stand before the Creator of heaven and earth. No games. No pretend. No exceptions. ***"He that believes and is baptized shall be saved. He who does not believe shall be damned."*** Jesus' entire earthly existence was focused on this one great truth. God grant to each of us the same focus, the same single-minded sobriety. Amen.

ESV **Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32** The word of the LORD came to me: ² "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? ³ As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴ Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die. ²⁵ ¶ "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? ²⁶ When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. ²⁷ Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. ²⁸ Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²⁹ Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? ³⁰ ¶ "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. ³¹ Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live."

ESV **Philippians 2:1-4, 14-18** So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ¹⁴ ¶ Do all things without grumbling or questioning, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷ Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. ¹⁸ Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

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The 18th Sunday after Pentecost – September 27, 2026

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 133 (Stanzas 1-3)

"Blessed Jesus, at Your Word"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 31ff. (Blue Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The First Lesson: (Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32) Our natural human inclination is to assign blame to anyone and everyone except ourselves. In our first reading the Prophet Ezekiel identified this basic character flaw among the people of his day. In their minds, God was unjust – mostly because he failed to do what they wanted him to do. They were upset with God for not rewarding them for their idolatry and sin. Still today we are not immune from the temptation to find fault with others, including even God, when the blame is ours alone.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 84 (Hymnal Page 84) (Read responsively)

The Second Lesson: (Philippians 2:1-4, 14-18) Note especially the humility that Paul advocates in our New Testament reading. That humility has its basis (and finds its greatest example) in Jesus Christ, who set aside the divine power and glory of heaven to come to our sin-broken world. That kind of humility is constantly searching for ways to serve not self but others. Yet, as in all things, we are saved not by doing good, but through faith in Jesus Christ, who did all things perfectly as our Substitute.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed *(Projected on Screens)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 147

"God, We Praise You"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 21:23-27 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"It's Not a Game"

The Offertory – (Projected on Screens)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 412

"Oh, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

The Prayers of the Day, Followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Hymnal page 38)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Hymnal page 41)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 142

"On My Heart Imprint Your Image"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time.

A note on Communion: It is a matter of conscience among us, drawn from God's Word, that communing together is an intimate expression of confessional fellowship based on shared beliefs. We therefore ask those who have not publicly declared their unity of faith with us to first meet with the pastor for the information you would need and want before communing. Please understand that we seek only to follow the Word and will of God and are in no way judging your Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (27) Average (35)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service with Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council and W.F. Meetings
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Frank Gantt is considering the call to St. Luke's of Lemmon. Pastor Matthew Hanel has returned the call to Gift of God of Mapleton. Pastor Zachary Sippert is considering the call to Holy Cross of Phoenix, AZ. Pastor Thomas Schuetze has returned the call to Living Hope of Appleton, WI. Pastor Aaron Ude has returned the call to St. Paul's of Austin, MN. Pastor Paul Krause is considering the call to Mt. Zion of Detroit.

September Schedule – We have resumed our regular (non-summer) Sunday schedule, with Sunday school and Bible Class at 9:00 a.m. and Sunday Worship at 10:00 a.m. Midweek classes also resume this Wednesday.

Church Council and Women's Fellowship Meetings – Both the Church Council and the Women's Fellowship are scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour.

Weekend Church Project – The parsonage porch roof repair project is scheduled for next weekend. See Trustee Coordinator Mark Johnson for details.