

The Temple Court

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- [0 : 00] Good morning, church. We're going to read from Matthew chapter 21 and 22, starting in verse 23. 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?
- 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.
- 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?
- But if we say from man, we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet. 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. What do you think?
- [1 : 18] A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answered, I will not.
- But afterward, he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir.
- But did not go. Which of the two did the will of the father? They said the first. Jesus said to them, Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.
- For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.
- And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him. Hear another parable.
- [2 : 29] There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants and went into another country.
- When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.
- Again, he sent more servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son.
- But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.
- And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When, therefore, the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?
- [3 : 39] They said to him, He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.
- Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the scriptures, The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?

This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

And the one who falls on the stone will be broken to pieces. And when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds because they held him to be a prophet. And again, Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son and sent his servants to call on those who were invited to the wedding feast.

[5 : 05] But they would not come. Again, he sent other servants, saying, Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered and everything is ready.

Come to the wedding feast. The king of heaven was ready. But they paid no attention and went off. One to his farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his servants, treated him shamefully, and killed them.

The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

Go, therefore, to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good.

So the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment.

[6 : 21] And he said to him, Friend, how did you get into here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.

This is the word of God. All right. Thanks, Angeline. It's a long reading. But I hope it's, as we will see, it coheres.

It's three parables. But why don't we pray together before we dive into it. Lord Jesus, we want to see you. We want to see your glory, your authority, who you are.

Please speak to us through these words. Take weak words from a weak human being, but make them your words by your spirit in our hearts. Please speak to each one of us today.

[7 : 25] In Jesus' name. Amen. Now, I don't know what you found of the reading. I don't know what you think of the parables. We think of them as really nice stories for children, right?

Like the lost sheep and, you know, the mustard seeds. And then we get actually these parables. And actually, these are rather violent, right? A lot of servants getting beaten and stoned, killed.

And then miserable wretches being put to death. And a king sending troops and destroying murderers and burning their city. And then another servant, you know, bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness.

These are not really nice stories, right? The only thing we do at Watermark, we try to preach through the Bible, through everything. And even though we're taking big chunks of Matthew, actually, this is in the Bible, right?

So we have to preach it. We have to look at it. But then again, you know, this is a real world, right? And sometimes violence is necessary. You know, there's a war going on in Ukraine.

[8 : 29] And people are giving tanks to Ukraine. And you might think, well, isn't that, you know, why tanks? Well, they need tanks, right? If they don't have weapons, then the country will be destroyed.

Sometimes that's just necessary. And I think we, you know, sometimes judgment is necessary. And that's what we're going to look at today. We're in a very tense time in the gospel, right?

Jesus has been going around. But now he's on his way to his death. He's on the way to Jerusalem. Well, he's entered in Jerusalem now. And he, you know, he's in the temple. If you were here last week, he comes to the temple, right?

The house of God. But he's made a huge mess. He overthrew the tables, kicked everyone out. You know, pretty violent and passionate, right? Here's Jesus. And he's saying, well, the temple is going to be destroyed.

This temple is obsolete. We don't need it anymore. It's now all about me. And you can feel the tension, the authorities. They are kind of, what is going on, right?

[9 : 30] What do you think you're doing, Jesus? Because this is a big thing, right? It sounds like, okay, Jesus is coming and he's going to replace the temple.

It's not just a building, right? If you're going to get rid of a temple, what are you going to get rid of? You're going to get rid of all the priests and all the Levites, right? And the whole system around the temple. The temple is in a city, right?

If Jesus says the temple is going to be destroyed, how about the city and all the people who live there? That city is the heart of a nation, right? Here is a nation, the nation of Israel.

And they were God's people. And what made them special? Well, God was with them. God was with them in the temple. It was their reason to be, right? And now that's going to be taken away.

So Israel is losing their place in the world. I mean, can you imagine if you take the pyramids away from Egypt? No one knew Egypt anymore, right? Here is the tent.

[10 : 29] But this is much bigger. This is the place of access to God. That was through Israel. Here it is. And Jesus is taking that away. It's messy. And that needs some explaining, right?

Why this big change? Was this really necessary? And so in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we all get this big confrontation with the Pharisees where Jesus, you know, explains himself, right?

We read it. If you were following the reading plan, right? The past week, we've been looking at the same thing in Luke. You know, these are clearly important parts. And maybe they don't speak to us that clearly.

But I hope we'll see today. Actually, we need to know this. And we need to see Jesus. He's kind of, you know, justifying the change. Here is King Jesus.

He's really a king. He's not a pushover. He is the judge, the jury, the executioner. And in a way, yeah, the rest of the reading, it's pretty straightforward in some ways, right?

[11 : 31] It's three parables. And you've seen that they all have the same thing in common, right? There's this authority figure. There's a father. There's an owner. There is a king. And then there are, well, those under authority, right?

There's two sons, old and new tenants, old and new wedding guests. And in each case, there's one group or one son who does not listen, who refuses, who rejects.

And in certainly two of them, it doesn't go well for them. And that's where we're going to go. And so it's basically like a court case. That's why I call this the temple court, not referring to the stone, but, yeah, a court taking place where Jesus, well, he goes through, well, the evidence, the verdict, the sentence on Israel.

So let's look at that together. For the sake of time, I won't spend too much on all of them. There's a lot of detail here. I'll mainly focus later on the parable of the tenants.

I think, I mean, of course, it starts with who is this guy, right? Verse 23, 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?

[12 : 47] Who gave you this authority? All right, again, here is Jesus and he throws all the furniture out of God's house. If you come to my house and throw out all the furniture, who do you think you are, right?

I hope you see this is a big thing. Who are you to declare the house of God obsolete? Who are you to say that, okay, I know for 1500 years, if you wanted to know God, you have to come here, but now you all have to come to me.

Who has the right to say that? Right? Right? Clearly this guy thinks he's quite a lot. But yeah, the authorities, they come to him. They want to trap him. They want to condemn him.

Instead, Jesus turns the tables. Well, why don't you justify yourselves, right? Let's talk about John the Baptist. You know, did you listen to him? Where do you think he is from?

And you can hear what they said, right? The authorities, well, we can't really say that he's from God because then why didn't we believe in him? We can't really say he's just a human, just a man from man.

[13 : 53] And so they refuse to answer. But then Jesus, well, he condemns them, right? Actually, you know what you did, right? You didn't believe in John. I won't go into all the details. But, you know, he starts to condemn them for, yeah.

You know, you look down on the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Actually, they listened to God. They, John came. He is from God. He offered you, you know, repentance, forgiveness. They did, but the Pharisees didn't listen.

The religious leaders didn't do anything. And so, yeah, how is that going to go? Well, let's go to the parable of the tenants because that's where we're going to spend most of our time.

What is the case that Jesus makes here? Now, this is a big parable. It's almost more like an allegory, right? Sometimes parables are just a story with one point. But here we have all these details that correspond to the real world.

And it starts really nice, right? Verse 33. Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard.

[14 : 59] Now, we just did John 15, right? We know vineyards. That's a vine. That's an Old Testament picture of Israel, the people of God. So, we're already thinking Israel. And look at how wonderful man this is, right?

He planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it. He dug a wine press in it and built a tower and unleashed it to tenants and went into another country, right? This man did everything for the vineyard.

He put everything there. They had everything they needed to produce fruit. And so, these tenants, he went away, but the tenants would look after the vineyard, would give him his fruit.

So far, so good. But then, well, the evidence, what happened? And when the time came, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit.

And the tenants, what did they do? They took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another, right? They didn't give the fruit. They, you know, very reasonable, right?

[15 : 58] You work for this guy. You give him his fruit. Instead, they beat the servants, stoned them. Stoning, right? Can you think of a, it's a really vicious, violent way of killing someone, right? What a shock, right?

And the owner sends more servants, more and more. And again, they get beaten. They get tortured. They get killed. This is how the tenants are treating the servants. Now, I hope you can see this is not just about the Pharisees standing in front of Jesus, right?

What are we talking about? All these servants. This is Israel's history. This is 1,500 years of Israel. Because they, what did they do?

Well, God kept sending prophets to them. And they kept rejecting the prophets. That's certainly Jesus' verdict. Verse from chapter 23, verse 37.

This is what he later says. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to you. That is the Bible's view of Israel, of Jerusalem.

[17 : 01] How they've, you know, so this is about the history. It's not about individuals. It's not just about these few guys. This is the nation. This is the system. This is the leadership, right?

The institution. They, well, this is what they've done. They've killed the prophets all through history. And now, well, what happened?

Finally, the owner, verse 37. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, they will respect my son. Might feel a bit naive, right? Why would you send your son to these dangerous guys?

I think in an honor-shame culture, though, did this make sense, right? This is the son. Surely you will respect the son of the owner, right? And they recognize him. They see, hey, this is the son.

I mean, so basically, Jesus is answering their question, right? They were asking, well, who are you, Jesus? And he is saying, well, I am the son of God, right? And the father sent me here. And he sent me here to, as your last chance, right?

[18 : 02] And the father thinks that you should honor and respect me because I'm the son. And they recognize him. But in the parable, the tenants think, well, this is a great chance, right?

This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. Let's kill him. And they do it, right? They throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. They kill the son of the owner.

And it's why Jesus, you know, telling them, I know your plan. You want to kill me, right? You want to kill me, the son of God. Like the ultimate crime, right? Killing the son. Well, what do you think is the verdict if this is what they've done?

I mean, these are absolutely unacceptable crimes, right? If you read this story, you would think that this is crazy, right? This is unacceptable. I don't know. What do you think?

And these are not just good people struggling to keep the law, right? These are not just good people producing fruit, but it wasn't enough fruit. They didn't meet their quotas.

[19 : 06] And the owner is angry. There's no talk of fruit at all, right? They are just rejecting the owner. If you kill, they're rejecting God. If you kill the servants, you're rejecting the master.

If you kill someone's son, well, you're rejecting the father, right? How can you say, oh, I really love God. I've killed his son, but I really love God. No. I mean, how do they treat the owner?

How do they treat God? It's such a weird phrase, right? Here is the son. Here is the son. Let us kill him. And we can get, then the inheritance will be ours.

It's like God is already dead to them, right? The father is already dead. So if we just get rid of the son, then the whole family is gone and it's ours, right? God is just dead to them.

As if he doesn't exist, they're rejecting him. And that's the overall message. And you read through all these parables, right? The son who says, yeah, yeah, I'm going to do what you say, dad.

[20 : 05] And he doesn't. The king and the wedding feast. I mean, wonderful story, right? Wonderful offer. A wedding feast with oxen and fattened calves. It's not even about working in a vineyard, right?

You get invited to a wedding feast. Israel got invited. The wedding supper of the lamb. And they kill the messengers. And stoned them and everything over and over again, right?

And you read on in these chapters. And they keep trying to trap Jesus. Chapter 23 is a long list of all their hypocrisy and everything they've done wrong.

What a terrible nation, right? What a terrible history. What a terrible leadership. I hope you feel that, right? I hope you read this and think, yeah.

You may think it's a bit unfair that, okay, these guys get singled out for the whole history of Israel. The whole history of the leadership. But then again, they're going to do the ultimate crime, right?

[21 : 07] These are the guys who are going to kill Jesus and get him killed. I mean, that was the last chance, right? And so, what is the sentence, right?

The evidence, the verdict, the sentence. Well, judgment and replacements. I mean, Jesus asked him, hey, how do you think these tenants should be treated? Verse 41. They said to him, he will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.

Right? These guys should be put to death. And Jesus says, yeah, I agree. Verse 43. The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

Or after the wedding feast, the king sent his troops and they destroyed those murderers and burned their city. A horrific massacre. But not just judgment, right? A replacement.

God still wants a beautiful vineyard. And so, he brings, yeah, so he gives it to new tenants. The king still wants a beautiful wedding feast with lots of guests.

[22 : 11] So, other guests get invited, right? The gospel going out to the Gentiles and people streaming in. Judgment and replacement. And note how that's so centered on Jesus.

Because, you know, here's the son and he gets killed. What happens to the son? Of course, in the wedding feast, he's the star. It's his wedding. But also with the, yeah, in the tenants.

How about the son? Verse 42. Jesus said to them, okay, this is what's going to happen. Have you never read in the scriptures? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Yeah? It said there's a building project. What are they building in context? Well, it's a temple, right? And here's the builders and here's a stone. And we don't want this stone. They throw away the stone.

And actually, that stone ends up the cornerstone. Ends up as the central part of the building. The central part of the new temple. And I guess the old builders get fired, right?

[23 : 10] This new temple. This new people of God. It's all, the cornerstone is Jesus. It's all centered on him. I hope that makes sense.

I hope you can see what this parable says. How do we respond to this, though, right? How do you respond to this dark, violent parable?

How do we respond to this dark, violent parable? I mean, first of all, I guess we're in awe of Jesus, right? I mean, you see Jesus and he's so accessible, as we heard last week. But here's Jesus and he, you know, he's gentle and lowly.

And he comes to the leper who wants to be cleansed and put his hand on him. And hey, I want to clean you. Be clean. And you see him, you know, frying fish as breakfast for his friends.

You know? But then you see him here, right? He's more than a prophet, more than a king. He's the son so close to his father. He is the judge who looks at his whole nation's history and deposes the nation.

[24 : 16] And says, okay, the whole world's going to change. It's now all going to be through me, right? This is the one with all authority, right? You know, whoa.

I mean, I don't know about your temperament. Certainly this week I was tempted to sin and I just thought of the Jesus here and I didn't sin, right? It's kind of whoa.

I don't know. And I think maybe some of you, you will feel scared of this Jesus who has such authority and who threatens judgment. Now, I mean, Jesus is not safe.

But he is good. We shouldn't read this as written to us, right? I mean, Matthew wrote it to us. But we are not the people he's talking about. We are kind of standing on the sidelines.

This is about bigger than you. This is BC and AD. This is about a whole nation that has, yeah, that gets replaced. A whole institution that has, you know, it's going to be obsolete, right?

[25 : 17] It's something much bigger. I mean, I hope in some sense we think this is good. You know, it's good what Jesus does. I mean, we should be in some ways glad, right? These tenants are terrible.

Isn't it good when the bad guys get defeated? When the bad guys get abolished? I don't know, the Lion King. Isn't it great when Scar at the end gets defeated, right?

Isn't it? You see that and you cheer. This is good. You don't feel sorry for Scar because you know what he's done. And this is not even the right picture because this is a fight between Simba and Scar, right?

I mean, Jesus is the judge. It's his job to do what's right, right? Because this is not just justice. He's doing something good for the world. I mean, the owner has a vineyard, not just for his own wine collection, right?

Why do you have a vineyard? You want to bring vine and grapes to lots of people, right? Vineyards are good. And, you know, Israel was to be a good thing for the world.

[26 : 18] The world wasn't going to be blessed through Israel. People could come to God through Israel, through the temple. You know, the whole nation would, the whole world would be blessed through them. And instead they were an obstacle.

They kept people from God. They kept people from his grace. And Jesus removes them. Isn't that a good thing? Isn't that, can you imagine if Jesus didn't do anything about this?

If he just let them carry on like this and the whole world still couldn't know about God and he wouldn't do anything. It's a good thing. Judgment is good.

Just to say, when I say that, it doesn't mean that Jesus likes it. You know, there's a sense in which we should feel sad, right?

These parables, they are deserved. The judgment is deserved. But, you know, look how this section ends. After a whole chapter of woe to the Pharisees. Woe, woe, woe.

[27 : 13] Let's look at these last few verses. Matthew, at the end of chapter 23. I've put them on the screen. We saw the first bit, right? Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stone those sent to it.

How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathered its brood under its wings? But you would not. I wanted to gather you.

I wanted you to come back to me. I wanted to have you. I wanted to bring you here. But you didn't want to, right? You didn't want to. You hear Jesus hard, right?

He wants them to turn. He wants them to come back. But they don't want to. He's like an exasperated parent of a wayward teenager, right? I wanted to have you back.

But you didn't want to. The Pharisees, they didn't want to. He warns them. If you kill me, it's going to end very badly. And so they plot to kill him. They just don't want to change.

[28 : 12] Then there's no end, right? But, you know, it's not that Jesus enjoys it. He wants to have people back. And, you know, that's important for all of us in a way, right? Because we think Israel and we think, oh, these people are so bad.

And actually we're not like them. I mean, in the Bible, Israel is not singled out because they're so bad. They're just a picture of all of us. God chose Israel to show what we are all like by nature.

And ultimately God is going to do something much bigger, right? He's going to judge the whole world for their rejection of him. He's going to judge the whole world for, well, the lack of fruit for the way we've treated him.

But, again, Jesus doesn't want to judge in a way. He wants to have us back. He has the same heart to us now. If we refuse to listen, you will face his judgment. But Jesus wants to forgive you.

He wants, he died on the cross. That's what he did, right? He was so willing to save us, so willing to have us back that he, you know, he went to the cross to pay for our sin. But if we don't want to, yeah.

[29 : 18] There's nothing we can do, right? If we don't want to. If we don't want to be forgiven. If we don't want to come back. Yeah. It's not his fault, right? Because that's the other side, right?

There is a wonderful offer here. So we would agree with Jesus. But I hope we receive the offer here, right? Yes, the old tenants go.

And that's good. But God's looking for new tenants. The old guests are gone. But there's an opportunity for new guests. I hope if you're not yet a Christian.

God is organizing the most wonderful feast ever. And he's inviting you. And he will forgive you. And he will have you there. Come to him. And if we have come, I hope.

Again, we feel that this is wonderful. Because, you know, we weren't originally invited. We were not supposed to be there. We're the Gentiles. Right? These people, they had a great privilege that they've lost.

[30 : 19] But we were the underprivileged. It doesn't feel like that, right? Because we are Hong Kongers. And many of us, we are wealthy. And we are educated. And we have great jobs. We are the most privileged people here. Actually, when it comes to God, we were very, very underprivileged.

We had no part in God or whatsoever. But now, instead, the gates are open. And we are welcome to come. So, yeah.

Come. And rejoice that we now can be part of this. We can be tenants in the vineyard. We can be guests at a wedding. And share it. Right?

You know, isn't this a wonderful news to bring people to when we have explore? So, agree. Agree. Receive. Though, at the same time, there is a little twist at the end of the last parable.

Right? At the same time, don't presume. Don't presume. I mean, it sounds so encouraging in a way. Right? That last story about the wedding feast.

[31 : 22] That, you know, the king sends his servants and they go out into the roads and gather all whom they found. Both bad and good. And so, the wedding hall was filled with guests.

And they lived happily ever after. That is not what it says. Right? There's a little twist. Verse 11. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment.

And he said to him, friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Among the guests there, there's one guy without a wedding garment. I don't know.

Here in Hong Kong, I've been to quite a few weddings. Sometimes people come and it looks like they just came from the beach. I don't know what it is. But normally, people, they dress up for a wedding. Right?

You have a wedding garment. And this guy doesn't. Right? I don't know what he thought. But he thought he was in. And I can be at the feast. But clearly, he is lacking something.

[32 : 23] And so, these are, I guess there are people who, you know, they think they're in. And they come to church. And hey, you know, yes, Israel. But now, it's the time of the Gentiles.

And I come to church. And I'm okay. And actually, well, what is Jesus saying? There is still something you need. Right? It's a wonderful investigation. But there is something you need. What do you need?

Well, what is that wedding garment? It doesn't say. But in context. I mean, you could think of fruit, right? What does he want? He wants people producing fruit. What kind of fruit?

Well, you read on, you know. You get these confrontations about loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You know, give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Give to God what is God's. But I think that sounds like, okay, we need to produce enough fruit.

And it's not. But that's not here, right? A wedding garment is a binary thing. You have it or you don't. It's not that, you know, he had a wedding garment, but it was the wrong brand. Or it wasn't white enough or whatever, right?

[33 : 24] You have it or you don't. I mean, where does our fruit come from? Well, we heard it earlier this year, right? Our fruit comes from being connected to the vine, to Christ. The new tenants, well, this new temple is focused on the cornerstone.

It's people who are connected to the cornerstone who are in, right? So ultimately this is, yeah, I guess this is a guy who never came to Christ. He came to church and he thought he was part of it.

Actually, you do need Jesus. And that is a warning for us, right? It's great to be here. And it's a great privilege actually have you come to Jesus.

And is that shown in your life by the fruit that should follow from that if we're connected to the vine? But let's see that in the part of a bigger picture, right?

Yes, this is a messy chapter. Judgment is good and right. But it's for a good reason. And there's a wonderful invitation. Let's take it and let's just make sure we're part of it.

[34 : 34] Okay, why don't we pray and take this in? Let me just leave us for 30 seconds and then I'll pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord Jesus, we do stand in awe of you.

We are so small. You are so great. The one who deposes nations, who changes the order of the world. But also the one who invites us now to come to him, to receive his invitation, to receive his forgiveness.

Yes, Father. For all of us who've done that, pray that we would rejoice in that. We would be thankful for your privilege of being part of this. Lord, we know what we deserve.

We are just as unworthy as others. But, yeah, we are those who have accepted. Come to Jesus. We pray for those who haven't done yet yet.

Those of us who presume. Pray that you'd make it clear to us that we need Jesus. And would we turn to him? Come to him. Come to the cornerstone. And find life.

[36 : 11] And, yeah, have what we need to be there one day at your great wedding feast. Lord, please turn our eyes to that. And help us, yeah, to see you as you are.

And live that way. In Jesus' name. Amen.