SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

Beyond Right and Wrong: The Journey of Faith

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost · September 27, 2026
Readings: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32 · Psalm 25:1–9 · Philippians 2:1–13 · Matthew 21:23–32

Preached by Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT thomaslucking.com

Introduction: Do You Want to Be Right, or in Relationship?

If you have ever sat in a counseling room, if you have ever tried to navigate a strained marriage, or if you have simply tried to have an honest conversation across a dinner table during an election year, you know a fundamental truth about human nature: we love simplicity. We crave black-and-white clarity. We like clear rules, neat categories, and tidy boundaries where we get to be right and someone else gets to be wrong.

In mental health work, particularly when working with couples locked in a fierce, exhausting standoff, there is a classic question that cuts straight to the core of the struggle: **"Do you want to be right, or do you want to be in a relationship?"**

Because so often, you cannot have both.

Standing on the moral high ground of "being right" feels safe to the ego. It provides a defensive wall against anxiety. But a relationship doesn't happen on a pedestal; it happens in the valley. Relationship requires us to step down into complexity, into vulnerability, and ultimately into love.

We live in a culture that is utterly addicted to the low-level safety of "being right." The author and theologian Jim Wallis once famously captured our political landscape with a brilliant phrase: *"The right is wrong, and the left doesn't get it."* Whether it is politics, sports fandom, cable news, or social media algorithms, our entire society is engineered 24 hours a day to keep us trapped in simple, binary tribalism. "Us versus them." Good guys versus bad guys.

Psychologist Carl Jung pointed out that this impulse to organize the world into stark opposites is one of the most basic, natural defense mechanisms of the human psyche. It is how we try to protect ourselves from the overwhelming chaos of a messy world.

And let's be honest: religion can be the most dangerous place of all for this black-and-white thinking. When faith gets stuck at the level of simple rule-keeping and law-enforcement, it does immense damage. It creates a rigid self-righteousness. It uses God as a weapon. It fuels literal and spiritual wars, leaving broken people outside the gates while those inside congratulate themselves on being correct.

The Law is natural—it reflects cause and effect, order, boundaries, and consequences. And structure is necessary! But Jesus did not come merely to leave us under the Law. He came to fulfill it and to invite us into the *supernatural*—into a path of faith that moves beyond our addiction to being right, leading us directly into the heart of God.

In our Gospel reading today from Matthew 21, Jesus meets a group of leaders who are utterly trapped in the obsession with "being right." And through a simple parable, He lays out a map of spiritual growth—a journey that moves through four distinct seasons as noted by author Brian McLaren: **Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, and Harmony.**

Movement 1: Simplicity (The Safety of the Law)

Our Gospel text opens in the temple courts. Jesus is teaching, and the chief priests and elders confront Him with a legal question: *"By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?"*

Notice what they are asking for. They want credentials. They want protocol. They want to force Jesus into a simple, binary debate about rules and institutional status. They are living in the first stage of faith: **Simplicity.**

Simplicity is the realm of the Law. It is black-and-white. It says: *If you keep the rules, God blesses you. If you break the rules, God punishes you.* We see this same black-and-white framework in our first reading from Ezekiel 18: *"The soul that sins shall die."* Clear, direct cause-and-effect.

Now, let's be fair to Simplicity: structure is not evil. Order is a gift! God is a God of order, not of chaos. When someone's life is falling apart in addiction, chaos, or destructive behavior, moving into a season of structure, clear boundaries, and moral accountability is life-saving. We need rules. Children need boundaries. Communities need laws. Simplicity gives us our initial vocabulary of faith.

The danger arises when Simplicity becomes an end in itself—when order becomes an idol.

Jesus exposes this trap in the Parable of the Two Sons. A father has two sons and tells them both to go work in the vineyard.

The second son smiles, bows, and says with perfect politeness, *"I go, sir."* He has the right titles. He uses the right language. He looks spiritually proper on paper. But he never actually sets foot in the vineyard.

That second son is the picture of religion trapped in Simplicity. It is all lip-service. It is the person who is obsessed with looking right, holding the correct doctrinal stance, and belonging to the right religious institution, but whose heart remains entirely untamed by grace. They say "Yes" to God with their lips, but their life never leaves the comfort of the porch.

Movement 2: Complexity (Wisdom & The Messiness of Life)

Jesus doesn't leave the parable at the porch; He drags His listeners straight into the second stage: **Complexity.**

The first son in the story is messy. When his father tells him to go work in the vineyard, he crosses his arms and flatly refuses: *"I will not."* He is rude, disobedient, and outwardly wrong.

But later, something happens inside him. The text says he changed his mind—he experienced a shift in his heart—and he went out into the dirt and got to work.

Jesus asks the religious leaders a simple question: *"Which of the two did the will of his father?"*

They are forced to answer: *"The first."*

And with that single line, Jesus shatters their neat, black-and-white worldview. Welcome to Complexity.

Complexity is the season of wisdom where we realize that real life rarely fits into tidy, pristine boxes. In the real world, the people who look spiritually pristine on paper are sometimes completely disengaged from love and mercy. And the people who look rough around the edges, who have a bad start, who say "No" at first, are often the very ones who end up showing up for their neighbors when it matters most.

Ezekiel 18 pushes us into this same complexity: a righteous father can have a rebellious son, and a rebellious father can have a righteous son. You cannot live off the spiritual pedigree of your family or your institution. Faith is an active, living, messy engagement with God in the middle of real life.

When we move into Complexity, we realize that following Jesus isn't about maintaining a squeaky-clean image. It's about getting our hands dirty in the vineyard of a broken world.

Movement 3: Perplexity (When the Rules Break Down)

When you move out of simple black-and-white thinking, something uncomfortable happens. You eventually hit a wall. You enter the third stage: **Perplexity.**

Perplexity is the season of wrestling, deconstruction, and deep questioning. It happens when life hands you a tragedy that your simple answers cannot fix. It happens when you see hypocrisy in the church, when political institutions fail, or when you realize that your good behavior doesn't guarantee a trouble-free life.

We see this exact moment of Perplexity play out in the text when Jesus turns the table on the chief priests. Before answering their question about authority, He asks them one: *"John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?"*

Look at the trap they are in. They pull back into a huddle and deliberate: *"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."*

Their neat system of control completely breaks down. Their political self-preservation is exposed. And so, the great religious experts, the masters of having all the right answers, are forced to stand in front of the crowd and mutter four words: *"We do not know."*

That is Perplexity. It is the moment where our certainty collapses.

And then Jesus delivers the most shocking, offensive Gospel declaration in the entire New Testament: **"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."**

Imagine the scandal! Tax collectors were seen as national traitors; prostitutes were seen as morally bankrupt. Yet Jesus says they are jumping the queue into the Kingdom! Why? Because when John the Baptist came showing the way of righteousness, the self-righteous leaders hid behind their status, while the broken, the outcasts, and the sinners looked at their lives, recognized their need for mercy, and surrendered to God.

Now, there is a subtle trap in Perplexity that we must be careful of. When people enter this stage of questioning and deconstruction, the human ego often finds a new game to play: cynicism.

It is always much easier to tear something down than to build something up. It is far easier to have an enemy—to poke holes in someone else's beliefs, to criticize the church, or to judge political opponents—than it is to take the vulnerable risk of actually standing for something fragile yourself. Perplexity can make us intellectual critics who sit on the sidelines, pointing out flaws while never entering the vineyard ourselves.

But Perplexity serves a holy purpose. God uses Perplexity as a mirror. It strips away our self-righteousness. It destroys the illusion that we can earn God's favor through our correct opinions, our perfect politics, or our religious performance.

Perplexity drives us to our knees to pray the words of our Psalter today (Psalm 25): *"Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!"*

Movement 4: Harmony (The Self-Emptying Love of Christ)

If Simplicity is about Law, and Perplexity is about Judgment, where does the Gospel land us?

It brings us to the fourth stage: **Harmony.**

Harmony is not a return to simple black-and-white rules, nor is it staying stuck in cynical doubt. Harmony is a faith that has been broken open by grace and reorganized around love.

How does God resolve the mess, the complexity, and the perplexity of the human condition? He does not do it by slamming down a heavy hammer of law. He does it through what the apostle Paul describes in our second reading from Philippians 2—the ultimate passage of divine Harmony.

Paul writes:

> *"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he emptied himself by taking the very nature of a servant..."*

Think about that! God Himself did not stand on His right to be "right." He did not stay in the exalted safety of heaven, firing down rules at us.

Instead, in Jesus Christ, God chose **relationship over being right.**

Jesus is the ultimate **True Son.** Where we said "Yes" with our lips and walked away, Jesus stepped down. He emptied Himself (*kenosis*). He took on human flesh. He entered the messy, chaotic, complex vineyard of our broken world. He sat at tables with tax collectors and prostitutes. He touched lepers. He bore the cynicism of the religious elite, the violence of empire, and the weight of our sins on the cross.

And through His death and resurrection, Jesus turned our stubborn "No" into a redeemed "Yes."

In Harmony, you no longer look at the world through the narrow lens of "who is in and who is out." You no longer need to win every argument to feel secure. You realize that you are a sinner saved entirely by unearned grace—and that the person across from you, even the person you disagree with politically or relationally, is someone for whom Christ died.

Conclusion: Welcome to the Vineyard

My friends, wherever you find yourself today on this map of faith, hear this Good News: **God's grace meets you right where you are, but it loves you too much to leave you there.**

If you are in a season of **Simplicity**, craving order and structure—thank God for the gift of His Law, but remember that rules without love will turn your heart cold. Don't settle for being the second son who speaks polite words but never goes into the field.

If you are in a season of **Complexity or Perplexity**, wrestling with hard questions, struggling with doubt, or weary of institutional hypocrisy—do not be afraid. God is not angry with your questions. The collapse of your self-righteousness is not the end of your faith; it is the beginning of your salvation. Let the confusion drive you past your ego and into the arms of mercy.

And as we come to the Lord's Table today, we are given a foretaste of **Harmony.**

At this altar, Jesus does not ask for your credentials. He does not ask if you have solved all the world's complexities or if you have a perfect theological record. He simply invites broken, imperfect people who need a Savior to come and eat.

In a world consumed by tribalism, fighting to be right, Jesus invites us to be in relationship.

So let us step off the high ground of our own pride. Let us put down our weapons of self-righteousness. And led by the Spirit of the One who emptied Himself for us, let us go out together into the vineyard—to love, to serve, and to live in the grace of God that passes all human understanding.

Amen.

Dr. Thomas Lucking, PhD, LMFT is a psychotherapist and coach who preaches at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in the Santa Cruz area. More sermons and information about Christian counseling: **thomaslucking.com/sermons**

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