

RIVER *Flow*

Seven Days of Devotional Practice
September 27 — October 3, 2026

The Way of Righteousness

A Note Before You Sit

Everyone in Matthew 21 heard the same word. The two sons in the parable received one command. The tax collectors and the temple leaders heard the same preacher standing in the same river. Nobody in the story suffered from a shortage of information.

What separated them was smaller than knowledge and much harder. It was whether they could turn around. One son said no and turned. One said yes and did not move. One crowd came up out of the water changed; the other watched it happen and stayed dry on the bank.

This week we walk the road that ran through the middle of all of them. Matthew calls it the way of righteousness. It is not a rank you hold or a reputation you keep. It is a road, and the only question a road asks is whether you will walk it. Sit with that question through these seven days. Do not settle it too quickly.

— *Pastor Mel Baga, D.Min.*
Lead Pastor, Auburn SDA Church

Daily Devotional Guide

SUNDAY, September 27 — By What Authority

*“By what authority are you doing these things?” — Matthew
21:23*

Read: Matthew 21:23–27

Reflect: The morning after Jesus overturned the tables, a delegation finds him teaching in the temple courts—chief priests and elders, the men whose office was to certify who could speak for God. *En poia exousia*—by what authority. Who signed off on you. The question is fair enough; a prophet was expected to show his commission.

Jesus produces no document. He asks a question back, and by the end the men who came to examine his authority have shown they have none of their own to judge with. Real authority did not argue for itself or reach for a lineage. It was simply what it was, and left the credentialing committee holding an empty folder. Power announces itself; authority is recognized. The leaders had the first and mistook it for the second.

Notice: Through the day, notice which voices you obey because they hold a position and which you trust because they have proven true.

Pray: Lord, I have trusted titles that were hollow and dismissed truth that came without a badge. Teach me to know your voice by its weight and not by its office. Amen.

Stay: After the prayer, sit in silence. Twenty minutes is the goal; take less if that is what you have. Sit upright and close your eyes. Before you begin, choose one word to return to — a single syllable is best — or simply return to your breath, noticing it at the tip of your nose. Once you have recentered, you can release the word as well, and release the focus on the breath, and return to the silence. When you find that your mind has generated a thought or a sensation, let it go quietly, say the word or come back to the breath, and continue sitting. Do this as often as the interruptions come. You are not emptying your mind. You are resting it, and consenting to God’s presence and to his unseen work in you. That is the practice each day of the week.

MONDAY, September 28 — The Question Behind the Question

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” — Matthew 21:25

Read: Matthew 21:24–27; Matthew 3:1–6; John 1:29–34

Reflect: Jesus answers a question with a question, which looks like a debater’s trick until you see what he chose to ask. He asked about John. *To baptisma to Ioannou*—the baptism of John—stands for the whole of John’s work: the preaching, the call to repent, the water, and the finger he pointed at Jesus and would not lower.

So it was no dodge. It was the same question in other clothes. To say where John’s authority came from was to say where Jesus’s came from, because John had spent his ministry saying so. The leaders understood at once, went quiet, and began to calculate. The man they were interrogating had already been vouched for, by a prophet they could neither affirm nor deny.

God rarely leaves us without a witness. Often the word we are avoiding has already come once, in someone we found easy to set aside.

Notice: Ask whether there is a word you are treating as an open question that God may have already answered through someone you did not want to hear.

Pray: God, I have kept questions open long after you closed them, because staying undecided felt safer than obeying. Give me the honesty to admit what I already know. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Today let your word be one that yields — *I turn*, or *here I am*.

TUESDAY, September 29 — We Do Not Know

“So they answered Jesus, ”“We do not know.”” — Matthew 21:27

Read: Matthew 21:25–27

Reflect: They knew. Judging whether a prophet spoke for God was the exact competence their office existed to exercise. “We do not know” was no confession of ignorance but a refusal to say aloud what they had already concluded. Matthew lets us overhear the private part: they did not weigh whether John was true. They weighed what each answer would cost them.

One answer led to a follow-up they could not survive—if John was from heaven, why did you not believe him. The other alienated a crowd that loved him. So they took a third road that was no road: they played dumb. And the men whose authority rested on telling true from false announced, in front of everyone, that they could not.

There is a dishonesty available only to those who know better. It does not deny the truth; it declines to say it, and calls the silence prudence. It is quieter than a lie and does the same work.

Notice: Watch for the moment today when you say “I’m not sure” about something you are sure of, because saying so out loud would obligate you.

Pray: Lord, I have hidden behind “I don’t know” to keep from having to change. Forgive the silences that were really refusals. Let my yes be yes. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Notice how much of the sitting goes to managing yourself rather than resting, and return to the word without scoring how you are doing.

WEDNESDAY, September 30 — The Word You Back With Your Feet

*“I will not; but later he changed his mind and went.” — Matthew
21:29*

Read: Matthew 21:28–31a; Isaiah 5:1–7

Reflect: Two sons, one command: go and work in the vineyard today. In Israel’s Scriptures the vineyard is the covenant people, the plot God planted and expected fruit from (Isaiah 5). To be sent into it is to be sent into the work of God’s will—and the father says *today*.

The first son says *ou thelo*—“I will not”—flat, rude, shocking in a culture where honoring a father sat near the center of the law. Then he goes. Matthew’s word for what turned in him is *metamelomai*—not the grand word for repentance but a plainer one, the change of mind a hard and embarrassed heart can still manage. He does not become eloquent. He picks up the tools.

The second son says *ego, kyrie*—“I go, sir”—the right words in the right tone. And he does not go. The word that counts before God is the one your feet finish. Speech is the cheapest thing we own; the vineyard does not care what you said at the door.

Notice: Find one place where you have said yes with your mouth and no with your calendar. Do not fix it yet. Just see it plainly.

Pray: Father, I am fluent in the yes that costs nothing. Make me the son who argues at the door and then shows up in the field. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Before you begin, name to God one thing you have meant to do and have not; then set it down and keep the silence.

THURSDAY, October 1 — A Road, Not a Rank

*“For John came to you in the way of righteousness.” — Matthew
21:32*

Read: Matthew 21:32; Proverbs 8:20; 2 Peter 2:21

Reflect: Explaining why the outsiders got in ahead of the insiders, Jesus uses a phrase worth slowing over. John came *en hodo dikaiosynes*—“in the way of righteousness”. *Hodos* is a road. The phrase belongs to Proverbs, where wisdom walks the way of righteousness and the way leads to life. Righteousness there is not a standing achieved. It is a road under your feet, walked or not.

The leaders held righteousness as a rank—in their office and their command of the text. John preached it as a road, and the two do not mix. A rank is something you defend; a road is something you walk, and you can stand at its edge admiring it and never take a step. John called for the very thing they claimed to possess, and exposed that they held it as a title, not a direction. Their tragedy is not that they lacked righteousness. It is that they had its reputation and none of its motion.

Notice: Ask which one you are protecting today—a road you are walking, or a rank you are keeping.

Pray: Lord, I have collected righteousness like a credential and left it in a drawer. Put me back on the road. I would rather be walking badly than standing still and respectable. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Let your word carry motion — a single *step*, or *come* — and imagine setting one foot down each time you return.

FRIDAY, October 2 — Nothing Left to Defend

“The tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.” — Matthew 21:32

Read: Matthew 21:31b–32

Reflect: The people who turned first had the least to lose. Tax collectors worked for Rome against their own; prostitutes broke the law in the most visible way there was. Both were shut out of respectable religious life and knew it. When John called them to repent, nothing rose up in them to protect a reputation, because they had none to protect.

Jesus is careful about why, and it is not the reason we reach for. He does not say the outcasts were secretly better. He says they believed and the leaders did not, and the difference was receptivity, not virtue. They were free to change because they were already undone; there was no self left to defend against the word. The leaders had a self built entirely of being right, and a word requiring them to be wrong could not get in.

“Ahead of you”, he says—not *instead of* you. The door is not shut to them. But the outcasts reach it first, because the distance from the ground to repentance is shorter when you are already on the ground. Whatever in us has been humbled and stripped of its case is not only a wound. It is the opening the word has been waiting for.

Notice: Name the place where you have the least standing to protect, and ask whether that is also where you can most hear God.

Pray: God, the parts of me that feel secure are the parts that will not bend. Meet me where I have already been undone, and let that be the door. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Tomorrow the week comes back together; today hold the silence with empty hands and ask for nothing but presence.

SABBATH, October 3 — Which Son

“Which of the two did the will of his father?” — Matthew 21:31

Read: Matthew 21:28–32; Matthew 7:21

Reflect: The parable was aimed at the men in the temple, but Matthew kept it, so it is now aimed at whoever reads it. The father’s question stands in the open: which of the two did his will. All week the passage has drawn one line through very different people—two sons, two crowds, those who could turn and those who could not. Today the line runs through you.

Jesus said elsewhere that not everyone who says *Lord, Lord* enters the kingdom, but the one who does the Father’s will (Matthew 7:21). The parable is that sentence turned into a story. The kingdom is entered not by the correctness of what we profess on the Sabbath but by feet that go into the vineyard on Monday. The capacity to turn—to say the honest no and then go—is itself a gift, and the ones who had it were not the likeliest.

You are back with the congregation today, saying the right words in the right place, and the words are good. The week’s one question is whether your feet will follow them out the door. Enter the vineyard the way God has prepared it for this season, even if it looks nothing like the vineyard you expected.

Notice: Before the day ends, name to God the one place your feet need to go this week, and let the naming be the first step.

Pray: Father, I have said yes to you in rooms full of people. Now let me be the son who goes. Where the way of righteousness runs through my ordinary week, give me feet to walk it. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Take the full twenty minutes today if you can, and when the sitting ends, do not rush on. Let the stillness be the arrival it is.

Group Discussion Questions

1. The week began with the claim that authority is recognized rather than announced. Whose voice do you actually trust, and what has made it trustworthy—position, or something proven over time?
2. Monday suggested that the word we are avoiding has often already come to us once, through someone we found easy to dismiss. Is there such a word, and such a person, in your life right now?
3. Tuesday named the quiet dishonesty of “I don’t know” spoken by people who do know. Where have you used uncertainty to avoid an obligation?
4. Wednesday drew the line between the yes that costs nothing and the no that is followed by obedience. Which son’s pattern is more natural to you, and where does it show?
5. Thursday distinguished righteousness held as a rank from righteousness walked as a road. Name one area where you have been keeping the rank and not walking the road.
6. Friday claimed that the places where we have the least to defend are often where we hear God most clearly. Has that been true in your experience? Where are you most undone right now?
7. The week ends with the father’s question left standing: which son am I? Holding the whole week together, where specifically are your feet being sent, and what would it cost to go?