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Jesus told this parable to challenge the authority of the religious leaders who sought to kill him. He said,

Matthew 21:28-32 (NRSV)

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' [29] He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. [30] The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. [31] Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. [32] 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

## FAITH STATEMENTS AND VIOLENCE

In the film, *The Godfather*, there is a classic scene that illustrates very well that a profession of faith does not necessarily mean there will be an appropriate change in behavior. Michael Corleone, the youngest member of the gangster family has just taken over for his father as head of the family, and he has consented to be the baptismal sponsor or Godfather for his infant nephew.

As the audience watches the elaborate service, the film flashes back and forth between the baptism and scenes of violence that have been ordered by Michael to take place at the very moment the baptism is being performed.

The contrast is dramatic. "Michael," the priest asks, "do you believe in God the Father Almighty?" "I believe," says Michael. And the next scene shows a man gunned down as he steps out of the elevator. "Do you believe in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord?" asks the priest. "I believe," says Michael solemnly, and the scene shifts to a steam room where a man is murdered

violently as he enjoys a massage. Throughout the religious ceremony statements of faith are paired with a violent murder.

This powerful scene has always reminded me of Jesus' confrontation with the religious authorities of his day.

These religious authorities were the keepers of the faith. They were entrusted with the message of the Law and the Prophets. And yet they did not put what they knew to be true into action.

Worse, these religious leaders were actually enemies of God's own Son, Jesus.

## A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Jesus entered Jerusalem during the last week of his life. A showdown was inevitable. When Jesus entered the town the crowds cheered Him and proclaimed Him to be the Messiah. They said, "Hosanna to the Son of David."

Jesus on his own authority then proceeded to eliminate the corruption of the moneychangers in the temple, overturning their tables and driving them out. Jesus then did in Jerusalem what he had already been doing for a long time in the countryside. He healed people, people who seemed to be beyond help, people who were blind and lame. In light of all this, the crowds were just getting bigger and bigger and from the standpoint of some, more dangerous.

Jesus was becoming more and more of a threat to the political and religious leaders of the day. The crowds were making some rather unflattering comparisons between Jesus and their leaders. Jesus taught as one who had authority. Their leaders didn't seem to have so much authority any more, at least not compared to Jesus. Jesus was in a league of His own.

There was only one thing for the leaders to do. In order to preserve their power and authority, they needed to confront Jesus. They needed to question his authority to preserve their own. So they asked Jesus,

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

Jesus, knowing their treachery refused to answer directly at first. He said, “I’ll answer your question if you answer mine. You remember John the Baptist and his baptisms. Where did he get authority to baptize? Was he a servant of God or did he just do this on his own?”

They couldn't answer that question. If they said that John just baptized on his own authority, then the crowd would be angry with them because most of the common people thought John was a prophet. On the other hand if they said that John’s baptism was from God, then Jesus could say, “If you thought John was from God why didn't you change your ways and follow him?”

So they simply said, “We don't know.” And Jesus replied, “Well, then I'm not going to answer your question either.”

## A TALE OF TWO SONS

But, in a way Jesus did answer their question, at least indirectly. He answered their question by telling a story, a parable about a father who had two sons.

The father asked one son to go out and work in the vineyard. That son replied, “Are you kidding? It’s too hot. Hire somebody else to do it. Why do you always ask me to do the hard jobs?”

But, later the father looked up from what he was doing and noticed that this rather impudent son had apparently changed his mind. He was now working in the vineyard.

And so the father decided to try his luck with son number two. He asked this son, "Would you mind going out into the vineyard to work a while?" And his son said, "Father, nothing would please me more than to go out into the field and work for you. You know me. I'll do anything for my dear old Dad."

Don't you just love it when a child is so pleasant like this? Two hours later son number two is still on the couch watching MTV.

This, of course, is a parable. It teaches an important spiritual lesson. And Jesus, the teacher, asks his pupils, the religious leaders of the day, "Now think real hard. Which son do you think pleased the father more? Was it the one who said "no" and then went into action or the one who politely said "yes" but then did nothing?"

## INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION

There are some things in life that we cannot know unless we do them. For example, someone can give a lecture on dance. It can be a very good lecture, but we would not understand dance by listening to the lecture. The only way to understand dance is to feel the moves and let the rhythm take over our body.

I was one of many viewers who watched ABC's hit summer program, "Dancing with the Stars." A few months ago I would have turned it off or left the room, but now I was interested and watching this show with my wife.

Now how did this miracle occur?

A few months prior to this show my wife and I had begun to take ballroom dance lessons, and I actually had some empathy for those stars that were performing. I had some inkling of how difficult it would be for amateurs to learn how to dance in just a few weeks and then compete on TV. The show had meaning for me because I had just a little bit of practical experience.

That's why men often like football and women don't. Many men have had the opportunity to play the game at one time or another. We are amazed when Peyton Manning can whiz the ball through the air for a great distance because we have tried to throw a pass ourselves. We appreciate the moves of a great running back because we too have tried to make a few moves in our day.

And those of us who played on the offensive line can even appreciate the skill of a well-thrown block. The game has more meaning for men because many of us have played the sport.

There are a number of areas where this is true.

What TV shows do you watch? What magazines or books do you read? I'll bet that in many cases you have an interest because you have some practical experience. We always have an interest in those things that we have participated in at one time or another.

## FAITH AND PARTICIPATION

The same is true with the Christian faith. The Christian faith is not an armchair philosophy. The Christian faith is a participation sport. And if you do not have an interest in the faith, perhaps it is because you have not been participating!

Faith is more than just memorizing the Apostle's Creed, reading the Bible and learning the basics of some major doctrines. Faith is more than just listening to a sermon, repeating some prayers and singing some songs before going to our favorite restaurant.

All of these things are good. They are necessary. They reinforce what we believe and the faith in which we stand.

But, our study of the faith is like the study of dance. In order for it to be any good, it has to be put into practice. Practical experience is the most important

part of the equation. If we do not practice what we preach, we will soon subscribe to a religion that is devoid of all power and meaning.

Like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, instead of putting faith in God, we will put faith in our own power and authority. Religion will become just another way to get what we want instead of doing what God wants.

James wrote in his letter that faith without works is dead. There is no point to faith if it is not put into action.

## THE CHURCH'S PURPOSE

And, there is no point to the church if it does not help us honor God in some practical way.

The writer of the book of Hebrews said that the church is important. But, he did not say that the church is important in and of itself. He said that the church has a purpose and that purpose is to encourage one another to live up to the high calling that is ours in Christ Jesus.

In Hebrews 10:24-25 we read,

“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

In order to do ballroom dancing you need a partner. In fact, as you progress you are encouraged to dance with various partners in order to improve your skill. New friendships develop and deepen as you learn together how to become a better dancer.

You become adept at assessing the skill level of a partner and adapting what you do in response. You develop sensitivity to your own movements and the movements of your partner. You learn how to maneuver around a crowded dance floor.

That is a pretty good example of what we are trying to do in the church. We are dancing together. We are learning how to do what God in Christ calls us to do. It is not always easy, and sometimes we step on each other's toes because we haven't learned the basic steps of the faith. The world in which we live is crowded and complicated, and sometimes the challenges seem too great for us.

But, God in Christ calls us to keep on dancing. He calls us to keep on moving to the rhythms of faith, trusting that the rough spots can be overcome if we only put into practice those things that we have learned and know to be true.

We won't be perfect. That's impossible.

But, we can keep on dancing. We can keep on trying to change our life in light of God's love as revealed in Jesus. It is in the struggle of that dance that we find the joy and the power of the Christian life.

## JESUS PRACTICED WHAT HE PREACHED

You see Jesus was not a philosopher who laid out a system of theoretical beliefs. Jesus was a teacher whose life taught what he preached. Jesus practiced what he preached.

The authority of Jesus lay in what he said and in what he did. And he said that those who hear his words and put them into practice are the ones who have built their house on a solid rock that will withstand the storms of life.

But, the religious leaders of Jesus' day had lost their moral authority because they had built their house on a foundation of sand. They no longer practiced what they preached. In their hands the law was no longer a tool to honor God and encourage moral behavior. They had turned the law into a way of ordering society for their own benefit.

Jesus with his simple little parable was able to drive home this fact. He asked them a seemingly innocent question. So, tell me what you think. Who did the will of the father? The answer was so simple and obvious. They blurted it right out without a second thought, “The one who obeyed the father did his will.”

“Snap” went the trap as the religious leaders were convicted by their own words. They got the answer to the question right on Jesus’ little test, but they got it wrong in their own lives.

### AN ATTACK ON THE “RELIGIOUS”

Jesus in one of the most scathing attacks of the New Testament told these movers and shakers,

“The con men and the prostitutes are going to make it into heaven before you. At least they were willing to listen to John’s warnings. They were willing to change their lives in response to his message. But, you were not willing to change. You ignored John’s warnings despite the power of his preaching. You would not repent and go in a different direction. Now you’re in real trouble.”

The problem with the religious leaders of Jesus’ day was that they didn’t see any need for repentance in their lives. They didn’t see any need for change. They were good enough, or so they thought. And so they rejected Jesus and his challenge.

The religious leaders wanted to question the authority of Jesus, but now their authority is questioned in the most severe way. If you ever wonder why Jesus was crucified, look no farther than this passage. If we were to tell the leaders in our community that they are worse than con men and prostitutes, that they have perverted the law and are breaking God’s heart. What do you think they would do?

Trust me. The “powers that be” still do not respond kindly to having their authority challenged.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

But, this parable is not so much about those “other people” who don't practice what they preach and so break the heart of God. This parable is about how we refuse to do what faith requires. This parable is about how we tell God “yes” and then we fail to follow through on our promise.

When Jesus in our lesson for today asks, “What do you think?” The question is directed not only toward those religious leaders who lived long ago. It is directed also toward us.

Are we laying down our lips for the gospel but not laying down our lives? Are we trying to make Christianity into an arid philosophy instead of a way of life? Are we politely saying “yes” to the call of our Heavenly Father and yet not going to work in the vineyard.

Jesus didn't tell the religious leaders of his day that they were worse than “prostitutes and con men” because he wanted to put them down. He wanted to shock them out of their complacency. He wanted to warn them that faith without works has no foundation.

I would suggest that many of us need that same warning. Faith requires more than promises. It requires practice. And each and every day we have an opportunity to practice what we preach in a greater way.

This is what makes our faith vital and exciting. Every day when we greet the rising sun we get to ask our Lord, “What do you want me to do today? What do you want me to say? Where do you want me to go?”

Faith is an adventure based upon obedience to the call of Christ.

## LORD OF THE DANCE

Or, to put it another way, faith is a call to dance with Jesus.  
Faith is a call to follow Jesus wherever he might lead.

When my wife and I first began our dance lessons, we were quite anxious about going to our first “real” dance. Some of us really did have two left feet ... or in the case of some couples we had four left feet! I hadn't felt so uneasy since the time I went to my first dance in junior high school!

But, our teacher told us that we would never learn to dance if we didn't put our lessons into practice on the dance floor. She said that we would make mistakes, but we shouldn't worry about them. The most important rule was to just smile and keep dancing.

She was right, and that's not bad advice for those of us who would be disciples of Jesus. It is not a matter of being perfect. It is a matter of smiling and continuing to dance, putting into practice the things that Jesus has taught us.

Today's second hymn uses this dance metaphor to describe the life of Christ. According to the hymn, the coming of Jesus into the world is like an invitation to dance.

He is, as the hymn puts it, Lord of the dance. Some reject the call to follow his lead, but others are courageous enough to follow. They are able to put His dance steps into practice, and the world has been dancing every since.

What about you? Do you want to join the dance? It's never too late you know.

Don't worry, Jesus will take the lead, but you have to get up out of your seat and do something.

You might be amazed at the beauty the two of you can create.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN