

## **Matthew 21:23-32**

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as 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 am doing these things.

28 "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.

### **A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY**

John the Baptist had recently been beheaded. John was popular with the people, and they mourned his loss. But, the religious and political authorities were not so sad.

John was a loose cannon who endangered the fragile peace the authorities had established between themselves and Rome. John's fiery speeches and all his talk about the kingdom and the Messiah had made an already tense situation worse.

So when Herod had John imprisoned and then murdered him, these leaders were not about to say a word. But, the relief of the authorities at the death of John was short lived.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem during the last week of his life riding on a donkey, another more dangerous showdown was inevitable. As Jesus entered the town the crowds cheered Him and proclaimed Him to be the Messiah. When they said, "Hosanna to the Son of David," the die had been cast.

Jesus rode to the temple accompanied by thousands. And he used this moment of glory to do some house cleaning. Jesus on his own authority then proceeded to attack corruption in the temple. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, and drove 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 playing video games.

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?"

## **FAITH AND PARTICIPATION**

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 a manual that tells us how to do something. 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.”**

At a preaching seminar the question was asked, **“What makes a good sermon?”** Someone replied, **“A good sermon helps me think about things in a new way.”** All the other preachers nodded in agreement. At first that sounded good to me as well, but over the years I’ve come to believe that’s a very poor test for a good sermon. In a way such a test can help us avoid what is really important in a good sermon and that is encouraging one another to do something about our faith, to put love into action in some practical way.

## **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.”**

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. Faith is about reaching out in love and compassion.**

## **THE HOSPITAL**

**I heard a story about a hospital that was losing money. The patients were the problem. Some of the patients who came were very ill, and left the hospital no better than they came. Some of the patients were demanding and difficult.**

**So the hospital decided to stop admitting people who were ill. They would only admit those who were in fairly good health. In this way the hospital could be pretty sure of a good outcome. There would be fewer lawsuits, and their shareholders could look forward to bigger profits at the end of the year.**

**I know what you're thinking. "That's a silly story. The point of having a hospital is to work for those who are ill, sometimes seriously ill. The point of having a hospital is not make profits for the shareholders. The point of having a hospital is to heal the sick."**

**And you're right. This is a silly story.**

**Take that as a parable of how silly we can be in the church. We don't exist to make each other feel good. The kingdom of God is not about lording it over others. The church is not about trumpeting our own righteousness. We are here as insiders for the sake of those on the outside.**

**Quite often we forget this. We put up barriers (some subtle and some not so subtle) that keep people from coming. We act like we have never heard this challenging Scripture passage and turn the church into some sort of religious club whose goal is the care and feeding of us insiders instead of finding a way to share the good news of God's salvation and forgiveness.**

**I like that old quote that goes, “The church is a hospital for sinners and not a museum of saints.”**

**In other words the church is not a place where good people get together with other good people. The church is a hospital for sin sickness. And according to the Bible, we all have the disease.**

**The simple parable in today’s lesson should make all of us pause. Just because we are involved in religious life and claim religious authority is no guarantee that we are right.**

**We can be good men and women in the worst sense of the word!**

**This story suggests that even though we say yes to God that saying yes is not enough. Faith must be lived to be real.**

**And this parable also teaches us that those who say no to God still have time to reconsider their decision.**

## **EVANGELISM SUNDAY**

**This is a very appropriate passage for today. Today has been designated by our denomination as evangelism Sunday. We have made many proclamations about the importance of evangelism in the past, but I have found that very few of us give it try.**

**Why? Why are don’t we talk about the grace of God to those outside the faith?**

**I think it’s because we are afraid. We are afraid of having to face our own sinfulness and doubts. And we do have them. And we’re afraid that we will say or do the wrong thing in our effort to proclaim the gospel.**

**I say that our fears are misplaced. In the final analysis it’s not up to us. It’s up to God.**

**It’s true. The message may be rejected. But, I have found that there are still many who are eager to have a sensitive honest discussion about what they believe.**

**And I have also found that those who say no to the Father at first sometimes say yes later on.**

**We can’t determine the decision that someone makes. But, we can be sensitive to what God is calling us to do this day.**

**God has chosen to work through us. God places us in the vineyard. God calls us to produce the fruits of the spirit. God calls us to preach the good news of forgiveness.**

**We are a hospital for sinners. Let us all come to the throne of grace for the cure.**

**Amen.**