

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?" 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. 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?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 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.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 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. 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. *

Actions, Not Words - September 27, 2020

Matthew 21:23-32

One of the neat things about the parables that Jesus told is that they can be interpreted in many ways. On the face of it, this story Jesus tells about two sons seems pretty obvious. A father asks his sons to do some work in the fields. One says, “yes,” but does nothing. The other said, “No,” but changed his mind and did what his father asked. Question: who obeyed his father? Obviously, the one who ended up doing what his father asked. So the moral of the story is something we already knew, actions speak louder than words. So what? Why does Jesus tell this particular story? What does he hope to accomplish by reminding his hearers of an obvious fact?

But the point of the parable is not the story itself, but the audience. To understand this parable, it is necessary to consider who was hearing these words because it makes all the difference.

Jesus tells this parable right after he had been challenged by the chief priests and elders of the people. In other words, those who were in positions of authority. And when I say authority, this was very much the reality. These men, of course they were men, exercised great control over regular folks. Remember, people in Israel did their best to live their lives according to God’s Law. Recall that on top of the ten commandments given by God to Moses, there were hundreds of other Jewish laws that regulated every aspect of life and living — from what people could eat, to what they should wear, to the commandment that farmers must not harvest all their crops so the poor could get a share.

Moreover, on top of the laws themselves was hundreds of years of written commentaries trying to determine exactly how the law should be interpreted for every possible circumstance. For the Jews back then, and even to an extent today, people believed that their relationship with God hinged on how well they obeyed the law — or failed to obey the law. It was widely believed that the quality of your life was directly related to your obedience to God. Those who obeyed would have a good life, blessed with family, food, shelter, and long life. Such people were held up as examples and all were encouraged to model their behavior. On the other hand, people who lived “bad lives” or did things that regularly disobeyed the law were supposed to be condemned by the people. Tax collectors, prostitutes, shepherds. These were among the occupations that were commonly believed to be rejected and hated by God. Moreover, if you were sick or poor or not Jewish, you were similarly considered to be cursed by God.

It was a very judgmental society back then — but really, we can understand the judgement of society, can’t we? How different are we from Jewish society of 2000 years ago? Unless we watch ourselves, we can easily fall into the trap of judging those richer and more powerful than ourselves to be blessed

by God and those who are poor, or non-white, or sick, or dealing with other hardships as being cursed by God and certainly inferior to us. Especially now, when much of the national dialog centers on emphasizing our differences and ranking ourselves in terms of our level of superiority of others, we can be very prone to deciding who the winners and losers are in life and, funny—we can always find losers so we can perceive ourselves as winners.

Thus the chief priests and elders were very well positioned to present themselves as life's winners. They, after all, were selected by society specifically to judge the people and separate the winners from the losers — or, as they put it back then, the sheep from the goats.

Jesus was challenged by these self-proclaimed winners about the source of his authority to teach and preach and heal in the name of God. As we know, Jesus was doing some pretty radical things. There is hardly a story about Jesus in which by helping someone Jesus also enraged the powers-that-be.

Friends, I cannot repeat this enough. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, our Lord and Savior was never the “gentle Jesus meek and mild” sung about or portrayed in artworks or preached in millions of utterly useless sermons over the centuries. No, Jesus was unquestionably a revolutionary who came to shake things up and make us look at life in new and fresh ways.

No doubt it is far easier to follow gentle Jesus than revolutionary Jesus and from the beginning of the church many have sought to domesticate him. His message is just so challenging to us — us as individuals and us as society.

That is why Jesus had to ask the chief priests and elders to “show their cards,” so to speak by asking them about John the Baptizer. Was John preaching and baptizing in God's name, or not?

Whatever we might know about John the Baptizer, I hope we recall that this man, whose task it was to predict and prepare for the coming of Jesus, John was a revolutionary himself. He demanded soldiers not rob the people and the tax collectors not collect more than they were entitled to and even the king obey the marriage laws. In short, John attacked the rich and powerful of his society and the regular people thought it was great. Finally, the regular folks thought, someone who actually says what we're thinking. John was extremely popular and his preaching brought many around to God because he spoke the truth.

Jesus knew, of course, how popular John was. He also knew that the people were tired of the hypocrisy of their leaders who made their lives so hard. John spoke the truth and everyone — from the highest priest to the lowest shepherd — knew it. There are certainly situations today where leaders of all kinds know the truth but do their best to ignore it. John spoke truth. Jesus spoke truth.

So when Jesus asked the religious leaders whether John was on God's side or not, Jesus knew that he had trapped them.

Jesus knew that the leaders knew that John spoke the truth about life and living. Jesus knew that the leaders knew how popular John's message was. Most importantly, Jesus knew that the leaders knew that deep down, these leaders who were tasked with interpreting and enforcing God's Law did not obey it themselves.

Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the leaders of his society. That's why they couldn't answer Jesus' question about whether John was on the side of God or not. They knew full well that John was on God's side meaning that they were not on God's side. The leaders, however, could not and would not admit their hypocrisy and Jesus told his story to seal their fate.

Clearly in the parable, the religious leaders were like the son who said yes but did not do what the father told him to do, These leaders loved their power and money and did not want to give it up.

On the other hand, the tax collectors and prostitutes, who undoubtedly did break God's Law through their actions, also recognized the truth John and Jesus spoke and changed their ways and followed them. At the end of the day, the ones whom society despised were the ones who recognized God in the words and actions of John the Baptizer and Jesus. It is they whom Jesus welcomed into God's Kingdom, not the ones who claimed to know God but did not obey it.

Friends, we, as the so-called church of Jesus Christ, are facing our own time of reckoning. I say we are "so-called" because there are many, too many, people who call themselves Christians who are doing nothing to truly follow the words and actions of Jesus. Quite the opposite — there are far too many who actively reject Jesus' teachings even as they claim to be his followers.

Is it any wonder that there are far more people who believe in God than those who are part of a church? I frankly despair over the future of the church of Jesus Christ when I look at how hypocritical so many leaders and entire congregations have been. Do not, friends, do not measure successful congregations by how many members they have or who is they claim to be members or how fancy their buildings are or what kind of TV ministry they have, or so many other human measurements of success. I believe Jesus would tell you that many of these churches that supposedly call him Lord have no idea who he is and would in fact throw the real Jesus out the door.

Unlike the chief priests and elders of Jesus' day, I am not setting myself up to judge which churches are truly following Jesus and which are not. There is only one judge of the universe and I am not God.

Rather it is up to us as individuals to search ourselves. It is up to us as members of this group called Collingswood Presbyterian Church to search ourselves. It is clear that we all need to pray — pray every day, pray like we've never prayed before. It is clear that we need to study God's Word — start studying if we've never studied it, study it more if that is our habit.

And then, after prayer and after study we need to challenge ourselves individually and collectively by asking whether we are following God's will — or not.

The time has come, friends, to declare ourselves. Our actions must align with our words. Unlike the sons in the parable, both the one who said yes but did nothing and the one who said no but did eventually do as his father's asked, we need to say what we mean and mean what we say.

Every week, we pray the Lord's Prayer. Well, if you really take the time to break it down, really listen to the words, the Lord's Prayer is an extremely radical statement of belief and action. Consider what you really are meaning when you are saying, for example, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." That's not an empty phrase. What we are saying with our mouths is that we approve, support, and trust what God wants for the world — not what we want for ourselves or for the world. I ask you, do you in your heart of hearts really trust God with your life? I mean, are you willing to model your life on the teachings of Jesus and the Laws of Moses? Will you take risks and do and say things that may cause you to lose your friends or family or your job or even your life as you know it? Because folks, that is what Jesus asks his followers to do! I don't need to tell you how messed up the world is today. But when we say, "Thy kingdom come," we are telling God not only do we support, approve, and trust God's plan for the world but also that we ourselves will take an active part in making God's plan become reality. Are you sure you want to say the Lord's Prayer anymore?

Now there are all kinds of people with all kinds of talents who will use them in all kinds of ways to make the kingdom happen. What we are saying in the Lord's Prayer is, "God, you know me and you love me, I ask that you use me just as I am to make your kingdom happen. I trust that you will give me the words to say and the tools I need. Most of all, Lord, I trust that when I do your will I will experience greater peace and satisfaction in my life than I ever have before."

That is just one phrase of the Lord's Prayer. There are quite a few others, each of them equally radical. The point is that for every word we utter with our lips, there is an action associated with it. To follow Jesus means, as he recommended, really letting our "Yes" be our "Yes" and our "No" be our "No." Let us choose in these perilous times to align ourselves and align our congregation with the will of God as revealed by Jesus. Let us both say and do as God asks. Then stand back, and watch the world be transformed!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.