

Matthew 21:23-32

To understand what is going on in this parable of the two sons we need some background information on the passage. Two days prior to this gathering in the temple Jesus entered Jerusalem with a triumphant procession, what we know as Palm Sunday. Upon entering the city, he went straight to the temple and found it being used for unholy purposes. He chased out the moneychangers and the people who were selling sacrificial animals, and invited in the blind, lame, and those who were in need of healing. Of course the Chief Priest and temple elders heard of the commotion. Jesus left that night to stay in Bethany but returned to Jerusalem the next day. It was at that time where the confrontation by the Chief priests and temple elders in today's gospel lesson begins.

Jesus is in the temple teaching and healing when the Chief Priests and elders approach him asking who gave him the authority. In typical Jesus style, Jesus answers a question with a question, this question being about who gave John the Baptist his authority. The temple authorities are afraid to answer because if they say it came from heaven then they are giving authority to Jesus. If they say human origin, then the people will be angry with them because the people know it was heavenly authority. So the temple authorities claim they don't know. Since they would not answer Jesus' question Jesus, as per his statement, refuses to answer their question. Then he goes into three parables, the first of which we hear in today's gospel reading.

You may be thinking, what does a story about two disobedient sons have to do with Chief priests and elders? Two disobedient sons? We can understand why the son who didn't do what he said he would do is disobedient, but isn't the one who said no but then went ahead and did what he was asked to do considered the obedient son? Initially, no. In the time this was written it was unheard of for a son to say no to his father; the son was considered disobedient. As were the tax collectors and prostitutes.

The tax collectors were Jewish men hired by Rome to collect the Roman tax. They were permitted to charge anything more than the actual tax to make their wage. Given this liberty they charged exorbitant fees and were far wealthier than the majority of the Jewish population. They were hated because they worked for the enemy and because they took advantage of their own people in a way that could be equated with stealing, which is of course breaking the commandments, being disobedient. Prostitutes were considered sinners, disobedient to God, because of obvious reasons. Jesus is comparing the Chief priests and pharisees to the tax collectors and prostitutes and finding the holy men wanting. Jesus equated the tax collectors and prostitutes to the son who changed his mind and did what he said he wouldn't do, saying they will enter the kingdom of God before the religious men.

The Chief priests and elders didn't want to say who gave John the Baptist authority because they didn't want to admit to making mistakes, they didn't want to anger the crowd, and they didn't want to jeopardize their position. The chief priests and elders had to maintain a delicate balance between peace with Rome and their duties of worship. They were not regular Jewish citizens; they were in a place of authority and power, and they were corrupt. And that is why Jesus spoke more highly of the outcasts than he did of the high religious authorities. This, even more so than raising Lazarus from the dead, set the authorities against Jesus, a major step in the direction of his crucifixion.

The tax collectors and prostitutes recognized and acknowledged the message from John the Baptist, that his authority came from God; they realized the evil of their ways. The Chief priests

and elders should have known who John the Baptist was, but they refused to acknowledge him and turn from their ways, perhaps because they did not recognize that they were sinners.

Are there times when we don't recognize that we are sinners? I believe there are. So I pray, forgive us for our sins, those we know, and those we don't know we've committed. Are there times when we are disobedient? Of course. There may be times when God would have us act and we choose to simply say no, or we choose to not follow through with actions when we agreed to do something, or maybe we just said yes to get rid of the person who asked, never intending to complete the task. Or we come to church on Sunday but live Monday through Saturday as though God isn't important in our lives. On Thursday I was in Franklin with the group from Imanuel learning about the Tiffany windows. The pastor, Rev. Shawn Clerkin said that the reason younger people aren't in our churches is because they are seeking authenticity. In church they see people profess one thing on Sunday and live their lives in a completely different way; they aren't authentic to their faith. Not only are the younger generation seeking authenticity, but that is also what God is looking for... God wants people who say what they mean and mean what they say. God wants people who walk the talk.

Ah... but we have a chance to recognize that we are not living the life God is asking of us. We have a chance to repent, to turn towards God through Jesus, to ask for forgiveness through Jesus. By turning and growing toward God we will be inclined to change our ways. This is the key message of Jesus' story and God's desire for us: God knows we've all pretty much failed at understanding what God wanted from us. But Jesus is giving us a new chance to "get it." All we need to do is turn our life around and make it right. Change our minds. Alter our direction. Decide to follow Jesus and engage with God in order to make the world right. Those who pay "lip service" but do nothing that God desires, do not love, do not show mercy, are not kind, will not change, do not get it! They will not get it! Those who refuse at first but then recognize God's presence and voice—God will celebrate!

I read about a pastor who told the story of receiving a letter from a young woman. In it she wrote that she wasn't sure he would remember her. He did remember her! As a teenager she had been on a mission trip with the youth group and had rebelled against everything the entire time. If it hadn't been so expensive, they would have sent her back home. Anyway, she wrote to him to tell him she wanted to apologize for the grief she had caused him on that trip, and to tell him that she had turned her life around. She was a Christian, married with 2 children and teaching Sunday school. This once disobedient girl had turned her life around and was serving God. She, like the tax collectors and prostitutes in today's gospel reading, recognized her sinfulness, repented, and changed.

Romans 3:23 tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The first time I heard that I was shocked, because if we have fallen short then how can we ever live in the kingdom of God? Only through the grace that is given to us through Jesus. Take time this week to ask the Holy Spirit where you have fallen short. Then listen, repent, and change direction. Even the disobedient sons had a chance to choose to do their father's will. The one who changed his mind and did what he was asked is the one who became obedient. Jesus said the tax collectors and prostitutes were like that son, and they would enter the kingdom of God. We too can grow in our trust, humility, meekness and build a closer relationship with God if we choose to do so.

All glory be to God.