“***Change Your Minds***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Sep. 27, 2020

**Matthew 21:23–32**

23 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?” 24Jesus 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. 25Did 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?’ 26But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27So 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.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which 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. 32For 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.”

Jesus ran into a lot of resistance. Conflict colors a lot of these exchanges that we read. Maybe you can imagine a situation where some people are going to take issue with anything you say. That is what is facing Jesus, but he is able to throw the spotlight on his enemies instead of himself. In the first exchange, public opinion makes Jesus’ enemies hesitant to answer his question, since they are afraid of the people, and the people admire John. Their cowardly hesitancy comes clearly into view here. Public opinion plays a role in the second conversation, too, because Jesus says that unpopular people, tax-collectors and prostitutes, will precede the priests and elders into the kingdom, since the priests would not follow the righteous prophet, John. It offends these self-righteous people to be told they will be preceded by tax collectors and prostitutes. So Jesus uses the issue of public opinion in both conversations, and the priests’ excessive concern about public opinion causes them to be embarrassed. They look weak when they cannot say anything about a popular prophet, and they are embarrassed at being told they will be preceded into the kingdom by tax collectors and prostitutes. In the first case, their fear of the people shames them. In the second case, their snobbishness embarrasses them.

Jesus sometimes sought to ease the sharpness of conflict by telling a story, a parable, because people could listen and would not immediately feel the need to argue with him. The second exchange here is a parable, one that shows deep insight into human nature. The first son in the parable seems to be argumentative. He tells his father he will not do what he is asked, but later on he does it. The second son speaks as though he will cooperate, saying he will do what he is asked, but he does not do it. Jesus is implying that the priests and elders are like the second son, claiming to be obedient to God but actually being disobedient.

The sassy first son is the one who turns out to be obedient. A key moment in the story has to be when the first son changes his mind and goes out into the field (Matt 21:29), but we don’t know his reasons. All we know is that each of the two sons says one thing, and does another. People have their quirky ways, and these two characters are quirky, but the key question is: which one was an obedient son? Obviously it was the one who did what his father asked, regardless of what his initial response was. The proof is in the pudding. Actions speak louder than words. And the priests and elders fit in the category of people who *say* a good thing, but don’t *do* it. This also is what hypocrites do. They talk a good line, but they don’t *do* the good thing.

What went on in the two sons’ heads? We don’t know, but we might guess. The son who said “yes,” said it thoughtlessly, to appease his dad, but didn’t think about his obligations at all. The son who said “no” presumably went back and thought about it, and made a decision to cooperate after all. So he was the only son who was actually thoughtful.

The son who says “no” but then follows through, resembles Rick in the movie “Casablanca.” Rick claims to be cynically looking out only for number one, and he enjoys interacting with his old flame whom he meets. But when push comes to shove, Rick does not try to regain his old flame, but helps her husband—who could potentially be his romantic rival—to go and fulfill his mission. Rick doesn’t act to serve himself but to save and serve other people. We tend to admire such characters, despite an absence of self-congratulation on their part, whereas we despise self-admiring characters who don’t live up to the noble things for which they claim to stand.

The first son questioned his father’s request, but his final decision shows that he thought about the request and decided to obey it. It shows where his real loyalties lay. And one’s *real* loyalties matter more than one’s merely *stated* values. It seems that Jesus is making a point about integrity versus hypocrisy. The passage comes not long after the cleansing of the temple, and right before the parable about the wicked tenants. In these passages, we see Jesus rebuking exploitation, hypocrisy, and violence.

Our lesson also has to do with openness to God as opposed to being closed and stubborn. People who were honestly open to God were receptive to John’s baptism, which asked only honest and sincere repentance from sin. And the good son ends up being receptive to his father’s request, despite resisting at first. The key question is: who is *really* responsive and receptive to God?

And so for us, as well. The real question is: are we responsive and receptive to God? Maybe we need time to think about things, like the son who thought and then changed his mind about cooperating with his father. When someone makes a request of you, it is alright to *think* about the request and make an informed decision. Your initial reaction is not always the same as your final decision. Maybe God is asking “is that your final answer?” You get a chance to think and decide.

It’s okay to question and think deeply. Then make a decision. Be like the son who actually *thought* about the request. Think about how best you may cooperate with God’s will in your life, being responsive and receptive to God’s guidance.