

Week 25  
March 8, 2009

## **Two Very Different Sons** *Matthew 21:28-32*

Jesus is teaching in the temple courts. As always, he's being challenged by religious authorities and peppered with questions intended to trap him. His approach to those moments is often to answer a question with a question. In this case, his accusers ask "Who gave you authority to do the things you are doing?" They must have meant his preaching and miracles, and especially his alarming habit of forgiving people of their sins.

Jesus answers, "Let me ask you a question. If you answer it well, then I'll answer yours. John's baptism – where did it come from? Heaven or from mere men?"

He knows and they realize that if they say "heaven" then he will ask, "Then why did you disbelieve and treat John so badly?" And if they say that John's baptism was not ordained by God, then the crowds will react, since John the Baptist has been a very popular preacher among ordinary people. Now those who try to snare Jesus are ensnared.

So Jesus freezes them with this question, and in their silence he chooses silence on the issue of his own authority.

It's a loud silence, of course. So he breaks the silence with a parable – a story about two sons.

This story is not to be confused with another parable about two sons, usually called *The Prodigal*. That story from Luke 15:11 is much better-known and deals with a few of the same issues.

In this story, a father asks his two sons to work in the vineyard for the day. The first son says, "I will not," but he does. The second son says, "Sure, I will," but he doesn't.

Jesus asks which son did the will of the father. The religious leaders answer, "The first one did. The one who said no but then showed up for the work."

Jesus appears to agree with that answer, though it should be noted that this correct answer is counterculture for some in Middle Eastern society.

Julie Priest, a missionary from this church to Iraq and Afghanistan, spoke at a men's gathering last year. She referenced this scripture and then helped us understand its countercultural nature for some. In Iraqi culture, for example, honor versus shame is a more prominent motif than right versus wrong. We live in a judicial society marked by a heavy emphasis on right and wrong. In the Middle East and elsewhere, being honored and

not shamed is a higher value than being right and not wrong.

In our culture, there is intrinsic honor in being right even if our minority approach brings us dishonor. So for us, the answer is obvious – doing the right thing, even if we initially refused, is much better than not doing the right thing when we said we would.

In some other cultures, it would be shameful to tell my father, “No, I won’t,” even if I did actually do what he asked. It would be more honorable and less shameful to say, “Yes, I will” to his face and then not to show up to do it.

Confusing as that sounds, Jesus puts more honor – or more righteousness – in the doing than in the saying. In fact, he’s really chiding the religious leaders one more time. Why? Because, borrowing from Matthew 23, they are in the habit of saying the right words and appearing to be religious, but they don’t *do* the will of God. So Jesus says of them to the crowds, “Go ahead and do what they say, but don’t do what they do.” (Matthew 23:3)

“I tell you the truth,” says Jesus, “tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of you. Why? They may not know the words, but they are receptive and repentant and responsive and they are hearing me preach and then doing what I say. You? You’re not doing it.”

Then Jesus goes back to John the Baptist. “He came to show you the way of righteousness, but you didn’t believe him.” What was John’s message? Repent. Change your life. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. “Tax collectors and prostitutes heard this and repented,” says Jesus. “You didn’t. You did not repent and believe.”

Here and elsewhere, Jesus honors people who are “big sinners” who are serious about change, and he rebukes religious people who don’t think they have any need to change.

In Luke 18:9, Jesus tells the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisee prays to God, “Dear God, I thank you that I’m not like other men – thieves, evildoers, adulterers. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” The tax collector nearby prays, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus says that the humble “big sinner” is justified before God and not the other.

The truth about “big sinners” is that they’re often closer to heaven and knowing God’s heart of grace, because they are humble and repentant.

The truth about religious people is that we are often farther from heaven and farther from God’s heart because we are proud, dismissive about our “little sins” and unrepentant. And we might not even be doing what God wants us to do. As Jesus says in Matthew 23:24, we “strain out a gnat to swallow a camel.” We can be so persnickety about minutiae of religious words and philosophies, but don’t simply do what God asks us to do.

In our day and any day, God honors actions over empty words. Yes, words and actions in concert make a world of difference. As we speak truth and live lives of love, we are people of integrity. It is right and it is honorable to live such credible lives that people see us doing good in the name of Christ and give glory to God. Philippians 2:15-16 says that when we live without fault in a depraved generation, we shine like the stars in the universe.

And when we see the “big sinners” the way Jesus does, we grow up and discover the perspective of God toward us and others. Jesus, after all, came for people who are sick, not those who think themselves too well to need a doctor.

To this day, we should receive with humility and urgency the message of John the Baptist. Repentance never goes out of fashion. The Apostle Paul, even at the end of an illustrious and godly life, calls himself “the worst of sinners,” and not just because he’d been a persecutor of Christians. In Paul’s mind, his own sins are the worst of sins and no matter how “small” or few or far between his sins, he viewed himself as a “big sinner” – even the biggest. Not that he lived in shame or suffered under the weight of guilt. He knew and accepted Christ’s forgiveness, not because of the slight nature of his sin, but because of the enormous measure of God’s mercy in Christ’s blood.

So where am I in this story of two sons? Where are you? Do we know the right words in order to convince ourselves and others that we are religious, but do not actually act on the things God asks us to do? Or am I the son who bristles a bit, but then shows up? Or am I a “big sinner” who is repentant and responsive? I know that I never want to be an unaffected, immovable religious guy who has forgotten how to repent. And, whatever my words, I want to show up and do what my Father asks.