

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 25: 1-9  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 21: 23-32  
September 27, 2020

### **“Two Sons”**

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Jesus’ run in with the Temple authorities took place not long after the cleansing of the Temple. Clearly, he had caused a lot of disruption. And now he was turning up and teaching. Things were coming to a head. A contingent of chief priests and elders approached him. They demanded to know by what authority Jesus was doing these things. Who gave him permission to do this? Just who, exactly, did he think he was?

The chief priests and elders probably thought that they had Jesus cornered. After all, they knew who they were. They were the duly appointed religious leaders. Theoretically, God put them in charge. In practice, however, there was a lot of cynicism regarding the legitimacy of the priestly leaders because they ruled at the pleasure of Rome. They held their authority because they were collaborators. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. These men were rich and used to being treated with deference and respect. They controlled large holdings of land and became even wealthier by dealing with those outside of Israel. When Jesus told parables about rich men, these were the type of men he meant. They claimed to represent the people politically and spiritually, when in truth they only represented their own self-interest. *Oh how the more things change the more they stay the same!*

It is these self-important men, men sure of their own position in life, who demanded Jesus account for himself. Most ordinary citizens would not dare oppose them. The average person would be completely intimidated and easily bullied into submission. Jesus was not the average person. By asking Jesus what the source of his authority was they probably thought they had trapped him, because if he said, “from God,” they could ridicule that assertion into the ground, and if he claimed to be the Messiah, they could get him for blasphemy and possibly sedition. Either way—they would win. But instead of answering their question Jesus responded with another question, “John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”

The easy victory quickly disappeared. Now the chief priests and elders were stuck. If they acknowledged that John’s baptism was from God they would have to answer for why they did not believe and follow John. If they said it was human in origin, all those supporters of Jesus and John standing around might not take kindly to it. But they were politicians. They looked at each other, hemmed and hawed and finally said, “We don’t know.” It was a lame answer. And to that Jesus responded, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

It's hard for us to realize just how audacious Jesus' confrontation of these men was. They held all the power. He held none. They were educated and rich. He came from a tiny rural village and was educated in scripture, carpentry and basic math. But he had authority IN HIM. These men may have had all the trappings of authority, but Jesus breathed authority. When Jesus walked into a room, people asked who he was. And Jesus wasn't finished with these men yet. Refusing to give them an answer was just the start. He then went on to tell a parable, one found only in Matthew's gospel.

There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

"I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing.

He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

"Which of the two did what his father wanted?" asked Jesus.

The chief priests and elders were forced to answer, "The first." And then, oh ouch! Jesus went on to say, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Just imagine the expressions on their faces. No wonder they hated Jesus. Everyone else groveled before them. Jesus told them off—in public!

Now to be fair, both sons in the story were disrespectful to their father, but the one who refused to do as he was asked changed his mind, and did it. These were the prostitutes, tax collectors and other "sinners" who first turned away from God, but then repented and came back. But the other son was worse, because the other son pretended to be respectful, when in reality he had no intention of obeying his father. The second son's hypocrisy reveals a much deeper lack of respect. The first son experiences remorse. The second does not.

From a spiritual point of view this difference is between those who come to a genuine faith after a bumpy rebellious journey to get there, and those whose religion is superficial, who externally appear to be faithful, but who are not. Their religion is for show. There is nothing inside at all. It is merely a good disguise for blatant self-interest. These leaders Jesus opposed were from an elite religious class. They were highly visible members of the community, leaders in both the religious and political spheres. (At that time the two roles were identical.) These were proud men, men who looked on John the Baptist and Jesus with disdain. They were part of a form of religion devoid of the Spirit. They did not recognize the work of God in their midst because they weren't looking for it.

It is harder for God to work through people who have power because people who have power often make the mistake of believing their own press. They start to believe the illusion and think that they are "it." God is shoved aside. And we're all capable of doing this. But God often works through unexpected people on the fringes, people like John the Baptist, people who are free of all the trappings of status.

We, too, are the sons called by God to work in the vineyard, and the vineyard is the world. Saying "yes" to God and actually going and doing what

God wants us to do means looking for where God is at work in all of life, not just within the church or synagogue. And that's really messy. In some ways we're not too unlike the Chief Priests and elders in that we prefer a world that is orderly, a world in which we know the rules, a world in which we are in control. We think that it is the dramatic temptations that lead people away from God—sex, addiction, money, power, but it's often something much more subtle than that. What tempts us away from God, what leads us to say, "Yes Lord, I'll go work in your vineyard," and then not go, **is fear of not being in control of our lives**. We want to carefully work out the perimeters of our life so that things are predictable and safe. We have our schedule for the day already set—how dare God go and change it? But God calls us to be ready to go where the Spirit leads, and to be humble and teachable. God calls us into a wild place on the fringes where anything can happen. God calls us to serve in the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of material self-advancement or economic security, and if we're *really* honest, we don't want to hear that!

But God is good. God does not intend to harm us, but to draw us close and bless us with the true blessings of the Spirit. As the psalmist says, "No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame." When we turn away from the tasks God has for us in God's vineyard, everyone loses. But when we go and do, *even if we're a bit grumpy about it at first*, there is life and blessing. Amen.

Psalm 25: 1-9

- <sup>1</sup> In you, Lord my God,  
I put my trust.
- <sup>2</sup> I trust in you;  
do not let me be put to shame,  
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
- <sup>3</sup> No one who hopes in you  
will ever be put to shame,  
but shame will come on those  
who are treacherous without cause.
- <sup>4</sup> Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.
- <sup>5</sup> Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.
- <sup>6</sup> Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,  
for they are from of old.
- <sup>7</sup> Do not remember the sins of my youth  
and my rebellious ways;  
according to your love remember me,  
for you, Lord, are good.
- <sup>8</sup> Good and upright is the Lord;  
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
- <sup>9</sup> He guides the humble in what is right  
and teaches them his way.

Matthew 21: 23-32

<sup>23</sup> Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.<sup>25</sup> John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

<sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

<sup>28</sup> “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

<sup>29</sup> “‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.