

The Two Sons

Matthew 21:23-32

A Sermon for Children

With Study Questions

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Matthew 21:23-32

Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"²⁴ But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things:²⁵ The baptism of John – where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'"²⁶ But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet."²⁷ So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."²⁸ "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.'²⁹ He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went.³⁰ Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go.³¹ Which of the two did the will of *his* father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw *it*, you did not afterward relent and believe him (Matthew 21:23-32).

Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority" (Matthew 21:23)?

A Confrontation

We should try to avoid silly arguments (Titus 3:9; 1 Timothy 1:4) – but sometimes confrontations are necessary; they become necessary when a person is behaving in a way that is displeasing to God.

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back,²⁰ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19, 20).

During the time of Jesus people wandering from the truth included practically the whole church. Jesus compared the church to a fig tree with no figs which He cursed and it withered away (Matthew 21:19) Jesus called the church at that time a **“den of thieves” (Matthew 21:13)** and the ministers in the church were **“like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones” (Matthew 23:27).**

These ministers loved to parade themselves **“around in long robes” (Mark 12:38)** and the temple of God had become like a hideout for bad guys. But Jesus, who had greater power than Samson would now enter the temple and soon He would pull the pillars down (Judges 16:28-30).

These priests would soon find that God’s patience had reached its fullness and they would shortly be ground **“to powder” (Matthew 21:44);** but not until it became very obvious how evil they were.

God is a patient God. But there is a point where people might mistake God’s patience for God’s approval. Your mom or dad may patiently give you the opportunity to stop behaving poorly on your own. But if they allow your behavior to continue too long you may begin to think that they’re okay with your poor behavior. It is never okay with God for people to think they can just get away with sinning. **“God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7).**

By What Authority?

These ministers come up to Jesus and ask Him **“by what authority” (exousia)** He did these things, and who gave Him **“this authority”**. “These things” were probably the things Jesus just did. This included the Triumphal Entry (where people praised Him), the cleansing of the temple (where Jesus made it clear that what they were doing in church was wrong), His reception of the praise of God’s people and His power to heal and teach with authority. Who gave Jesus the right to do all this? They certainly hadn’t voted Jesus into this position.

Have you ever asked that question about anybody? Who or what gives your parents the right to teach you or punish you? Who or what gives certain people the right to make or enforce laws (You might be careful about asking a policeman that if he pulls you over)? Who or what gives the church the authority to speak for God? If you really think about it, the answer (if you were to keep asking why do they have the authority over and over) leads either to God or to nothing. The only legitimate answer to any of these questions is the authority of God Himself.

But their question was fake and Jesus would now expose them for being dishonest people.

But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: ²⁵ The baptism of John – where was it from? From heaven or from men?” (Matthew 21:24, 25a)

I’ll Answer Your Question If...

At first it doesn’t sound like Jesus is really answering their question. He tells them that He will answer their question if they answer His. But His question will help everyone understand that they were not really interested in knowing the truth. Jesus asks them about the baptism of John. We have to realize that when Jesus mentions the baptism of John He is really talking about the whole ministry of John the Baptist.

And what was the ministry of John but to tell people about Jesus (John 3:30). John was the **“voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (John 1:23)**. The answer to their question (who gave Jesus authority) is right there in Jesus’ question. The following verse helps us understand:

And when all the people heard *Him*, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him (Luke 7:29, 30).

You see, these ministers (Pharisees and lawyers – which meant they were teachers of God’s law) had been taught the truth many times but were determined to reject the truth and reject Jesus. They knew by what authority Jesus did these things. But they chose to reject **“the will of God”** for themselves. When somebody hears the word of God (assuming it’s biblically accurate) they know it’s the word of God and contains what **“man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”**¹

All they had to do was answer Jesus’ question honestly and they would have answered their own question. Here is something important for us to know: Deep in everyone’s heart, they know there is a God (Romans 1:19, 20) and when the truth about Jesus is accurately preached, men know that it is true.

Their dishonest hearts are now exposed as we get to listen into their conversation.

And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’²⁶ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.”²⁷ So they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know” (Matthew 21:25b-27a).

They Reasoned

“And they reasoned (*dielogizonto: dia, through, logizomai, to reason*) among themselves.” If it wasn’t so sad it would be funny; they formed a committee to figure out what would be the safest and most convenient answer. If they answered that John was from God then they had answered their own question. If they denied John they feared the crowd. They were directed by fear, unbelief and a desire to maintain their phony-baloney status. It never dawned on them to simply give the honest answer.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell how long we should talk to people who aren’t willing to be honest or embrace the simple truth. Jesus wasn’t going to enter into a silly discussion. He confronted them on something they

¹The Westminster shorter catechism : With Scripture proofs. 1996 (3rd edition.) (Question 3). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

knew to be true but chose to reject and the discussion ended with these words:

Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things (Matthew 21:27b).

End of Discussion, Not End of Instruction

Although the discussion was over, the instruction was not. Jesus would now tell a parable which they free to hear – and the parable very much involved them. Jesus begins His parable with His own question:

But what do you think (Matthew 21:28a)?

Jesus would now give them another opportunity to “reason among themselves”. It’s one thing for men to ask questions of and about God. It is an entirely different matter when God starts asking us questions. When by His word and Spirit He begins to search out our souls, it would be wise of us to respond like Job:

Then the Lord said to Job, “Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.” Then Job answered the Lord and said, “Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth (Job 40:1-4).

The parable seems simple enough.

A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’²⁹ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went.³⁰ Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go.³¹ Which of the two did the will of *his* father?” They said to Him, “The first” (Matthew 21:28b-31).

Two Sons

There are two sons in this parable. They are both asked by their father to work in the vineyard. The first starts out disobediently. He answers 'No'. He later comes to regret (μετάνοια *metameletheis* – regret, remorse, repent, change mind. From meta (with) and melei “to think about”) his disobedience and goes to work.

The other son pretends to be obedient – like the ministers Jesus just spoke with. He announces that he will do the work but then does not. Which, Jesus asks, did the will of his father? One can only wonder about the tone of their voice when they answered, **“the first”**.

Jesus now gives them the hard truth.

Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw *it*, you did not afterward relent and believe him (Matthew 21:31-32).

Excluded From the Kingdom

These ministers, no doubt, would be insulted to be compared to tax gatherers and sinners – they thought they were way better people than them. But the insult gets even worse when Jesus places these sinners in the kingdom and excludes the ministers from it!

So what is the real issue here?

John came preaching about Jesus. Jesus was the **“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29)**. The tax collectors and sinners believed. They did not deny what they knew to be true – that they were sinners in need of a savior and that Savior was Jesus.

These ministers were too busy showing off their good works to honestly think about how sinful their hearts were before God (Matthew 6:1-5). Sinners were repenting of their initial rebellion against God. They had at first said 'No' but were now believing and seeking to do the works of their Father in heaven. Yet the ministers remain unmoved. Jesus seems

to be indicating that when they saw the sinners come to faith they should have been moved to sorrow (again *metemelethete*) regret, and repentance.

They should have reasoned among themselves through the basis of truth rather than convenience.

**Come now, and let us reason together," Says the Lord,
"Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as
snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as
wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the
good of the land; ²⁰ But if you refuse and rebel, You shall be
devoured by the sword"; For the mouth of the Lord has
spoken (Isaiah 1:18-20).**

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table, let us flock to it, like those who are hungry for forgiveness and peace with God, which can be found only by trusting in what these elements place before us – the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Questions for Study

1. Should we try to avoid silly arguments? When is a confrontation necessary (pages 2, 3)?
2. Who had wandered from the truth during the time of Jesus (page 3)?
3. Where does true authority come from (pages 3, 4)?
4. How did Jesus reveal the evils of hearts of the ministers when He asked them about John the Baptist (pages 4, 5)?
5. What are two things everybody knows (page 5)?
6. What did the ministers fail to do when they answered Jesus' question (pages 5, 6)?
7. Who do the two sons represent in this parable (page 7)?
8. What was the real issue Jesus was dealing with in this passage (pages 7, 8)?