

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

Matthew 21:23-32

Key Verse: 21:31b

“Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.’”

From time to time we see a bumper sticker that says, “Question Authority.” It is understandable. It is part of the American psyche to evaluate authority. We don’t want to blindly obey someone, as Germans obeyed Hitler. However, when we question authority it should be genuine, with a decision to obey what we know is right. In today’s passage, the religious leaders question Jesus’ authority. Yet, they had no intention of obeying the truth. They just wanted to mask their own rebellion. They knew that Jesus was sent by God. Yet they rejected his claim in order to avoid obedience. Nevertheless, Jesus did not treat them as enemies. Jesus was like a father to them. Jesus did his best to lead them to the kingdom of God. As we study this passage, let’s think about our own attitude toward Jesus’ authority. Let’s accept Jesus as King, repent of our sins, and enter the kingdom of God.

First, Jesus has spiritual authority from God (23-27).

When Jesus cleansed the temple from secular business, he opened the way for prayer and Bible study to be done there. Now Jesus was teaching the word of God in the temple. What a wonderful Bible school, led by Jesus himself! But something disturbed it. Verse 23 says, “...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?’” The chief priests and the elders were very angry. Upon seeing his triumphal entry, and hearing the people cheer for Jesus, their blood pressure began to rise. Their condition was aggravated when Jesus seemed to ruin their temple business as he drove out their agents, and the ringing of their cash registers stopped. Jesus was acting like the owner of the temple. They thought they were the owners of the temple with the exclusive right to issue work permits. They thought Jesus was undermining their authority. So they wanted to start a fight with Jesus. It was a tense moment. From time to time, we also confront this conflict. Some dedicated UBF missionaries were inviting students to Bible study. Then the campus police came and asked, “Do you have a license to teach the Bible? Who gave you authority to teach the Bible here?” In such a case, how did Jesus respond?

Look at verses 24-25a. “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. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?’” Jesus was very wise. Jesus did not fall into the trap of the religious leaders. Instead, he asked them a question which indirectly answered their question. Jesus asked if they recognized John the Baptist as God’s servant. From the gospels, we know that John entered the world through the crying out prayer of his parents. A holy angel announced his birth as the forerunner of the Messiah. He lived a pure life, full of the Holy Spirit. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and his message cut to the heart, convicting men of sin. The whole region of Judea was affected by his preaching. All the people recognized John as a prophet sent by God. John clearly and repeatedly testified that Jesus was the Messiah. However, the religious leaders were too proud and self-righteous to repent of their sins.

Jesus said that there are two kinds of authority. There is God's authority and man's authority. God's authority is spiritual, rooted in his almighty power as Creator. God's authority is absolute and universal. Man's authority is temporary, very limited, and ultimately dependent on God's grace. In John 3:27, John the Baptist confessed, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven." The religious leaders needed to realize that their authority was strictly limited. They were not the owners of the temple, nor of the nation Israel. They needed to pray a lot and discern the will of God before exercising their authority. They needed to acknowledge God's limits on them. On the other hand, Jesus is the Christ, God's anointed King who has true spiritual authority.

Let's think about Jesus' spiritual authority. Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins. Once, a paralytic was brought to Jesus. Obviously, those who brought him wanted his paralysis to be healed. But Jesus told him, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." The religious leaders strongly objected to this. Then Jesus said to them, "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." Then Jesus said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." And the man got up and went home (Mt 9:1-8). Jesus proved his spiritual authority by healing a paralytic. Since then Jesus has healed innumerable spiritual paralytics by forgiving their sins, cleansing them, and making them strong to do the work of God. Shepherd David Hull was once a paralyzed person because of the power of sin. But he met Jesus through one-to-one Bible study and received the forgiveness of sins and healing. Now he is strong in spirit, strong enough to use his many talents. He supervised all of the practical preparation of the Midwest Region summer Bible conference. Every week, he prepares heart-moving vocal team performances. And he fully supports his family, caring for his wife Colleen and daughter Danielle so well.

Jesus has authority over evil spirits, authority over diseases and sicknesses, authority to teach the word of God, authority over nature, and authority over death (Mt 4:10; 4:23, 8:3; 7:29; 8:26; 9:25). Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus has all authority to judge and to rule the world. Jesus is the King sent by God who reigns in heaven and on earth.

Jesus had exercised spiritual authority by serving people in need. Jesus had shared his authority with his disciples when he sent them out for fieldwork training. By Jesus’ great authority, he wanted to establish the kingdom of God—where God reigns with love and peace, perfect paradise. The religious leaders argued with this Jesus about authority.

Matthew reveals to us the minds of the religious leaders. Look at verses 25b-26. “They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will ask, “Then why didn’t you believe him?”’ But if we say “From men”—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”’ The religious leaders were not interested in truth. They were only interested in defeating Jesus. But they had to be careful not to offend the people, because they were afraid of the people. After a united conference, they replied, “We don’t know.” This is the catchphrase of deceptive people. Instead of responding with truth, they pretend to be dummies and say, “I don’t know.” Their question was not genuine. Nonetheless, Jesus had answered them indirectly. Jesus is God’s King with spiritual authority that comes from God.

Second, Jesus wants us to repent and obey (28-32).

Jesus could have dismissed the religious leaders as hypocritical rebels. But he did not. Jesus continued to talk to them. Jesus told them a parable of two sons to reveal the truth of God to them. Jesus really wanted them to repent and enter the kingdom of God.

Look at verse 28. “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.’” This parable compares God to a vineyard owner and mankind to his sons. Adam was the first son of God. He was given the privilege of working for his Father God in the beautiful paradise. He had a love relationship with God that required him to trust and obey. But Adam disobeyed God and lost his privilege. Since then, man’s life became hard toil to survive—not like a son, but like a slave under curse. Jesus came to set us free from a cursed life and to give us a blessed life. Galatians 3:13,14 say, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law...in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus....” In Christ we are children of God with the privilege to work in this vineyard. God has give us the vineyard of campus mission at UIC, Northwestern, Northeastern, Loyola, IIT, Harper, Oakton, Truman, Devry, MVCC, and all high schools as well. God does not command us like slaves to work in these vineyards. Rather, God speaks to us as sons, giving us the privilege.

How did the first son respond? Look at verse 29. “‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.” Wow! We wonder why the privileged son responded like that. Maybe he was planning to see the latest romantic comedy with his girlfriend. Maybe he wanted to watch the Bears game or spend time updating his personal website. Or maybe he wanted to have a boxing match with his brother. So, without thinking, he blurted out, “I will not.” But later, he changed his mind

and went. Most likely, he was surprised by his own reaction to his father. As he thought about it, he realized that he was wrong. He began to struggle with the truth, against his petty, selfish desires. His mind cleared, and he realized that his father loved him. His father wanted to see that he use his talents to the full measure and bear abundant fruit. It was only for “today,” not forever. Perhaps the following day his father would take him on a camping trip. With joy, he went and worked in the vineyard.

Throughout history God has used rebellious people who repent. God told Jonah, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the Lord and went in the opposite direction to Tarshish. He did not want the Ninevites to repent. They were enemies of Israel, and Jonah would prefer that they all be destroyed. He was like some Americans who don’t like Muslims. God disciplined Jonah through a storm at sea and then rescued him by sending a great fish. Jonah repented and preached to the Ninevites and the whole city repented.

God called Moses to go to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from bondage. Moses was eighty years old and had lived in the desert, taking care of sheep, for forty years. God wanted to send this desert shepherd to the king of the world power nation to command the release of the Israelites. It looked impossible. What is more, Moses had no confidence since his people had rejected him 40 years earlier, saying, “Who made you ruler and judge over us?” So Moses said to God, “Send someone else.” God understood Moses and provided help and showed him miraculous signs to persuade him. Still Moses was unwilling to go. Finally God said, “I will be with you.” Moses accepted this promise and put his whole trust in God. Moses changed his mind and went. God used him to deliver his people, to

train them with the law, and to lay the foundation for a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

To obey God's calling is not natural for human beings because we have a sinful nature that is rebellious toward God. We may have many good reasons not to obey God's calling, such as fear, hidden despair, human struggles, worldly desires, or just plain rebellion. If we find ourselves saying, "I will not," we should not be surprised. But we should admit our sin honestly. We must ask God for mercy to help us change our minds. We must pray, "Lord, you are calling me to serve you as a Bible teacher for students. But I am very rebellious. Please change my heart and help me obey your calling so that I may be blessed."

One young man began to study the Bible and he really liked Jesus. He realized that Jesus came to be his King. But he hesitated to trust Jesus with his marriage. Once he said, "I will not," when given an opportunity. After that, he studied the Bible more thoughtfully. Gradually, he realized that God loved him and that marriage was God's blessing to him. Recently, he visited another country and met a beautiful woman of God. He "changed his mind" and decided to establish a house church with her. In God's providence, they were engaged. Afterward he confessed, "It was the best decision I ever made." Another somewhat older man has studied the Bible in UBF for over 15 years. Whenever he was asked to share his testimony or preside at a meeting, he said, "I will not." But this summer he changed his mind and presided at the nightly prayer meetings for the summer conference, though he felt that he was dying inwardly. After the conference he made a decision to go to Korea for missionary training and after passing, to go to China as a missionary. No one expected this. But when he changed his mind and "went," God began to work

in him. No matter what kind of problem we may have, today God gives us the chance to change our minds and go to the vineyard. It is the way to God's blessing.

Look at verse 30. "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go." The second son spoke well. He sounded obedient and hardworking. Most likely, he really intended to go. But something came up. Maybe he found an opportunity for good business. Maybe he found a sale on the new car he wanted. Or perhaps he was invited out to a farewell party for a close friend. So he thought, "Well, I just can't make it today. I will try to work in the vineyard tomorrow." But in doing so, he disobeyed his father. He ignored his father's love and purpose for him. This was the problem of the religious leaders. They performed rituals well and said all the right things. But they did not do what they should have done. They did not obey God from their hearts. They did not accept God's King, Jesus. They were hypocrites. How easy it is for us to become like this second son. After learning the Bible we can think Bible thoughts and speak Bible words, and still not do what the Bible says. Especially, the desire to enjoy God's blessings without going to the vineyard makes us useless to God. We intend to visit the campus to evangelize students, but not right now. We reason that first we must see to our own needs, be they family, career, or our own study. Though we intend to feed God's sheep, we do nothing. We must really examine our conduct in light of this passage and ask, "Did I really do what God wanted me to do?"

Look at verse 31a. "'Which of the two did what his father wanted?' 'The first,' they answered." God sees whether we actually go to the vineyard and work. God is patient with rebellious people in the hope that they will repent and go to work in his vineyard. In the parable, neither of the sons is perfect. One was rebellious with

words and obedient in action. He can be given a “C+.” The other was obedient with words, but rebellious in actions. He can be given an “F-.” They both needed to repent. We should say, “I will, sir,” and go to the vineyard and work. Jesus did so. Jesus said, “I will,” and went to the cross and died for our sins (Heb 10:7). Jesus received an “A+.” Jesus told this parable to encourage us to repent whatever style of rebellion we are practicing.

Look at verses 31b-32. “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, 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.’” Though the tax collectors and prostitutes had been terrible sinners, they accepted the word of God through John and through Jesus. They repented their sins and they were entering the kingdom of God. Matthew was one of them. As a tax collector, he had been a selfish man who sold his conscience to make money and enjoy pleasure. He suffered from guilt and fatalism. He had no hope. Then Jesus said to him, “Follow me,” and he left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus loved him and trained him until he was transformed into a heavenly prince.

Then there was Mary Magdalene. She had been known as a wayward woman. She flirted with young men and enjoyed romantic meetings, sending secret text messages and listening to many love songs. But in the course of doing so, she lost her purity. When she lost her purity she lost everything. She felt condemned by the devil and her future was dark. Some young men were drawn to her, but their desires were on the animal level. No one really respected her and she did not respect herself. Some days she felt like committing suicide. But one day she met Jesus. Jesus deeply understood her and ministered to her wounded soul. Jesus

drove out all of her demons and restored the purity of her heart and life. She became a new creation with new hope and a bright future. From that time on, she followed Jesus and worked hard with great joy every day to support Jesus' disciple raising ministry. She loved Jesus most. In each gospel account, she was the first one to meet the Risen Christ, and the first resurrection witness.

On the other hand, the Jewish religious leaders remained in their arrogant and rebellious unbelief. In the end, it was they who condemned Jesus to death and had him crucified. Their punishment was hanging over their heads. Soon the Jewish nation would be destroyed, and the temple demolished, and they would lose everything, even their lives and souls. It was urgent for them to repent and accept Jesus as their King. Only Jesus could save them. With a broken heart, Jesus pleaded with them to repent like the tax collectors and prostitutes did.

In this passage we learn that King Jesus has all authority. Jesus died for our sins to make us God's children and to give us the privilege of working in his vineyard. But we must repent of our innate rebellion to gain this privilege. Let's study the word of God thoughtfully and ask the help of the Holy Spirit to enable us to go and work in the vineyard.