

## The Obedient One

Preached September 27, 2020-FCCW Virtual Worship service

Matthew 21: 23-32

T. S. Eliot once wrote, "Oh my soul, be prepared to meet Him who knows how to ask questions." Let me tell you, Jesus knew how to ask questions. Almost every time someone asked Jesus a question, he replied with a question of his own. So it was, one day while Jesus was in Jerusalem, that the religious leaders came to Jesus with a question, as he was teaching in the Temple. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" they asked him.

It's not hard to understand their hostility towards Jesus when you remember that just a day or two before Jesus had entered Jerusalem on a donkey surrounded by a throng of supporters. Rode through the city straight to the Temple, where he marched in and drove out the moneychangers and merchants, who he accused of turning the Temple from a house of prayer to a den of robbers.

This day, he was back in the Temple, teaching. But the local religious leaders challenged Jesus, saying, "Who do you think you are anyway? What gives you the right to do this?"

Like I said, Jesus had this annoying habit of answering a question with a question of his own. The question he asked them was whether the ministry of John the Baptist was legitimate or fraudulent. Was he a genuine prophet, sent from God? Or was he a false prophet, who misled the people?

It shouldn't have been that hard of a question for them to answer. It was, after all, their job to know such things. They were the religious authorities; the determiners of who was and who wasn't a legitimate prophet. But there were hidden consequences to answering this question wrong and they decided they would have to choose their words very, very carefully. If they affirmed John's authority as being from God, then they must accept Jesus' authority too, since John had pointed to Jesus as being the Messiah. To admit that John was a true prophet would also be an indictment against themselves, because John had

publicly declared them to be a "brood of vipers." On the other hand, if they said that John was a false prophet, they risked angering the crowds of people because John had been tremendously popular with the people. So, they went back to Jesus and said, "We don't know."

Jesus replied, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." The truth of the matter was, he didn't have to tell them. He had already cornered them into answering their own question for themselves, by the question he had asked them. In the process they had damaged their own credibility and moral authority, because they had chosen what served their own self-interests instead of choosing the truth. Their non-answer was the most profound answer they could possibly have given.

But Jesus asked yet another question, in the form of a parable. A man had two sons. He told the first son to go work in the vineyard. That son refused, right to his father's face. "No, I will not." Later though, he ended up doing what his father asked of him.

Meanwhile, the father went to a second son, and told him to go to the vineyard to work. That son cheerfully agreed, "I'm on my way" he said. He was so respectful that he even called his father "Sir." But he never went to the vineyard. "Which of the two sons," Jesus asked, "did the will of his father?"

It didn't take as long for them to answer Jesus this time. They said that the son who refused to go but, in the end did what his father asked, was the one who did the father's will. It seemed like a safe answer. Most people would agree that actions speak louder than words. So, the one who does the right thing, not the one who says the right thing, is the obedient one, the one deserving of praise.

But Biblical commentator William Barclay writes, "The key to the correct understanding of this parable is that it is not really praising anyone. The ideal son would be the son who accepted the father's orders with obedience and respect and who unquestioningly and fully carried them out."

For a son to rebel against his father's authority by refusing to obey him, the way the son who refused to go to the vineyard did, would be to disgrace that father

publicly. But a son who lied to his father, who promised to do something, then ignored his duty, would have been just as scandalous.

The key to this parable is that nobody is the obedient one. Neither son is someone for the father to be proud of. At best, what we have is a picture of two imperfect kinds of people. And neither you, nor I, nor anyone we know is perfect either. Sometimes this imperfect world of ours gives us choices where the best we can do is to settle for the lesser of two evils. But that is not the best that God can do.

When Jesus told the priests and elders that tax collectors and prostitutes were going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of them, he wasn't comparing two sets of people and saying, "Well, these tax collectors and prostitutes are no prize, but at least they're not hypocrites, so I guess if God has to take somebody it'll be them."

This IS what he said, and it is what makes this parable make sense. "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For 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."

Do you hear how Jesus emphasized the importance of believing John's message? Three times he says it on one sentence. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; the religious authorities did not. But what is more important is that even after the religious people saw sinners repenting and being baptized they did not change their minds, but stubbornly continued to disbelieve.

And what was the message of John that sinners responded to and holy men disdained? In the third chapter of Matthew's gospel it is written, "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" The Kingdom of Heaven came near with the coming of Jesus. Preparation for its arrival called for repentance. And what does repentance mean? It is a changing - a turning in a new direction.

The tax collectors and prostitutes had long ago said "no" to God and gone their own way. But when they heard John's message about Jesus, they believed him

and believed in Jesus when he came. That is how the first son in the parable and the tax collectors and prostitutes are alike. They both saw the need to change their course. The chief priests and elders *did not* change after hearing John's message of repentance. And they rejected the change of heart in Jesus' message. Being right isn't the point of this story. It is gaining a righteousness from God by admitting when we are wrong and turning back to God.

There was no obedient son in this parable. The only truly obedient son was the one who told the parable. He had said "yes" to his Father all his life, and as a result he now he faced a cross. So one more time he said "yes," to what was asked of him, and kept his word. To his Father, and for us all.

Where did Jesus get the authority to teach in the Temple? This is how Paul answered the question of Jesus' authority. "Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus was the obedient Son, who didn't dishonor his Father, but glorified Him. And whenever you or I respond to Jesus by changing a "NO" we have said to God into a "YES," we glorify God, too. Our working out of our salvation does not mean working harder at being good, or better than others. It means continually working at acknowledging Jesus as our source of righteousness and our ultimate authority, and recognizing when and where we fail to do that ... when we say "No, Jesus!" ...

It means seeing where we need to change our minds and hearts and turn back to him ... to say "yes" to God when we are off course ...

"YES" to what God asks us to be and to do ... "yes" to what Jesus has done for us.

"Yes," with our lips ... *and* with our lives.

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