

Parable of the Two Sons
Matthew 21:28-32
 ABC 6/28/20

The issue of authority arises in a number of ways. Recently we've seen differing opinions on preventing the spread of COVID-19 with the president saying one thing, governors saying another, & counties yet something else, not to mention everyone's personal opinions. Who has authority? Who do you listen to? I'm sure even among us this morning, we'd have differing opinions on who's authority we should obey. Since I'm not a legal nor constitutional scholar, I'm not going to say. Other than we're told to obey those in authority over us (Rom 13). But the parable we're looking at today is told to establish Jesus' authority. *Authority* is a word signifying power & privilege. A person with authority exercises control over the lives & welfare of others. Society can't operate without having people in positions of authority; the alternative would be anarchy & chaos. In the family, parents have authority. In school, teachers & administrators have authority. In the community, the mayor, police, & firemen all have spheres of authority. The conflict in this encounter between Jesus & the religious leaders was over the issue of authority, specifically Jesus' authority, which they questioned & which they feared would threaten their own authority. Our parable this morning is unique to Matthew. Open your Bibles to chpt 21. It's about those who've seen their sin & turned from it & come to Christ. But it also has a straightforward, powerful warning against hypocrisy. Let's hear God's holy Word, here in Mt 21:28-32. PRAY

1. The Setting (1-22) This is Jesus' last week before His crucifixion. In the 1st part of this chapter Jesus performs 3 symbolic actions. 1) He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday presenting Himself as Israel's true King & Messiah. 2) He cleansed the temple, restoring it to its God-given function as a **house of prayer** rather than a **den of robbers**. 3) He cursed the fig tree as a symbol of God's coming judgment on the nation for its failure to produce spiritual fruit. Jesus has been in conflict with the religious leaders for some time. Now that He's ridden into Jerusalem & received the *Hosannas* of the crowds, it's just been a matter of time for the leaders of Israel to come & rebuke Him for not scolding the crowds when they cried out & pronounced Him to be the Son of David (9). We've been waiting for them to come after Him for cleansing the temple (12) & upsetting the status quo. Since

they've been unable to confront Him successfully in rebuking His teaching & miracles, they now take an indirect approach. They question His authority to be teaching in the 1st place.

2. The Questions 23-27

Who is Jesus & what's the source of His authority? is a question of utmost importance for every one of us. Here we see an exchange between Jesus & His detractors where they challenge His credentials. A question is put to Him by the chief priests & elders of the people. The other gospels tell us that the scribes were there as well. They ask Jesus a question meant to embarrass Him. **23b** By **these things**, they meant everything Jesus had been doing & teaching, including His seemingly pompous entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday & His presumptuous cleansing of the temple the day before. They're on the offensive & demanding an explanation. Why had He, an untrained, unrecognized, self-appointed rabbi, driven the merchants & moneychangers out of the Temple? Although not themselves religious leaders, they were operating their businesses under the umbrella of the Temple authorities. **Who gave You ... authority to throw them out?** They ask Jesus. They want it known that He's never gone to any official, formal rabbinic school & they haven't approved or authorized Him. They're wanting to shame Him, expecting Him to admit He's never been given authority by them. They don't like what He's doing or claiming. What authority did He have to do what He's done? But the question they're asking Him has already been clearly answered throughout His ministry. Jesus taught authoritatively which was completely lacking in their own teaching (Mt 7:29; Mk 1:22). His ministry demonstrated authority to grant those who believe in Him the right to become children of God (Jn 1:12). His heavenly Father **gave Him authority to execute judgment** (5:27) & **authority over all mankind** to give eternal life to those His Father has given Him (17:2). He had authority over His own life, **to lay it down**, & over His own resurrection, **to take His life up again** (10:18). & then He says, **All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth** (Mt 28:18). There's absolutely no question about the answer to this question. Jesus by His own words, by His claims, by His miracles, & by His life has made it abundantly clear where the source of His authority came from. Furthermore, God Himself had witnessed to Jesus. He spoke from heaven to accredit His Son's ministry at His baptism saying, **This is My beloved Son, in whom**

I am well-pleased (Mt 3:17). Jesus was witnessed to by men, beginning with John the Baptist who said of Him, **Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world** (Jn 1:29). & even demons would confess that He was the Son of God (Mt 8:29). Because Jesus had the Father's power & authority, He sought no other authority or accreditation. By doing this He pitted Himself directly against the Jewish religious system & invited its relentless wrath. Its leaders were appalled & scandalized that He not only failed to consult the Sanhedrin & the Temple authorities but had the audacity to condemn them. In asking Jesus to identify His authority, they probably hoped He'd say, as He'd done many times before, that He worked under the direct power & authority of God, His heavenly Father. That would give them another opportunity to charge Him with blasphemy & maybe succeed in putting Him to death for it, as they'd tried to do before (Jn 5:18; 10:31). The reason they're asking now isn't because Jesus hasn't made it clear but because their hearts were hard. It's important to understand this. One's rejection of the authority of Jesus isn't a sign that you haven't been given enough information. It's a sign of a heart that's in rebellion against God because the claims are clear. The testimony is clear. The evidence is clear. How you respond to Jesus is an indicator of your spiritual condition. If we claim to be Christians, if we profess Him & yet reject His lordship & live in hypocrisy, our profession of faith may rightly be called into question. We may have heard friends say something like: *I know that's what the Bible says, but...* & we've all been tempted to that at times. & it may be because the Bible is speaking to a personal sin of yours that you don't want to let go. *I know the Bible says that I'm not supposed to do that, but...* That's a challenge to the authority of Jesus. If our posture is to question the authority of the Scripture or of Christ over our lives, then we're standing with the chief priests & the elders of the Jews. If we're saying, *Who gave You the authority to tell me that?* we're rejecting the authority of Christ. For the professing believer, the rejection of the authority of Jesus is a blatant sin of rebellion. As Matthew Henry says, *To acknowledge that a doctrine is from God, & yet not to receive & entertain it, is the greatest absurdity & iniquity that a man can be charged with.*¹ When Jesus begins to demand the rights of His authority, His lordship, in areas of our lives we don't want to

¹ *The Gospel of Matthew*

give our own lordship up in, then we have a struggle. If Christ isn't Lord of your life, then you're lord of your life. & if you're lord of your life, then Christ is neither Lord nor Savior. The practical expression of our acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ as Christians, is to bow our knee & submit wholly to Him in all things. & if you haven't done that, I want you to understand that you can't be indifferent to Jesus because He won't let you. Jesus makes it very clear that the only appropriate response to His claims is that we bow the knee & acknowledge Him to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. You can't be in between on that; you can't be indifferent to that.

Jesus' enemies ask about His authority & in vss 24-25a we see Jesus' response to them by His asking them a question. **24-25a**

Jesus responds to their question by asking a question. He wasn't being evasive & had given the answer to their question countless times before. His question was simple: **the baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?** Because John the Baptist had started his ministry 1st, the religious leaders had rejected him even before they rejected Jesus. The phrase, **the baptism of John**, referred to His entire ministry, which was characterized by his baptizing those who repented of their sins (Mt 3:6). Jesus asks this question to put them in the corner they thought He was going to be in. Calvin puts it this way: *Christ is not by some tricky way dodging the question put to Him. He is giving a complete & consistent response.*² It was impossible to acknowledge that John the Baptist was a servant of God without acknowledging that Jesus Himself was Lord. Jesus was saying, *Answer Me this: Was John's baptism from God or from man? Did John make that up himself or was He commissioned & called by God Himself?* That's the question. If you answer that question correctly, you've got the answer to the question they asked Him. He's saying, *If you answer my question, then you've got the answer to the question you asked Me. If you answer correctly, that John's ministry was from God, & John said of Me, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* (Jn 1:29); *if John acknowledges Me to be the Son of God, you've got your answer.* Jesus' answer points to the authority of His person & His work. The witness of John shows that the work & the teaching of Jesus is from God Himself. By asking them about John He was asking them

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to rule, to give their opinion, on John the Baptist's ministry. By phrasing His response as a question, Jesus had both answered His accusers & put them in conundrum. If they said, *Yes, John's ministry was from God*, then Jesus could say, *Then why haven't you accepted Me?* If they say, *No, it's not from God*, the people were going to turn on them. They were in a pickle. As **they began reasoning among themselves**, they saw that. If they said, **from heaven**, Jesus would say, **Then why did you not believe him?** It wasn't simply they'd rejected John himself but they also rejected John's testimony about Jesus, whom he'd proclaimed to be **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world & the very Son of God** (Jn 1:29, 34). To have accepted John as a prophet **from heaven** would have required accepting Jesus as the Messiah & that was something they absolutely would not do. Therefore, they conspire together (25b-26). They try to figure out how to get out of the mess they've gotten themselves in. But their reasoning wasn't a careful reflection on what Jesus had said. They were scheming about how to avoid answering the question. Instead of answering, *We don't want to answer that question*, they confess with embarrassment, *We don't know* (27). After all, they were politicians & were being driven by popular perception. They preferred to plead ignorance & to look ridiculous. Their dishonesty had been unmasked.³ In other words, they were being led by polls. & the irony of this is these people, who so wanted to assert their own authority, are totally captive to popular opinion & have no authority in face of the question Jesus puts to them. *Unwilling & unable to take a stand, or exercise the authority they claimed to have, these men replied, "We don't know."*⁴ They cared more about what men thought about them than what God thought about them. Jesus had them in a dilemma. In chess this would have been *checkmate*. By the way, there's testimony to Jesus' deity & authority even in this incident. Vs 25 says they were reasoning among themselves. How would Jesus know what they were talking about if they were talking in their own huddle? This isn't the 1st time Matthew mentions something like this & it won't be the last. What Matthew is telling us is that Jesus knew their thoughts. Have you ever wondered, *How did Matthew know what they were talking about?* Was it because they were talking

³ Howard F Vos, *Matthew*, p 148

⁴ Larry Richards, *Bible Teacher's Commentary*, p 579

too loud & he overheard them? No. It was because Jesus told His disciples, *By the way, guys, what they're talking about right now is how to get out of answering the question I just asked them.* Jesus knew their thoughts. It's just another testimony to His authority as God incarnate. Their rejection of Jesus isn't because of a lack of evidence. They'd seen His miracles, heard His teaching, & observed His life. They had the testimony of John & of the Scriptures & of God Himself, & they still rejected it. Spurgeon puts it this way: *Those who will not see shall not see.*⁵ It's not that there wasn't anything for them to see. It's they didn't want to see it. It was an action of their wills. & so, because they didn't want to see, they couldn't see.

3. The Parable 28-30

In this short parable Jesus characterizes 2 contrasting responses to the gospel. & once again He gives His opponents the opportunity to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. In the 1st instance, the **son** who was asked to **work ... in the vineyard** told his father, **I will not**, but he **afterward regretted it & went**. The 2nd son at 1st refused to go, saying, "**I will, sir,**" but he **did not go**. The implication is that he'd never intended to go & lied to his father to give the false impression of obedience. When Jesus asked the chief priests & elders, **Which of the two did the will of his father?** they gave the obvious correct answer, **The first**. Jesus' point in is that doing is more important than mere saying. Of course, it's best for a person to say he'll do God's will & then do it. But it's immeasurably better to at 1st refuse His will & then repent & do it than to hypocritically agree to do it but not follow through. In this context, the doing of God's will relates to acceptance of the gospel, of receiving Jesus as the Messiah & as Savior & Lord, & of accepting His authority over your life. The key difference between the finally obedient & finally disobedient boys is again that only one genuinely repents. Jesus uses this parable to say to these leaders of Israel, *I want you to look at this situation & I want you to tell Me what you think about it.* & when He gets their opinion, He turns it back on them like a mirror to convict them of their sins.

4. Q & A 31a

⁵ *Treasury of David*, p 183

Having told the story, He turns to them & asks them to give their ruling on who was the better of these 2 sons. They give their answer, the right answer, that it was the son who initially said, *No*, but then repented & followed his father's command. They answered correctly but their response to Jesus & His ministry was wrong & wicked. Their own words condemned them. They claimed to obey God but their actions denied that He had any place in their hearts or lives. They claimed to be longing for the Messiah but when He came they rejected Him. Jesus says to them, *You aren't that son. You're the other son who said he'd go but didn't.* & even as Jesus is explaining the parable, what's He doing? He's applying it painfully right to the religious leaders of Israel.

5. The Explanation 31b-32

No rebuke could have been more insulting or infuriating. In their eyes, **tax-gatherers & harlots** were the scum of society, perhaps even worse than Gentiles. If anyone was outside the realm of God's mercy, the self-righteous Jewish leaders thought it was people. But Jesus said the **tax-gatherers & harlots** were nearer the **kingdom** than the chief priests & elders, not because they were inherently more righteous or acceptable to God, but because they were more ready to acknowledge their need for God's grace than the self-satisfied priests & elders. Jesus' point was that claims to religion don't qualify a person to enter the kingdom, & even gross sin, when repented of, won't keep a person out.

Jesus continues & brings up John the Baptist's name again, giving the answer to the question they'd refused to answer earlier. He's saying to them, *Since you won't tell Me whether John's ministry was from God or from man, I'm going to tell you. It was from God. He was a prophet. He came to show us the way of righteousness & you didn't listen to what He said.* To say that **John came ... in the way of righteousness** was to say not only that his ministry was from God but that he was a godly man. He was a holy, righteous, virtuous, Spirit-filled man whom God had sent to prepare the way for His Son, the Messiah. He preached a righteous message & lived a righteous life. **Among those born of women**, Jesus had said earlier, **there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!** (Mt 11:11). But **you did not believe him**, Jesus told them. The Jewish leaders had been

skeptical of John from the beginning, having sent a group of priests & Levites to question him (Jn 1:19–25). & when John

saw many of the Pharisees & Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; & do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham (Mt 3:7–9).

But the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him, Jesus said. Some of the tax-gatherers had been open to the gospel even in its incomplete form taught by John the Baptist. As evidence of their sincerity in being baptized for the repentance of their sins, they asked John, **Teacher, what shall we do?** (Lk 3:12). Although no specific instance is mentioned in the gospels, Jesus makes clear that among the multitudes who were baptized by John there were also some **harlots** who **did believe him** & who, like those tax-gatherers, confessed their sins & were forgiven (Mt 3:5–6). Remember what John’s message was? **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand** (Mt 3:1). Jesus is saying,

These sinners, who’ve done things which aren’t only socially unacceptable but are offensive to God, these sinners who’ve seen their sin & responded to John’s message, have done the will of their Father. On the other hand, you, the religious leaders of Israel, have claimed to be willing to do the command of your Father, but you haven’t done it.

Jesus is showing us a picture of those in Israel who’ve repented at John’s message & those in Israel who claim to be godly, but aren’t. He’s saying to these religious leaders that tax collectors & prostitutes who responded to John’s message of repentance were going to get into the kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders ever would. This was a slap in the face. It would be like Jesus standing in front of ABC & saying, *I’m telling you, drug dealers, pedophiles, & serial murderers are going to get into the kingdom of heaven before you guys.* That’s somewhat of the force this had on the religious leaders of Israel. He’s saying, *These people realize what they’ve been doing was wrong & have repented of it. But you think you’re right with God but you’re not. You’ve been immunized to His grace. Your soul is shriveling.* These tax collectors & prostitutes had said, *I will not*, to God’s commands, but then repented & ran to the message of John & Jesus & have been accepted by God. He’s saying, *They’re in the kingdom. You’re not!* The kingdom of God belongs to repentant sinners, not to those who are hypocritical. Jesus isn’t saying something new here. He’s saying something Ezekiel preached about 600 years before. In 18:20, Ezekiel says, **The person who**

sins will die. That's Ezekiel's version of Paul's words that say, **The wages of sin is death** (Rom 3:23).

& so, Ezekiel says,

"The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, & the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself. But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed & observes all My statutes & practices justice & righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord GOD, "rather than that he should turn from his ways & live?" (20-23).

Ezekiel says God will judge sin, but those who repent of their sins & turn to God will be received by Him. The message is, of course, that God is more willing to receive repentant sinners than sinners are to repent of their sins. Jesus is saying to us today that the Father is far more ready to receive us than we are to let go of our sins. His message to those in Israel, even to the Pharisees, is if they'd repent & cast themselves on the mercy of God, they'd find God's favor, His mercy, & His grace. God delights when the wicked turn from their sin to Him. That's the message here, the priority of repentance. It's been explained this way:

It wasn't simply that the Jewish leaders needed to change their minds; as the story ends we are told that these authorities also needed to believe John and then act on the course of righteous behavior he urged. It is one thing to understand and give mental assent or even lip service to something a prophet says. It is another matter altogether to "believe him," by which Jesus means put feet in motion in the right direction to demonstrate one's assent.⁶

Concluding His indictment, Jesus said, **& you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.** They didn't believe John's message when they heard it & did not even **believe him** when they saw the transformed lives of the tax-gatherers & harlots who had believed. In other words, they wouldn't be convicted either by the truth of the message or its power to transform sinners. They'd been exposed to the full light of the prophet of God & the even greater light of the Son of God, yet they refused to be enlightened. They'd heard the message of the herald of the King & the message of the King Himself, yet they wouldn't listen or believe.

The parable is clearly showing us that God desires repentance, but at the same time it's showing us the hypocrisy of those who don't act as though they need to repent of their sin. God will exclude

⁶ Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p 232

from His kingdom all those who are right in their own eyes. Why is Jesus so forceful when He speaks about the spiritual danger of hypocrisy? Because hypocrisy will immunize you from grace. The hypocrite pretends he's godly. He pretends to be righteous. He pretends to be in right relationship with God, even when he's not. By doing so, he immunizes himself from the grace which God is waiting to shower upon everyone who will simply admit they're in need of a Savior. If you don't think you need a Savior then the offer of God in Jesus means nothing to you. If you don't think you need forgiveness of sins, then the wonders of forgiveness through Christ means nothing to you because you don't think you need it. Hypocrisy is a soul-killing sin. It immunizes us to the message of grace. These Jewish leaders claimed to be outwardly obedient. They made a lot of confession with their lips, but their lives, their hearts, weren't right with God. They were shutting themselves out of the kingdom by their hypocrisy. We'll see that even more clearly in the next parable, but it's very clear that pride is at the root of their hypocrisy. Jesus attacks them for their hypocrisy but I'm sure His words weren't mean-spirited. I'm convinced He wanted to shake these religious leaders out of their spiritual arrogance. By saying these words of warning, Jesus desired to win these men for the kingdom of God. & there's proof of this in the book of Acts when we find that many Jewish priests converted to Christianity (Acts 6:7). Jesus is showing His love for the Pharisees by confronting them. Hypocrisy is a soul-killing sin because it cuts us off from the grace of God. But repentance leads us to the ways of righteousness. Hypocrisy insulates us from obedience. It makes us work very hard to look one way on the outside that we're really not on the inside. That's not the way of righteousness that John nor Jesus taught.

Jesus is speaking to us in this passage to us today as well. To those who are sinners, who've done things they think there's no way God can ever forgive them for, Jesus is saying, *God is far more willing to receive you than you are to let go of that sin. God's mercy is greater than your sin.* & to those who're attempting to look one way on the outside without having the reality of God's grace & love in the heart, Jesus is saying, *Don't defraud & deceive yourself. On the last day it won't be those who look righteous who I will welcome. It will only be those who've rested in My righteousness alone. Why? Because I've born the shame of everyone who trusts in Me. You need*

not fear your shame ever again before the almighty God because I've born it for you. So trust in Me. When we come to Christ we don't negotiate terms. It's unconditional surrender to His absolute authority. Come to the foot of the cross & embrace Him as Savior & Lord. He's given all the testimony needed in the glory of His gospel, in His person, in His work, & our only proper response is to bow before Him & embrace Him. May God enable us today as believers to practically show that He is our Lord in our words, our actions, & our attitudes. PRAY