

Matthew 21:28–32

²⁸ “What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, ‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ He said in reply, ‘I will not,’ but afterwards he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, ‘Yes, sir,’ but did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did his father’s will?” They answered, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. ³² When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

Context

Jesus has already entered Jerusalem (Mt 21:1 ff) and been received by the people, proclaimed as Messiah, overturned the moneychanger’s tables (21:12-17), and had his authority questioned by the chief priests and elders. Jesus is performing signs and speaking in a way that the people are interpreting as Messianic – and there is a history there. Jesus is not the first messianic figure to come to Jerusalem and the chief priests and elders want to protect the people – although they have already concluded that Jesus is another false claimant. They have been amassing charges and accusations against Jesus and are simply waiting for the opportunity to bring him to trial and be done with him.

Unique to Matthew’s gospel, this short parable was, at its basic level of development, addressed to the chief priests and elders in defense of Jesus’ penchant for associating with sinners – those deemed unrighteous by the Jerusalem authorities. This is a dynamic that has been present in the gospel according to Matthew since the days on the banks of Jordan River when the same authorities came out to question John the Baptist.

That is perhaps why this round of the many encounters begins with reference to the Baptizer:

When he had come into the temple area, the chief priests and the elders of the people approached him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them in reply, “I shall ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I shall tell you by what authority I do these things. Where was John’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or human origin?” (21:23-25)

It is the Jerusalem authorities that are put on the spot. The leaders are standing (likely) in the midst of people who responded to John’s proclamation and the good news proclaimed in Jesus’ words and works. How will they respond to this challenge for they themselves to “fish or cut bait?” They are leaders of this ancient faith – how will they live out that faith. This is part and parcel of a theme popular in the Matthean gospel: faith that is spoken, but not lived, is empty. Calling out, “Lord, Lord” is not sufficient; the will of the Father must also be accomplished (see Matthew 7:21-23; 12:50; 23:3-4). Promises and profession must be matched by performance.

Commentary

Jesus had left Jerusalem for a brief stay in Bethany. He has now returned to the Temple area where, when he left the day before, the chief priests and scribes were angry with him (cleansing of the Temple, vv.12-17.) Given the deeds of the previous day, it seems only natural that the chief priests and the elders would ask about his credentials and question his authority.

Jesus' authority challenged (21:23)

Boring (*Matthew*, New Interpreters Commentary) suggests this outline for this section on Jesus' Authority. Note that it forms a cascade that begins and ends with a question by Jesus.

A Jesus' response: a question (21:24-27)

B Three parables

The Two Sons (21:28-32)

The Lord's Vineyard (21:33-46)

The Great Supper (22:1-14)

B' Three controversy stories

Taxes to the Emperor (22:15-22)

The Resurrection (22:23-33)

The Great Commandment (22:34-40)

A' Jesus' question (22:41-46)

Jesus' response to the challenge to his authority indicates two possibilities: authority can come from heaven or from humans (vv.23-25) – this will frame all that follows. Long (*Matthew*) says the following about the two forms of authority:

First, there is human authority. No matter how sophisticatedly it is packaged, human authority is a matter of raw power. If you have enough people behind you or guns with you, you have it, and what you say goes, period. Divine authority, on the other hand, has to do with truth, the truth of God, the truth about who God made us to be. In the short run, human authority can appear to overwhelm divine authority – even to crucify it – but, ultimately, God's truth prevails. [p. 241]

Jesus responds to their question by asking a question. The Jerusalem leaders “discussed” or “dialogued” (*dialogizomai*) how they might answer Jesus. This discussion indicates that their authority came from humans.. They are concerned about what Jesus or the crowds would say or do to them. There is no indication that they prayed, asking for God's guidance There is little concern with seeking the fullness of truth, but rather, the principle concern is if they would “lose face” (or lose “authority”) before the people.

Daniel Patte (*The Gospel According to Matthew*) makes this observation:

Even though the chief priests and the elders correctly view authority as something given to someone and not as an intrinsic part of someone's being, for them once it has been received this authority characterizes that person. For them, Jesus has an authority, and with it he does certain things. By contrast, Jesus does not speak of John's authority but rather of the authority of his baptism: “The baptism of John, whence was it”? (21:25a). In other words, authority, for Jesus, is attached to an act, to what a person does, rather than to the person. The person does not have authority; what a person does, such as the baptism performed by John, is authoritative. [p. 294]

Carter (*Matthew and the Margins*) comments on the response in v. 27:

So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” They choose a path of non-commitment, which, ironically, betrays their commitment. To not answer displays not genuine ignorance (their debate in 21:25 shows they know the options) but deliberate resistance. In refusing to say that John's ministry comes from God, they reject the claim that John and Jesus have God-given authority. To refuse this recognition is to reveal their own illegitimacy. Like the Pharisees and their tradition (15:1-9), they are not God's planting (15:13-14). They are of human origin. Jesus has now exposed and discredited the whole religious leadership. Judgment on them and their temple is inevitable. [p. 424]

All this leads to the parable that forms our Sunday gospel.

The Parable Of The Two Sons

When Jesus asks, “What do you think?” (21:28) one has to hear the question in the context of their previous refusal to answer a question about the person and ministry of John the Baptist. Jesus does not allow their previous strategic silence to pass into obscurity. Since the new question is about characters in a story, it is indirect, and the leaders cannot avoid answering it. Their own answer will likely expose the weakness of their human authority.

Matthew, more than the other gospels, has an emphasis on deeds (or bearing fruit). Long (*Matthew*) points out this emphasis:

This parable is, in its own way, a narrative depiction of Jesus' earlier statement in the Sermon on the Mount “Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). [p. 243]

The short parable of the Two Sons emphasizes that deeds are more important than words. On one level, this short parable addresses the church/synagogue tension present in Matthew's community. The synagogue were the people who had said “Yes” to God, but who had failed to go and work. They were not doing God's will. The church, especially with “sinful” Jesus and Gentile converts, were those who originally had said “No” to God, but who had changed their minds/hearts and did what God had asked.

However, related to this is the warning that even the church, who are now people who have said “Yes” to the Messiah, could become those who say the right words, but fail to act on them. It is a parable and warning for the people of faith then as well as today.

Which of the two did his father's will?” Depends on the text you read.

There is considerable variation in the MSS and other older texts for the form of the parable and the subsequent answer to Jesus' question. There are three main variants: (a) The first son refuses and then goes; the second promises and then fails; and the leaders approve the first. (b) The first promises and then fails; the second refuses and then goes; and the leaders approve the second. (c) The first refuses and then goes; the second promises and then fails; and the leaders approve the second. [There are cultures in which the very act of saying “no” to one's father is a far greater offense than not doing what the father asks. But it is perhaps that both sons need to change.] Scott (*Hear Then the Parable*) suggests that both sons are wrong. Scott frames it in the sense of honor -- a son who publicly says “no” to his father is shaming his father.

When the parable hearer is asked to choose between the two sons, a dilemma arises. Both sons have insulted the father, one by saying no, the other by saying yes but doing nothing. But one comes to the family's aid by going into the vineyard and upholding family solidarity, while the other maintains the family's good name by appearing on the surface to be a good son. Would the father choose to be publicly honored and privately shamed, or publicly shamed and privately honored? In the first century C.E. that is not much of a choice. The real question is with which one he would be more angry. But in being forced to choose, he must choose between the apparent and the real, between one who appears to be inside the family and one who appears to be outside. [p. 84]

That being said, the third variants [c] has the Jewish leaders approving words rather than deeds. This puts them in a bad light even before Jesus comments on their behavior, and it may have been for that reason that some scribes and translators preferred this reading that makes the Jewish leaders speak in the very way that Jesus will charge them with having acted. But this last option can hardly have been the original intention of the story, since Jesus' response does not challenge their answer, but rather charges them with not having lived up to it. Their reading of the story, he implies, is right, but their

correct thinking is belied by their actual behavior. The reading as translated in our text is agreed by most commentators to represent the original form of the story and response.

Changing

This parable is about doing the will of God (v. 31). The question, “What is God's will for my life?” is one that Christians often ask. However, answering that question with an unreflective “obeying God and working in the fields” too easily leads to an idea that one is able to work/earn one’s salvation. But then again, relying on faith alone can reduce action to a meaningless afterthought to one’s words.

The key to this parable is the word *metamelomai*. Although the NAB (Catholic Bible) translates it with the sense of changing one's mind,” (vv. 29, 32) that is not the most literal understanding of this word. Usually the idea of “changing one's mind” or “repenting” is conveyed by the Greek word *metanoeo*. One wonders if Matthew’s use of the word *metamelomai* points to something more subtle.

The prefix *meta* = “change” begins both words. The verb *noeo* is related to activities of the mind (*nous*). The verb *melo* has the sense “to care for,” so we might translate *metamelomai* as “changing what one cares about” or “to change what one is most concerned about.” – or desires. It could be that v.29 might be translated as: “He answering said, “I am not willing,” but later having a change of heart, he went.”

We might say of the religious leaders of v. 32, “They would not change their hearts” – or to use an OT phrase: “Their hearts were hard.”

Their Answer

The question that Jesus posed is now filled out: the chief priests and elders are required to adjudicate between the two brothers. For “doing the will of” God distinguishes mere profession from active compliance, and so here it suitably distinguishes between the attitudes of the two sons. Jesus’ question thus allows only one reasonable answer, which the Jewish leaders duly provide, but, like David in his response to Nathan’s parable (2 Sam 12:5–7), in so doing they provide Jesus with the ammunition he needs to mount an attack in v. 32 on their own inconsistency. First, however, he spells out its consequences.

The Jewish leaders (like the second son) claimed to be living in obedience to God’s law, and kept themselves strictly apart from those who (like the first son) made no such claim. It was Jesus’ interest in such “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 15:1–2) which gave rise to another parable about two sons (Luke 15:11–32). In this gospel the “underclass” of Jewish society have also been described as “tax collectors and sinners” (9:10, 11; 11:19), and on two occasions the Jewish tax collectors have been even more dismissively linked with Gentiles (5:46–47; 18:17). The substitution of “prostitutes” here for either “sinners” or “Gentiles” gives an even more offensive comparison, especially in so male-dominated a society as first-century Palestine. These are the people whom the chief priests and elders most despise and most heartily thank God that they were not like (cf. Luke 18:11). They had no place in respectable, religious Jewish society — how much less in the kingdom of God. So when Jesus speaks not only of their entering God’s kingdom but also going in there *first*, he is making a no less radical pronouncement than when he spoke of Gentiles coming into the kingdom of heaven to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while the “sons of the kingdom” found themselves outside (8:11–12).

What Next?

It seems that the *tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you* – at least the chief priests and elders are entering. But then there is a question how much is implied here by *proagō*, “go before.” There are a couple of possibilities:

- At least it means a reversal of priorities, with the chief priests and elders admitted but only after the sinners have been welcomed in. In that case they must endure the humiliation of being led, “shown the way” (a possible sense of *proagō*; cf. 2:9) by those they have regarded as beyond the pale.
- But in 8:11–12 the fate of the “sons of the kingdom” was not merely demotion but exclusion, and while *proagō* normally implies that the other person will follow (cf. 14:22; 26:32; 28:7), in the wider context of Matthean statements about the future for Israel’s leaders many interpreters conclude that it implies here “get there first” and so “take the place of.” In the parable of 25:1–12 those who go in first enjoy the feast, but the door is shut before the others get there. And in 7:21–23 the fate of those who do not “do the will of my Father” is to be excluded from the kingdom of heaven.
- Exclusion is not explicit here, but it would be hazardous to argue from the choice of the verb *proagō* that here there is, unusually, hope for the ultimate salvation of those who have rejected God’s call—unless, of course, like the good son, they subsequently change their minds, and respond to the preaching of righteousness as the tax collectors and prostitutes have done.

John the Baptist

One should not forget that this parable is preceded by Jesus’ question about John the Baptist and from where came his (authority) to baptize. It is a remarkable testimony to the high view of John the Baptist in this gospel that whereas previously Jesus has condemned those who refused to believe and respond to his own message (11:20–24; 12:41–42), he now places rejection of John’s ministry on the same level.

Those previous denunciations were of unbelief in Galilee, where Jesus had himself been active. Our narrative is located in Judea, where according to this gospel’s story-line he has not previously been heard, and so he speaks now of John as his southern predecessor and “colleague”, to whose call Jerusalem had responded before he himself took up the mission in the north (3:5).

The repentance and its appropriate “fruit” which John demanded according to 3:7–10 matches closely the Matthean sense of “righteousness.” John came to show people how to live according to God’s will, and those who “believed” him repented and were baptized. They included especially the less respectable members of Jewish society, for whom repentance was an obvious need, and perhaps for that reason the chief priests and elders saw themselves as not in need to such “righteousness” as it was something they assumed they already possessed. The obvious and enthusiastic response of the common people should have caused them to change their mind later.

If they refused John’s call because they are unable to discern that John was “of God,” then it is not likely that they will attribute heavenly authority to Jesus.

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