

DOING THE FATHER'S WILL
MATTHEW 21:23-32

Last week we explored a seemingly random event in the life of Jesus. The morning after His triumphal entry, we read that He was hungry as He was walking down the Mount of Olives on His way back to Jerusalem. When He discovered that a leafy fig tree alongside the path did not have any fruit on it, He cursed it so that it withered. I submitted to you that there was nothing random about this event or rash about Jesus' behavior. This event was an *acted* parable—a lesson Jesus “acted out” in order to illustrate a spiritual truth. Jesus was telling His disciples that God's people are designed to bear spiritual fruit—beliefs, attitudes, character, and behavior that correspond to God's will and character. If people do not bear spiritual fruit, not matter how good they look on the outside, it proves they don't really belong to Him, and, therefore, will, be cursed by God in the end, just like the fruitless fig tree. Spiritual fruitfulness is the ultimate test of whether someone truly belongs to God.

The next several encounters and conversations in Matthew's Gospel illustrates what this parable looks like in real life with real people. The passage we are going to look at this morning is the first of these encounters and conversations. Look at **verse 23**. *²³ And when He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”*

This is the Tuesday of Holy Week. On Monday Jesus went to the temple and drove out the those who were buying and selling, overturning the tables and chairs of the money changers and those selling animals for sacrifice. Then some who were blind and lame came to Him, and he healed them. There were also children who were shouting in the temple precincts, “Hosanna Son of David!” These things enraged the chief priests and elders, and they felt it was their duty to put a stop to what they perceived were inappropriate temple disruptions.

So they questioned Jesus about His authority to do and allow such things. Trust me, they were not asking these questions because they sincerely wanted to learn about His authority. They had already concluded that he had absolutely no authority. God's Messiah would never undermine the traditional institutions of Judaism like Jesus was doing. God's Messiah would never have an adversarial relationship with them, the spiritual Who's Who in Judaism. So, they asked the question in order to get Him to say something that would publicly discredit Him.

Verses 24-27. *²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it 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 man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.*

This is one of my all-time favorite responses of Jesus. He responds to their question by asking a question of His own, which, if they were to answer it, would jeopardize their integrity or their reputation. And when they play dumb, He says, “Alright then, if you're not going to risk anything by answering my question, then I'm not going to answer yours.”

Then He tells a parable. **Verses 28-32.** *²⁸ “What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ And he*

answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go.

This is what is called a “two-story parable.” Jesus tells two stories side by side, each with similarities but each with a significant difference. What is common in both stories is that both sons have a fault. Both are flawed. In the first story, the son too quickly opposes his father’s will. The father says, “Son, I want you to work today,” and the son replies, “I will not!”

In the culture of that day disrespecting or disobeying your father was a serious matter with serious consequences. This would not have escaped the notice of people listening to Jesus tell this story, and it was intentional on His part, because He wanted them to form an immediate impression about this first son. And even though there are very few words, anybody who has ever been around kids knows exactly what is going on and what this kid is doing.

“I will not! I’m sick and tired of this farm, dad. I’m going to go into town with my friends and have some fun today.” And we think, “Oh my, that kid has got a lot of nerve. He’s rebellious. He’s defiant. He needs a serious attitude adjustment with a time out or a trip to the woodshed.”

But afterward this son changed his mind. Literally, “he was sorry” or “he was remorseful,” and he did, in fact, go out and work. Why? We don’t know. Jesus is not interested in giving us the reasons *why* He felt bad or why He changed His mind. He is interested in telling us the end result.

Someone said, “This son is a big problem at breakfast. He’s got a sharp tongue and he upsets mom and dad. But give him credit; he’s a joy at supper” (Earl Palmer). His flaw was his initial reaction and his reluctance to do his father’s will. His virtue is that he had a serious change of heart that compelled him to do his father’s will.

The second story is the more significant one, for in any two-story parable it is the second that is more complicated and more surprising and usually the one Jesus wants His listeners to pay most attention to.

After the father asks the first son and is rebuffed by him, he asks the second son and he says, “I go, *sir!*” Wow, what a kid! “I’m so glad you made that suggestion, dad. In fact, I was just thinking this morning...during my quiet time, ‘I need to help my father with his work. After all, he’s done so much for me. He’s given me free room and board; he’s put aside money into the college fund. I want to do as much as I can for him while I still have the opportunity.’ I go, sir.”

But for whatever reason, he does *not* go. Again, our Lord does not tell us why. But the way He creates this dialogue, however brief it is, reveals a lot about what kind of son he is.

This son says what he thinks his father wants to hear. He sounds respectful. He says the “right” words in a way that makes him seem like he is obedient and compliant and eager to honor his father. But what’s his problem? He’s slippery and evasive. He comes across like he’s on his father’s side. So even though he’s a joy at breakfast (or at least he wants his parents to think he is) he’s a problem at supper. And unfortunately for him, this is a supper parable, not a breakfast parable (Earl Palmer).

What is the lesson Jesus wants to communicate to His listeners? Jesus is not so much concerned with how someone reacts or what someone says at first, but with what they *do* in the end. This is a parable about *doing* the father’s will, as opposed to saying what you think your father wants to hear or pretending to be on His side. Look at **verse 31a**. ³¹ *Which of the two did the will of his father?* They said, “The first.”

Have you ever noticed that whenever Jesus asked a question after a parable His

audience always got the right answer, even if they didn't like Jesus? Sometimes they had to suck it up and swallow their pride, but they got it right. And in this story the chief priests and elders had to admit that it is better to do what at first you said you would not do, than *not* to do what at first you said you would. It is not just that actions speak louder than words, it's that words without actions are meaningless.

Once again, this parable is teaching a *spiritual* truth. It is not about how children respond when their earthly fathers tell them to do something, but about how God's "children" respond when their heavenly Father tells them to do something. And Jesus goes on to tell these religious leaders that how people respond to what God tells them to do about a specific matter actually determines their eternal destiny.

Look at **verses 31b-32**. *Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you."* ³² *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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*

Jesus makes yet another reference to John the Baptist. Earlier, when He asked them if John was from God, they replied, "We don't know." That was a lie. They most certainly *did* have an opinion about John. They thought he was a fraud for the same reasons they thought Jesus was a fraud. He called them out for their hypocrisy. He pointed out the flaws in their religiosity and pleaded with them to repent. And all these things threatened their own sense of self-righteousness and self-importance. So, when Jesus asked them who John was, they carefully scripted a safe answer. "We don't know". Which, being interpreted meant, "We don't want to risk saying 'no' or we might take a hit in the public opinion polls, since most believe that John was God's prophet."

It was all about making sure they could maintain their reputation, influence, status, and privileges, even if they had to be dishonest—even if they had to ignore or reinterpret the truth.

So, Jesus said, "Tax collectors and prostitutes believed." They are like the first son, resistant and rebellious at first, but who eventually come around to their father's way of thinking and their father's will.

But the religious leaders are like the second son. They saw John the Baptist and knew that what he was saying was true. But they chose to reject him and his message because it threatened their smug sense of well-being. In so doing, they were choosing to respond to God's will in an evasive manner. They continued to give Him lip service. They continued to act as though they were on God's side. But the Father saw through their charade.

So, the religious leaders are like the fig tree that has the outward appearance of fruitfulness because it is in full leaf, when, in actuality, it was fruitless. The religious leaders are spiritually fruitless, so the same fate awaits them, unless they repent.

Before we look at the application of this passage, I want to make two observations about this passage, and particularly the parable. First, Jesus expects a sharp reaction to His claim of lordship over our lives. He expects us to struggle with hearing what God requires and then doing it, because a lot is at stake. He knows that lordship is not an easy decision.

But the first story reveals that our struggle between hearing what He requires of us and then choosing to do it does not bother Him. Notice, after the first son said, "I will not!" the father does not go after him and force him into the vineyard against his will. Revelation 3:20 says, "Behold I stand at the door and knock," not, "I break down the door and barge in."

God does not barge into our lives and force us to believe in Him or do His will. Sometimes we pray that He would. Sometimes we want Him to barge into the life of our loved

ones and make them believe in Him or do His will. But He won't do it. It would violate His rules. He wants us to come to Him and follow Him of our own volition, because He wants a relationship with us based on love, not on coercion. He tells us what it involves and what it costs, He tells us what to do, but He doesn't force us to do it.

So, it does not upset God when someone initially struggles with Him about His will for their life. Remember Job, who argued with God and His friends said, "Who do you think you are that you can talk to God like that?" Then, at the end of the story, God lines up His friends and says, "Look, you should have listened to my servant Job." God is not fragile. He does not get bent out of shape when our first response is, "I will not!" He wants us to be honest. He is more interested in our honesty than He is in our verbal compliance.

But our Lord also expects evasive responses. The second son is a tragic figure because he does not really have a real, meaningful relationship with his dad. He's not honest. He's slippery. He uses all the right language, but it's only so he can placate his father. He thinks his words will please his father, but his failure to act upon his words proves he doesn't really know or respect his father. He *sounds* respectful - "I will, sir" - but his actions prove that he cares only for himself and not his father.

That is tragic. It is also frightening. But it happens all the time, and all of us have seen it. People who use their words or acting skills to avoid making a commitment or a decision in order to evade *doing* what God really wants. They come across as compliant and submissive, but inside they are selfish or rebellious.

And that brings me to the second observation. This parable shows us what faith is - the kind of faith that pleases God. There are lots of things we can learn about faith from this story - that faith can be a struggle, or that the struggle produces a deeper faith than mere shallow compliance, or that the journey of faith may take time.

But I believe the main thing Jesus wants to convey is that ***faith is validated only by doing what God says, and not before.*** You have to submit to the will of the Father in order to validate your faith.

In downhill skiing there are three simple rules. Once you ride the chairlift and get ready to go down the mountain the first thing you need to do is face down the fall line. You don't start out going side by side or you won't go anywhere. You've got to face down the hill. Second, you have to have some speed. You cannot execute a turn in downhill skiing without some amount of speed. If you go too slow, you are going to fall over.

Third, and most importantly, you must keep your weight on the downhill ski, not on the uphill ski. If you do that, you'll catch an edge and fall. All the traversing in skiing is a continual shift of putting your weight on whichever ski is on the downhill side.

Those are the simple rules. But there is only one problem. All three go contrary to human instinct, especially the last one. We don't naturally want to put our weight on the downhill ski. We want to put it on the uphill ski so that we can be as close to the mountain as possible so that when we fall, we will only fall a little way. But we cannot actually ski unless we put our weight on the downhill ski. I have just taught you how to downhill ski. But let me ask you a question: When do you learn that the principles I just told you about are true? Only when you *do* them. That is when you learn that it works.

And that brings us to the application of this passage. I think it is pretty clear that this encounter between Jesus and the chief priests and elders, including the parable, is ultimately about how a person can know whether or not he/she is on God's side. The religious leaders were absolutely convinced they were on God's side because, besides knowing God's word and making every attempt to obey God's laws, they participated in all the religious traditions,

they had all their theological ducks in a row, and they went above and beyond the requirements that were mandated by Moses.

But according to Jesus, they were *not* doing the will of the Father. On the other hand, tax collectors and prostitutes - the moral and spiritual low-lifers in that day - although they were resistant and rebellious at first, ultimately changed their minds (like the first son) and *were* doing the Father's will, which meant that the last people you would expect were the ones on God's side, and the people you would most expect to be on God's side were not.

So, the big question is: What is the will of the Father that these tax collectors and prostitutes were doing? It wasn't merely that they stopped cheating people at the tax booth or stopped soliciting sex, though I'm quite sure this was the *result* of doing the Father's will. Likewise, it wasn't by doing all the things that the religious leaders did, only doing them more sincerely and fervently.

What Jesus meant in this passage by doing the Father's will is much more specific. Clearly, it has something to do with rejecting John's message, which was all about what and who? It was all about getting ready for the Messiah. Jesus! The will of the Father, then, has something to do with how one receives and relates to Jesus.

I'd like to direct your attention to **John 6:40**. ***40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise Him up on the last day.***

The Father's will is actually quite simple: ***"That everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life."*** What does this mean?

Looking on the Son and believing in Him means that we accept Jesus as the long-anticipated Messiah, God's Deliverer and King. To look on the Son and believe in Him means trusting Him to save us from our helpless sinful condition which makes us guilty before God and worthy of eternal punishment. It means trusting Him to rescue us from our abject spiritual poverty, clothe our shameful spiritual nakedness with His righteousness, and make us presentable to the Father.

We are not looking to our own good deeds or our own righteousness to get to heaven. We are not looking to our religious upbringing or our spiritual accomplishments to save us. We are not looking to anything we have, anything we have done, or anyone we know. Because it's not what we do for God - it's embracing what He has done for us through Jesus.

Do you want to be on God's side? Do the will of the Father. What is the Father's will? Look on the Son, believe in Him, and you shall have eternal life. That is the entrance requirement into the kingdom. There is no other way to get on God's good side.

Have you looked on Jesus and believed?

It is possible that some of you have thought that you were going to be just fine on the Day of Judgment because you were baptized as a baby, or you grew up in a Christian family, or you went to church all your life, or you've read your Bible several times, or you've done a lot of good things. Be assured, none of these things can save you. You cannot bring anything with you on that Day of Judgment - not your baptism certificate, your church membership papers, your church attendance records, your tax forms that show how much you gave to God's work, your Bible degree from such and such a college, your good works. As the hymn writer so poignantly wrote, "Nothing of my own I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling."

Knowing for certain that you are going to be safe on the Day of Judgment is not a matter of saying certain words, or praying a certain prayer, or knowing correct doctrine. It's about believing in the One He sent. Accept Jesus as the Messiah and trust Him as your Savior.

Doing the Father's Will Matthew 21:23-32

Main Idea: The only way to be on God's side is to do His will.

The "authorities" question Jesus' authority (vv.23-27)
Their motive

Their unwillingness to risk

The parable of the two sons (vv.28-30)

First son: A problem at breakfast, a joy at supper
Resistant and rebellious at first

Obedient in the end

Second son: A joy at breakfast, a problem at supper
"Compliant" and "respectful" at first

Resistant and rebellious in the end

The Analysis: This is a supper parable

It is better to do what at first you said you would not do, than not to do what at first you said you would

The indictment of the "authorities"

The "insiders" are on the outside with God

The "outsiders" are on the inside with God

The application: What does it mean to do the Father's will?

What the tax collectors and prostitutes actually did

What Jesus expects us to do