

Matthew 21:23-32
17th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)
September 27, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

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The events of our reading today took place during Holy Week. Jesus had just entered town to the shouts of “Hosanna!” On His way there, He had raised Lazarus from the dead. And news traveled fast. But then, when He got into town, He stirred things up again. He overturned the money tables and chased people out of the temple. And that didn’t sit well with the chief priests and elders. So, the next day they confronted Him as He was in the temple again, this time teaching. **“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”** they asked.

They think they’ve got Him. Either way He answers, they’ll nail Him. If He answers claiming a human authority, the chief priests could trump Him and accuse Him of subversion. *They* were the ones who had been entrusted with keeping order and leading the people in the temple. If He claimed divine authority, He would be guilty of blasphemy in their eyes.

He knew their hearts. So, Jesus turns the tables again, this time with a question of His own. The point of reference was John the Baptist. What did they think of him and his message? By what authority did John do what he did? Weighing their options, the chief priests and elders realized that they had fallen hopelessly into their own trap and pleaded ignorance. If they admit “from heaven” then why are they saying “no?” Why aren’t they repenting like so many others have repented? And if they say “from man,” well the evidence is still damning. So many have held that John was a prophet. So many were repenting and believing. So, yes, they were afraid of the crowds of followers of John. But even worse than that. This man was obviously doing the work of one sent by God. So again, why aren’t they repenting?

In their stubborn unbelief, they refuse to admit that either John or Jesus received their authority from heaven. At the same time, their cowardice prevents them from confessing their unbelief before the crowds. So, they conclude that the appearance of ignorant fool was better than admitting the truth about what they believed.

Jesus refuses to answer their question, but instead gives them the Parable of the Two Sons. A man has two sons and tells each of them to go work in the vineyard. The first son says no, but then changes his mind and goes to work. The second son says “yes,” but then changes his mind and does not go to work. Jesus asks which did the will of the father. And they answer that the first son did the will of the father. Even though he said “no” originally, he went and worked eventually.

This makes sense to us too. The theme, after all, of John the Baptist’s teaching and of Jesus’ teaching is repentance—turning away from sinful ways and seeking forgiveness from God. So the fact that the first son originally said “no” and then repented and did the father’s will seems like the right answer.

But an interesting point was brought up by a missionary. He told this parable to a crowd of Palestinians exactly as it appears in the Gospel and then asked them the question. Who did the will of the father? To his great surprise the crowd answered unanimously, “The man who said he would go, and did not.” When they were asked why, they said, “A day’s work in the vineyard is a little thing, but to say “no” to your father’s beard is a grievous sin.” In other words, it wouldn’t matter if the son carried out the work later. He already committed an offense and failed to do the father’s will when he said “no.”

So, who did do the will of the father? The one who said “no” and who later with his actions said “yes?” Or the one who said “yes” and later with his actions said “no?” The “yes/no” son, or the “no/yes” son? It turns out it’s complicated. If we try to answer it, just like those chief priests and elders, we will be caught in a trap also.

Because it is a parable, the father stands in for our Heavenly Father. The sons stand in for people. So, who are the elders and chief priests if this was originally targeted at them? Were they the first son who said “no” and then did or the second son who said “yes” and then didn’t?

Well, they are actually neither son. While it *looks like* they gave their “yes” to God and then did their own thing, (and outwardly it did look like they were saying “yes”) they were actually rejecting God’s prophets and

prophecies, and even His own Son. They were more concerned with their status, their authority, their power and standing in society. Their answer with their words and their actions were actually a “no” and a “no”—refusing to believe, refusing to repent.

So, Jesus pronounces a judgment on them. John came and they refused to believe; refused to repent. But the sinners of sinners—the tax collectors and the prostitutes—they did believe. They repented. They will go into the kingdom before the elders and chief priests.

That’s what’s going on in the text. What’s going on in our neck of the woods? Where do we find ourselves as we try to apply this parable to ourselves and our own lives of faith? Which son are we?

Again, it’s complicated. We know that we are all by nature sinful and unclean. Each one of us was born rejecting God, opposed to His will. Each of us in our natural state was a son or daughter crying out “no” to God’s commands. But then something happened. The Holy Spirit stirred and the Word of God came to us. And we were brought to repentance. While we originally said “no,” later, as faith was worked in us, we changed our answer to “yes” and started living out God’s will for us.

But along the way, as God’s people always do, filled with the Word and thankful for God’s gifts of forgiveness purchased by the cross of Jesus Christ and eternal life because of His empty tomb, we said “yes” over and over again and then failed to do. It’s complicated because each of us keeps bouncing back and forth from the first son to the second son. We continue to say “no” and then repent and amend our sinful ways. And we also continue to say “yes” and fail to do. None of us has completely done the will of our Father.

Fortunately for us there is a third son. He doesn’t appear in the parable. He is the one who gave the parable. And He does not say “no” and then “yes,” or “yes” and then “no.” He always says “yes” and then “yes.”

2nd Corinthians 1:20 tells us that **“all the promises of God find their ‘Yes’ in Him.”**

When the Father said *“You need to be human,”* the Son said, “Yes” and was born of the Virgin Mary. When the Father said *“You need to live a perfect life in their place, free of sin,”* the Son said “Yes” and then fulfilled all righteousness. When the Father said *“You need to exchange Your perfection, your righteousness for the sin of the world,”* the Son said “yes” and became sin for us. When the Father said *“now is the time. Carry their sin to the cross. Die for them. Take their sin to the grave.”* the Son said **“Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”** ^{Matthew 26:39} **“Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this He breathed His last.”** ^{Luke 23:46}

When the Father said, *“Now, proclaim your victory to the world.”* Then Jesus rose from the dead and He said to His disciples, **“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”** ^{Luke 24:44-47}

And then later, as the disciples were worshipping Him, Jesus said **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** ^{Matthew 28:18-20} And the disciples said “yes.”

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, along the way we have often acted like both sons in the parable. From the offspring of fallen Adam and Eve, to the people of Israel, to the Apostles, right down to you and me. Sometimes we fight God’s will until His Word and Holy Spirit work repentance in us. Other times we say “yes” quickly to Jesus with no intention of keeping our promise. But Jesus is not like either son. He agreed immediately and obeyed perfectly. In Him we have forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. ^{Rev James T. Bartholomew} In Christ, the answer is always “yes” and “yes.” When the Father told Jesus to earn our forgiveness, Jesus said “yes” and He did. When the Father told Him to remain with His people, Jesus said “yes” and He is with us. When the Father told Jesus to raise up His people and bring them into the new creation, Jesus said “yes” and on the last day He will.

“For all of the promises of God find their ‘Yes’ in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory.” ^{2 Corinthians 1:20} In Jesus’ name, Amen.