

## Tale of Two Sons 10-2-05

Matthew 21:23-32 (NIV)

<sup>23</sup>Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" <sup>24</sup>Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>25</sup>John's baptism--where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'" <sup>26</sup>But if we say, 'From men'--we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

<sup>28</sup>"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' <sup>29</sup>"I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>"Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

From this point in Matthew through chapter 23, Jesus will be dealing with the religious leaders of His culture. Five centuries earlier, the Jews had returned from captivity, humbled and broken. Their leaders consistently reminded them of the importance of obeying God's laws so that they could be blessed. (Nehemiah 10:29) It was out of this zeal to keep the Law to avoid divine retribution that the Pharisees emerged. Like many good movements with good intentions, there came a gradually increasing focus on the rules and the making of numerous rules to keep the rules. The desire to do God's will is a wonderful thing. How could such good intentions end up so hardened to the truth? Over the generations, the rules and their interpretations of them became their god.

The intention of the law is that of a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. (Galatians 3:24) It showed us that none of us is able to keep it. Therefore, we all need a Savior. Though it declared that none are righteous, (Psalm 14:3) the religious system found great pride in being in learned positions. They found legal loopholes to justify their setting aside the laws that hindered their pursuits. (Matthew 15:3-6) The lust for pride and the desire for the respect of man had replaced the heart that longed to know and please God. (Matthew 23:5)

Numerous times during Jesus' ministry, they had made outrageous claims about Him. They even said He was empowered by Satan. (Matthew 9:34) To understand how obstinate they were in their unbelief, consider what it would have been like to see someone delivered from a demon, or a deformity made whole, or a man born

**Commented [notes1]:** 29 all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.  
Nehemiah 10:29 (NIV)

**Commented [notes2]:** 24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.  
Galatians 3:24 (NIV)

**Commented [notes3]:** 3 All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.  
Psalms 14:3 (NIV)

**Commented [notes4]:** 3 Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?  
4 For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'  
5 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,'  
6 he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.  
Matthew 15:3-6 (NIV)

**Commented [notes5]:** 5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;  
Matthew 23:5 (NIV)

**Commented [notes6]:** 34 But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."  
Matthew 9:34 (NIV)

lame suddenly walking and jumping. Then, look at the face of the religious leader. Instead of a smile, there is a scowl. (Mark 3:5-6) Consider the life transformation that took place among the prostitutes and tax collectors. It would fill any honest heart with joy. But those who lust after the adoration of men only see someone stealing their show. Some of the leaders even declared that they knew He was of God and yet they resisted Him. (John 3:2)

**Commented [notes7]:** 5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.  
6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.  
Mark 3:5-6 (NIV)

It is one thing to resist and another altogether to plot the murder of a man who did such wonders. It was the greatest miracle of all, the resurrection of Lazarus that convinced them they had to kill Jesus. And why? Because everyone was believing in Him. They were losing their audience. (John 11:47-48)

**Commented [notes8]:** He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."  
John 3:2 (NIV)

These obstinately defiant leaders interrupted Jesus as He taught the people in the Temple courtyard.

*<sup>23</sup>Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"*

How could He ruin their moneymaking schemes in the outer court without declaring who authorized it? They were the ones that ordained the rabbi, and they had never ordained Him, so what right did He have to teach? They had heard Him say before that God was His Father. Now they were hoping for an even bolder statement so that they could have a reason to put Him to death. (John 10:33)

**Commented [notes9]:** 47 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs.  
48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."  
John 11:47-48 (NIV)

The patience of Jesus always amazes me. These crooks, who were masquerading as religious giants, were interrupting the One who gave them life with their sneaky demands. He did not call fire down from heaven, nor did He strike them blind, (2 Kings 1:10, 2 Kings 6:18) as happened in the case of prophets of old; instead, He taught. What a Master is Jesus! He is a Master of His emotions and able to set selfish interests aside and do what is best for everyone watching. He countered their question with a question.

**Commented [notes10]:** 33 "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."  
John 10:33 (NIV)

But before we go on, I must ask you if you question what right He has and where His authority comes from? We might say, "Never!" Yet we refuse to submit to that authority. He says to love our enemies, (Matthew 5:44) but we refuse and make excuses. He tells us seek first the kingdom of God, (Matthew 6:33) but we have other priorities. You do not have to question with the bold audacity of the religious leaders to obstinately deny His right and authority. There are far more passive aggressive rebels than vocal ones.

**Commented [notes11]:** 10 Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.  
2 Kings 1:10 (NIV)

**Commented [notes12]:** 18 As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike these people with blindness," as Elisha had asked.  
2 Kings 6:18 (NIV)

*<sup>24</sup>Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

There were a few days left before the Passover. A direct and forthright answer would have Him in court days earlier than what was planned. The question would not only expose these hypocrites to the listening audience, but also give the leaders an opportunity to search their own hearts while delaying His arrest.

**Commented [notes13]:** 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,  
Matthew 5:44 (NIV)

**Commented [notes14]:** 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.  
Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

<sup>25</sup>John's baptism--where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?"

What a perfect analogy! John had called them a batch of baby snakes. (Matthew 3:7) John did not do a single miracle, and yet lives were transformed by his message. The people knew John was a prophet, yet he was not ordained by these leaders. (John 10:41) If John's authority was from heaven, certainly Jesus, whom John pointed to as the Lamb of God and One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, received His authority from heaven.

*They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'"<sup>26</sup> But if we say, 'From men'--we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."*

They were trapped in their own lust for acceptance by man. The only thing they did not consider was the truth! Incredible, isn't it? These men were supposed to represent truth, but it was not even a consideration in their answer. They had grown used to it by debating the law with the intent of winning an argument rather than to find the truth. May God keep us from deceiving ourselves, and by the grace of God, may we always be open to truth!

<sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

It was a perfectly analogous situation, so Jesus had every right to refuse to answer. What good would it do? If they could not figure out John, then they could not figure out Jesus. If they were incapable of judging, then Jesus' answer would not help them.

The real problem was many of them did know. They were just refusing to admit it. It is the same for the unbeliever today. They know, but they refuse to admit it. They present arguments why they do not believe, but reality is they do believe but choose to go their own way. They excuse themselves by saying there are hypocrites in the church, while they go on living a hypocritical life. They know where Jesus' authority came from. They just refuse to yield to it. (John 5:39-40)

Most men...

- choose expediency rather than principle.
- choose to play it safe rather than to stand up for the truth.
- choose to say, "I don't know" rather than to speak the truth.

—Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible - Commentary

Jesus answered their hardheartedness with a parable that should have broken any heart that was open to truth. It is a tale of two sons.

<sup>28</sup>"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'<sup>29</sup>"I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

One son verbalized his rebellion against his father's order. Later, his conscience got to him. He decided he should have obeyed, so he went to work. This son allowed his hardhearted condition to be changed by conviction. He was willing to recognize when he was wrong, humble himself, and do what was right. What he said with his mouth was wrong. What he ended up doing was right.

**Commented [notes15]:** 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Matthew 3:7 (NIV)

**Commented [notes16]:** 41 and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true." John 10:41 (NIV)

**Commented [notes17]:** 39 You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me to have life. John 5:39-40 (NIV)

<sup>30</sup> "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

This son said what his father wanted to hear. He may have even intended to go. Instead of softening his heart, like his brother, he hardened his heart. He refused to do what his father had ordered and what he had committed to do. Not only was it rebellious disobedience, but it was dishonest. He gave one impression while he lived differently. It reminds us of the fig tree that Jesus cursed in the previous passage. The leaves promised fruit while there was none. This was the typical Pharisee. They often said the right thing, but they would excuse themselves from doing it.

(Matthew 23:3) It was as if saying the right thing was more important than doing the right thing. We can sing "Standing on the Promises" while all we are really doing is sitting on the premises.

**Commented [notes18]:** 3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. Matthew 23:3 (NIV)

This lying answer is doubly destructive. The request for labor was because of a need. As we have seen before, if there are not enough laborers, there is loss. By thinking the son was going to work, the father would not have looked for another laborer to hire. The deception caused the father loss.

<sup>31</sup> "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

It is interesting how Jesus brings people to condemn themselves with their own mouth. (Matthew 12:37) By making what they were doing a simple story, He helped them disassociate themselves from it and exposed their obstinacy. Now they would have to think about the parallel and wonder why they could so easily say "The first," but not obey the call to repent that came through both John and Jesus. (Matthew 3:1,2; 4:17)

**Commented [notes19]:** 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Matthew 12:37 (NIV)

**Commented [notes20]:** 1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Matthew 3:1-2 (NIV)

Sometimes it takes an example for us to be able to see clearly. We see another life that parallels our own, and we can see what they should do. Then we slowly realize that we have been blind to the same need in our own life. The heart of man is desperately wicked. It so easily deceives us into pleasing self while justifying our actions. (Jeremiah 17:9) To step out and look at our situation from the eyes of an outsider can completely change our perspective, if we are willing to be humbled and see our error. That was a step the leaders seemed to be unable to take, while the dregs of their society took it with joy.

**Commented [notes21]:** 17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Matthew 4:17 (NIV)

**Commented [notes22]:** 9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9 (NIV)

<sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

What did John show them? The way of righteousness was to repent and prepare your heart for the coming Messiah. They saw the way of righteousness as being the keepers of the rules, the arguers of right and wrong, the judges of others. Had they noted in their law the example of David who declared that God accepted the sacrifice of a humble and contrite heart? (Psalm 51:17) Had they heard Solomon's words, "Pride goes before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18) Did they see that Abraham was justified by faith? (Genesis 15:6)

**Commented [notes23]:** 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalms 51:17 (NIV)

**Commented [notes24]:** 18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18 (NIV)

**Commented [notes25]:** 6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:6 (NIV)

Even if they did not see those truths, they should have seen the transformed lives of the tax collectors and prostitutes. If they were really in power for the purpose of seeing people come to a closer walk with God, they would have been thrilled to see lives changed. It would have made them realize that repentance and transformation is what God is after, not perfectly keeping the rules. They would have believed John when he said, "...and I saw and bore record that this is the Son of God." (John 1:34) They would have believed him when he said, "Behold the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29) John never did a miracle, but the people said that everything he said about Jesus was true. Do you believe John was a prophet? Then you must believe that Jesus is the Son of God that takes away the sins of the world. Then you must believe God provided a way for you to be right with Him through the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross, and that it is Jesus alone who baptizes us into the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 3:11)

**Commented [notes26]:** 34 I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."  
John 1:34 (NIV)

**Commented [notes27]:** 29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"  
John 1:29 (NIV)

**Commented [notes28]:** 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."  
Matthew 3:11 (NIV)

As we go through Jesus' dealings with the Pharisees in the weeks to come, we should be examining our own hearts to see if there is something of the Pharisee in us. They are not so removed from us. They began with a desire to please God. They continued by strict discipline with study and sacrifice. What was missing was a willingness to see their faults and a tenderness of conscience that would have yielded to Jesus' gentle prodding. Can we step outside our circumstances and apply what we see in others' situations to our own life? Or are we so set in our ways that our minds and hearts are locked up, no longer open to receiving instruction? (Proverbs 19:20)

**Commented [notes29]:** 20 Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.  
Proverbs 19:20 (NIV)

Since the heart of man is the same the world over and throughout time, we should be careful that, in the light of so much evidence, like that which the Pharisees saw in the lives and testimonies of John and Jesus, that we do not ignore the obvious. May God help us to recognize and yield to the authority of Jesus in our lives! And may God help us to never question it.

In Jesus story, there were two sons with two different responses. The point Jesus was making is that God is looking for obedience more than what we say. But there could be a third type of son or daughter, one that says, "We will go" and actually does go. (James 1:25) Let us be sons and daughters that say we will go and actually do go and labor for our Father. He comes to us today and says, "Son, daughter, go today and work in my vineyard." What will your response be? But more importantly, what will you actually do?

**Commented [notes30]:** 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.  
James 1:25 (NIV)