

HEADING OUT INTO THE VINEYARD
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Text: Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to 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, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Someone with way too much time on their hands once figured out that in the gospels Jesus is asked 183 questions and gives direct answers to only three. I'm not sure what qualifies as a direct answer, but it seems pretty clear that Jesus had a roundabout way of telling people what they wanted to know, and today we have a shining example of that.

Once again, Jesus is up against his old adversaries—the chief priests and elders. They find him teaching in the temple in Jerusalem, and they ask him a question: "By what authority are you

doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

And they're not just talking about him teaching. They want to know where he got the authority to do the all things he's been doing ever since he arrived in town: whipping up the crowds as he rode through the streets on a donkey, driving the money-changers out of the temple, and generally being a thorn-in-the-side of the powers-that-be.

Now, obviously it's not a real question. These guys could care less about the answer. They're shrewd politicians, and they're trying set a

rhetorical trap. They're trying to trick Jesus into saying something they can use against him.

But Jesus is no dummy either. He's sees what's going on, and instead of taking the bait, he answers their question with a question of his own—a question about John the Baptist. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven," he says, "or was it of human origin?"

Seems like a pretty random thing to ask, but look at it from the perspective of these religious leaders Jesus is talking to. There's really no way for them to answer that question without undermining their own position and creating a lot of headaches for themselves. If they say John's authority came straight from heaven, they'd be legitimating him as a prophet, someone who speaks for God, which is supposed to be their job. If they say John's authority came from a merely human source, that would tick off pretty much all of John's followers and make a lot of people super angry.

The only choice they have is to not give an answer, which is exactly what they do. "We don't know," they say, and while they're standing there scratching their heads, Jesus launches into a parable.

He tells a story about a man with two sons. The man went to the first son and asked him to go work in the family vineyard. The son replied, "Sorry, dad, not today," but later on he changed his mind and did what his father wanted. Then the man went to the second son and asked him the same thing. The son replied, "Sure thing, dad, I'll get right on it!" but he never did.

When he finishes telling the story, Jesus follows up with another question: "Which of the two did the will of the father?" "That's easy," the priests and

scribes all say. "The first one." Clearly they understand that the son who initially refused but then went out and worked in the vineyard is the one who did the father's will. Clearly they understand that in the relationship between these two sons and their father, actions speak louder than words.

And yet in their own relationship with God, these supposedly devout and pious men are nothing but talk. They present themselves as people who serve God faithfully, but when God actually calls them to do something, they pretend not to hear.

That's what Jesus is saying in the last part of the reading, where he brings up John the Baptist again. "It's funny you'd say that," he tells them. "It's funny you'd say the first son did the will of the father. Because out in the wilderness, when John was announcing the kingdom of heaven and calling people to repent, you guys acted like the second son. You refused to listen to him, even when you saw with your own eyes that he was indeed a real prophet."

So it turns out the priests and scribes are not like the first son at all. They're like the second son—the one who puts on a big display of obedience and then ignores the father's wishes; the one who says, "Yes, sir! Right away!" and then doesn't lift a finger. In their own life of faith, that's who they are.

And if we're honest, we have to admit that we've all have times in our lives when that's who we were, too—times when we said yes to something we felt like God was calling us to do but then somehow never got around to actually doing it. I can hear God complaining, "If I had a nickel for every time one of my followers made me a promise..."

And that's okay because one thing we never hear God say is that God's had enough of our empty promises and doesn't want anything more to do with us. God never tells us anything like that. God never runs out of patience with us, no matter how many times we let God down. God never gives up on us, no matter how many times we fail to live up to our word. God's always hopeful that one of these days we'll finally get our act together and head out into the vineyard, where God is calling us to go.

And then there's son number one—the son who flat-out refuses to do what his dad tells him to do, but then has a big change of heart. At one time or another, we've all been him, as well. We've all had times when we saw that there was some kind of need in the world around us, and we heard that little voice in our heads urging us to do something about it, and we told that voice to go away and leave us alone. Maybe we were overwhelmed by the size of the task. Maybe we were busy with other things. Maybe we thought it was someone else's problem.

But that little voice didn't give up. It kept whispering in our ear, and eventually we found ourselves being sent into the vineyard, where we ended up making connections with people, and becoming part of a community, and discovering meaning for our lives.

That's what I love about this parable. It tells me that even when we don't respond to God, even when we refuse to do what God wants, God keeps trying to engage us

Which honestly can be a little annoying. God can be like a telemarketer who keeps on calling even when we block their number. But it's only because God knows us so well, better than we know ourselves, and God has a vision for our

lives and won't give up on the vision until it comes to be.

So my advice is to pick up the phone, answer the call, and head out into the vineyard. Because even though the work can be hard, and the hours can be long, what you'll find out there at the end of the day, when the sun's getting low, is yourself—the person God made you to be. Amen.