



# Preach **Matthew** notes

**Proper 21**  
**25th September 2005**

**RELATED**  
Ez 18:1-4, 25-32  
Psalm 25:1-8  
Phil 2:1-13

**CONTINUOUS**  
Ex 17:1-7  
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16  
Phil 2:1-13

## **Matthew 21:23-32 (NIV)** **By whose authority?**

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?"

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. 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?' But if we say, 'From men' – we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."

So they answered Jesus, "We don't know,"

Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"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.'

"I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

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

"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. 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."

This is a critical passage in Matthew's Gospel it follows the story of the cleansing of the temple and the challenge to Jesus authority in 21:23-27. Then in three successive parables, the Two Sons, the Rented Vineyard and the Wedding Feast, all turning on the theme of sonship, Jesus criticises the Jewish leadership. This all stems from their failure to adequately answer Jesus own question about the authority for John the Baptist's ministry.

The Jewish leaders approach Jesus the day after the cleansing of the temple to question his authority to "do these things" Matthew's editing of Mark's account

is interesting. Mark describes Jesus as "walking around" the temple courts when the question of authority is addressed to him. Matthew has Jesus "teaching" (*didaskonti*) when he is so addressed. The "things" for which authority is sought are probably also to include Jesus authority to teach, and to heal in addition to the cleansing of the temple. It is as though the single act of cleansing the temple stands for the entirety of Jesus ministry.

As so often in the Gospels Jesus counters a question with another question. This is no a subtle ploy to evade the issue but a rabbinic form of dispute. The



question is designed to expose the lack of insight and integrity on the part of the questioner. There are some questions which are designed to provoke, trap or criticise. There are other questions which genuinely seek information and understanding. The Jewish leaders question about Jesus authority belongs to the former category.

▼  
**Discipleship  
is about the  
choices we  
make not just  
the privileges  
we enjoy.**

Jesus' counter question asks the leaders to comment on the authority of the Baptist's ministry. Matthew makes clear their dilemma and they can only say "we do not know". Just as the cleansing of the temple incident stood for the entirety of Jesus ministry so John's baptism stands for the entirety of his message of repentance and the imminent coming of the kingdom. Their lack of insight and their desire to court the approval of the people is evidence of a closed question, designed to provoke not to explore.

So far Matthew is following Mark but he now adds a parable from his own special source, that of the Two Sons which further explains the failure of the Jewish leaders to understand and respond to Jesus ministry. The first son (interestingly not described as the elder son with all the privilege that would imply) represents the tax collectors and prostitutes, those whose disobedience is obvious but who on reflection become obedient. The verb here, *metamelētheis* is elsewhere used in Matthew to indicate repentance. Discipleship is about the choices we make not just the privileges we enjoy. The second son represents the religious authorities that offer a superficial response but do not translate formal piety into obedient action. The Jewish leaders are guilty on

three counts - of belief without obedience, of a failure to see the evidence of the kingdom in the repentance of sinners and of fearing the disapproval of the crowd. In failing to authenticate John's ministry the leaders indicate that they have already made their decision about Jesus. Closed minds ask closed questions and Jesus has the freedom not to make an answer.

### Stewardship reflections

The cleansing of the temple was to reassert the primacy of the temple as a house of prayer – but it had economic implications for those who made a living from it. Whether it is politics, the minimum wage, changes in working practices, or aid to the poorest countries change and reform will always encounter vested financial interest which will resist. Money has the power to excite, to provoke a response because it so often touches a raw nerve in us, as though it was symbolic of so much more than just finance.

Teaching on money can and often does expose that raw nerve for people. We need to be ready for the questions and ready to discern those, which are genuinely open questions and closed questions from those whose minds are already set. Money is perhaps the primary area in which we fail to translate belief into obedience.

### Core


The privilege of adoption as the sons and daughters of God carries with it the responsibility of obedience – turning faith into action. Obedience in the area of money is hard and we may need to think twice about it! We might acknowledge that God is the source of all that we have, that we should give to God of the first fruits of all that is ours but in practice rarely make the





connection between giving and income levels which is required by the proportional giving which Paul teaches in 1 Cor 16:1-2. It is important to stress that this is not about 10%, nor 1% nor even 5% or any other percentage as a Biblical standard of giving. The teaching of proportional giving is to reconnect income and giving. That is a big step for many of us. The challenge for the core is to consider no longer asking “how much should I give?” and begin asking “what percentage of my income should I be giving?”

### Congregation

Jesus criticism is towards those that maintained a religious superficiality, the right words but no action. 

Sometimes our religious questions are closed questions, designed to protect us not to open us up to truth. When it comes to money what are the questions we are asking? Are they open or closed questions? Do we hide behind the perceived wealth of the Church of England, or disagreement about how our church spends its money? Can we not see the work of God in the ministry of our parish church? Are our questions real or are we protecting ourselves from the claim of the Gospel on our lives? Self-deception is much harder to challenge and change in ourselves than disobedience.

**Money is perhaps the primary area in which we fail to translate belief into obedience.**

### Fringe

The religious leaders could not see the work of God in John the Baptists ministry but the people could. They could not see the work of God in Jesus ministry, but thousands could and they flocked to him. We may feel as though our chance has passed us by but the Gospel is always about a second chance. The obedience of giving is just one part of the obedience that we are called to as Christian; not obedience to a set of rules but the obedience that comes with the privilege of being a child of God. ■

