



Preach **Matthew** sermon

(Year A Proper 21)

RELATED

Ez 18:1-4, 25-32
Ps 25:1-8
Phil 2:1-13

CONTINUOUS

Ex 17:1-7
Ps 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.”

Jesus really knows how to upset the priest and elders doesn't he? He comes in throws out all their lucrative marketing stalls in temple offerings and the next morning after the clear out, calmly starts teaching the people. Hardly the way to make friends and influence people - especially following a fairly dramatic entrance on a donkey the previous day. No wonder the elders were a bit upset, and no wonder they questioned his authority. But as usual with Jesus, they got more than they bargained for, and before we get too sympathetic towards them, or too judgmental we have to look at what it was that offends Jesus so much.

The Jewish leaders approach Jesus the day after the cleansing of the temple to question his authority to “do these things” This includes the cleansing of the temple but also include Jesus authority to teach, and to heal There are questions which genuinely seek information and understanding and there are those designed to provoke, trap or criticise. The Jewish leaders question on Jesus authority belongs to the latter category. As so often in the Gospels Jesus counters a question with another question. Jesus counter question asks the leaders to comment on the authority of the Baptist's ministry. John's baptism stood for the message of repentance and the imminent coming of the kingdom.

The parable of the two Sons further explains the failure of the Jewish leaders to understand and respond to Jesus ministry. The first son represents the tax collectors and prostitutes, those whose disobedience is obvious but who on reflection become obedient. 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 i.e. hypocrisy
- Of a failure to see the evidence of the kingdom in the repentance of sinners i.e. God's work is less important than status and authority
- Of fearing the disapproval of the crowd i.e. popularity being more important than principle.

In failing to acknowledge 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.

Before we get too comfortable at their offences we need to ensure that we are not risking the same condemnation. After all we are in a similar position as members and stewards of the church just like they were elders and priests of the temple. We think this is our church just like they thought the temple was theirs. After all haven't we been given authority just like they had?

Jesus is offended by hypocrisy and by religious people putting obstacles in the way of other peoples desire to worship God. The cleansing of the temple, which had become a marketplace was necessary in order to give back to the Gentiles a holy and peaceful place to worship God. The growth of the temple market in doves and other sacrificial offerings effectively excluded them from worship. It was discriminatory - even racist.

In what ways do we exclude those who don't often worship? Do we welcome the stranger, even when they are noisy, and unused to our traditions and quiet? In what ways do we exclude the unchurched by depriving our ministry of the resources necessary to do it's work, both in our own communities, our national church and abroad through mission giving?

Jesus is offended by hypocrisy. Our actions should speak much louder than our voices. As Archbishop Temple said "preach the gospel at all times - use words if you have too". Belief without obedience is hollow worship. The desire for justice, mercy and a life that speaks of the grace, generosity and redeeming love of God depends far less on what we say in church than how we live outside of it.

Core

For those of us who have positions of authority in the church the onus is even greater. 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 carefully about it! We acknowledge that God is the source of all that we have. Our giving should speak loudly of God's love, God's generosity and grace. But also the rest of our money should too! Remember generosity can be measured by what is left! For a millionaire to give a tenth or tithe of his income is no great sacrifice - it costs him nothing! For a person only on state pension to do so is a real sacrifice. Before thinking of our giving, think of our living, do we live ethically, promote justice, do we live simply in order to give more? Billy Graham says that a chequebook is a theological statement. What does ours say? Are we guilty of dissociation between words and action?



Congregation

For those regular worshippers here the need to measure our actions against our words is also necessary. 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? We also have to take seriously the need to think again about our giving and its priority in our lives just as Sunday worship is a priority in our time. If we give the first hours of the week in worship can we not do the same and give the first part of our weekly or monthly income to God as well, as part of our worship; our faith into action?

Fringe

For those of you, who join with us less often; remember that 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. All are called to God, none are excluded by God. The obedience in giving is just one part of the obedience that we are called to as Christians; not obedience to a set of rules but the obedience that comes with the privilege of being a child of God. If we truly want to worship and to know God, then we will want to spend time with Him, in prayer, worship, and reading of the bible. If we want to be part of his will in the world then we will want to share in the giving of both time and money in order that we show the grace, generosity and love of God in our lives, and grow more into his image and closer to Him.

This is a hard reading, it is a hard message - we come to church not because we are good but because we accept we are sinners and we need Gods forgiveness and renewal. But we wish to avoid the charges laid against the elders and priests in this reading. We want our lives to be free of hypocrisy; we want to open doors to faith not close them for people in need in our community and our time, here and now.

Amen

