

When 'Yes' Means 'No' ~ and 'No' Means 'Yes' The Parable of the Two Sons

Matthew 21:23-32
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa



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(Before Scripture Reading)

The biblical context leading up to today's reading in chapter 21 of the Gospel of Matthew is important for us to be aware of in order to gain a greater understanding of this passage. The chapter begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (what we call Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday) that marks the last week of his life. One of Jesus' first acts upon entering the city is the dramatic cleansing of the temple. It is that particular action that leads to a confrontation, which is the first of many, between Jesus and the chief priests and elders. It is specifically *their* authority that Jesus defied when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Hear, now, from the Gospel of Matthew the interaction that follows the next day when Jesus again returns to the temple to teach.

(Read Matthew 21:23-32)

There are people who have a predominant tendency to say, "No!" No to what they are asked to do, or even to what they know is the right thing to do. But after some thought they later have a change of heart and mind and do it.

Then there are people who have a predominant tendency to say, "Yes!" Yes to what they are asked to do, or to what they know is the right thing to do. But then they either don't follow through, or never had any intention of doing so in the first place.

This scenario is what is portrayed in Jesus' parable, often called the parable of the two sons. Admittedly, there are many obscure passages in the Bible in which it is hard to find modern relevance – but this isn't one of them. The practical applications for our lives that are set up by this teaching that actions are more important than lip service are indeed quite obvious. I'll return to this in a moment.

First, I want us to look at the issue of authority. What right did Jesus have, as a simple traveling preacher, to interfere with the way things were run at the holiest site in the Jewish world? Were the religious leaders not justified in their protest of Jesus' unauthorized interference? What if some other Presbyterian minister were to burst into this sanctuary right now and cause a ruckus about how we do things here at College Hill? Would we not be concerned and wonder what gave that person the right – the authority – to do such a thing?

The chief priests and elders at the temple in Jerusalem, as it turns out, do the right thing. They ask Jesus, whom they probably have heard something about, a twofold

question, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" It was an appropriate question by those responsible for the faith, morals, and institutional life of Judaism. Their questions rightly assume that there are different kinds of authority and that Jesus is exercising authority of some kind.

In his biblical commentary, *Matthew*, Presbyterian preaching professor Thomas Long states the following about two forms of authority:

First, there is human authority. No matter how sophisticatedly it is packaged, human authority is a matter of raw power. If you have enough people behind you or guns with you, you have it, and what you say goes, period.

Divine authority, on the other hand, has to do with truth, the truth of God, the truth about who God made us to be.

In the short run, human authority can appear to overwhelm divine authority – even to crucify it – but, ultimately, God's truth prevails.

While I am among those who would need to have a long drawn out debate on just what "truth" is anyway, I don't think it's unfair to apply the overall concept of distinguishing these two categories of **human and divine authority**. My bigger concern is when the right to yield any authority, human or divine, crosses the boundary into becoming authoritarian.

As a volatile example, what gives the United States the authority and right to invade another country? And as the most powerful nation in the world, have we not, at times, tried to pass off our human authority as God's divine authority? This issue of just who has authority, where it comes from, and how it is wielded is something worth a lot more attention than we have time for this morning. So I'll press on.

Matthew now presents Jesus' response to the chief priests and elders. Jesus seizes on the question posed about whether he has the authority to do what he does, and transfers the question about authority to the activity of John the Baptist. Jesus turns the tables on his inquisitors by responding with a question to them, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Responding to a question with a question may seem evasive, but Jesus adds a daring promise, "If you will tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things."

Back in my seminary years, I learned something very important from Janie Spahr, an activist for equal rights within the Presbyterian denomination, and someone many of you know as well. She once told me **how to respond to a difficult or perhaps even inappropriate question**. She said, "First, ask them why that information would be important for them to know. Second, if you want to answer the question then tell them that you will answer it if they, in turn, will also answer the same question. I can't help but think that this advice is quite similar to what Jesus does in his response to the questions from the religious authorities. Instead of ducking their question, he steps onto the high wire and dares them to follow.

Jesus' question places the chief priests and elders in a dilemma. They dialogue with each other and think over their alternatives. Those leaders are anxious for the approval of the people and they don't want to get themselves in trouble with the masses.

Leadership, today, hasn't changed much has it? **Politicians seem obsessed with opinion polls, often using those results to undermine what they believe is the right thing to do. There are some religious leaders that do the same.**

Seeing a no-win situation, the chief priests and elders simply respond to Jesus' question with, "We do not know." Now, **"We don't know" can be a legitimate religious response.** Religious leaders should never be burdened with the impossible task of knowing all the answers. **And those in positions of leadership should never claim to know more than they do.** In fact, "We do not know" can be a very Christian confession of faith in that it acknowledges the mystery of God.

But not in this instance. For by their own laws, it is the chief priests and elders' responsibility to know who is and is not a false prophet. By refusing to answer they seek refuge, and in the process they compromise their own authority. They choose a path of non-commitment, which, ironically, betrays their commitment. **Does not a person with legitimate authority and in a leadership position have an obligation to tell the truth when he or she knows it?**

In refusing to say that John the Baptist's ministry comes from God, which is what the people believed, they reject the claim that John, and therefore Jesus, have God-given divine authority. Their original question, which was a strategy to trap Jesus, becomes a trap that they fall into themselves. There's a good principle here for us. **Those unwilling to answer questions should not ask them.** I can think of many practical applications of this.

Since they will not answer Jesus' question about authority, Jesus refuses to answer theirs. Instead, he tells them a parable (found only in Matthew's gospel) and invites their response by starting with a simple question, "What do you think about the following?" They cannot dodge a simple story, the point of which seems obvious.

A parent has two children and directs the first to go and work in the vineyard. In an act of defiance, this one declines, but then has a change of heart and mind and obediently goes to work. The second one is given the same directive, verbally agrees to be obedient to work, but does not.

Jesus follows this simple story with another simple question, "Which of these two children did the will of the parent?" The answer, which the chief priests and elders agree on, is the one who was eventually obedient and followed the parent's instructions. This is Jesus' simple lesson: **God requires deeds and action rather than empty words. Practice is more important than profession.**

So just who are these "Yes" and "No" people? Well that depends on the context to which this parable is applied. In a modern Christian context it becomes a warning to those of us in the church who say "Yes." This parable rightly indicates, even predicts, that **the church includes those who say the right words, but then fail to act on them. It refers to those that when all is said and done, more is said than in done. It refers to those who pay lip-service to God and put on a good religious appearance, but whose lives reflect otherwise. This is the very definition of hypocrisy, of being a hypocrite.**

It is any wonder, then, that so many people in our society-at-large see much of the church institution as hypocritical and increasingly more irrelevant? And if all they see is church people fighting amongst themselves, why would they want to be a part of that?

Today's parable reveals that it is not those who give an empty 'yes' to God who find abundant life, but rather those who actually in their lives do what God wills. And I would summarize that most simply the way Jesus did – to love God, neighbor, and

oneself. In other words, and to put it more bluntly, which I have a tendency to do, **it is not verbal assent to a list of so-called fundamental tenants and orthodox doctrines that ultimately count the most, but rather obedience to the teachings of Jesus.**

What makes the difference, then, is not only what we do here on Sunday morning, but what we do on Sunday afternoon, and Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and so forth. As biblical commentator Frederick Bruner summarizes, "Our parable is directed against both a doctrinal fundamentalism that tells people that believing the right truths is the way of salvation, without any moral component, and against an emotional revivalism that looks only for responses, not life."

The one who does God's will is the person, like the one in the parable, who ultimately realizes that saying 'no' was wrong, thought better of it, turned around and did 'yes'.

Does your life, does our church life, do and not merely say, yes?

Amen.