

Do You Have Follow-Through Matthew 21:23-32

I must confess, I read this scripture a few months ago and assumed that I understood what it must be about. However when I studied it in its context, I realized that I had mostly misunderstood what Jesus was saying to his original audience. So let's examine this scripture together.

Jesus is being questioned by the chief priests and elders. They are demanding that Jesus explain by what authority He had done His Triumphal Entry into the Jerusalem, by what authority He received praise from the people, by what authority He cleansed the temple, by what authority He healed the blind and the lame (vv. 8-14), and by what authority He did His teaching (v. 23). Before you shake your head and say how dare they, I must remind you that I currently serve on the Commission on Ministry for the Michigan Region. It is our responsibility to meet with anyone who wants to be ordained or commissioned for ministry to determine whether we believed they have been called by God to their particular ministry. So as the custodians of the spiritual life of the nation, they had the right to ask this question of Jesus. But we are amazed that they asked this question at this point. Jesus had given them three years of ministry, and they still would not face the facts. They wanted more evidence. The leaders understood Jesus was claiming authority as Messiah and they wanted to know where He got such authority. He certainly had not received it from them!

In response to the religious leaders' question, Jesus asked another question, promising that if they answered His question, He would answer theirs. He asked: John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?

vv. verses

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Though this question seemed fairly simple, it prompted a debate among the religious leaders. If they answered that John's baptism was from heaven, they knew Jesus would respond: Then why didn't you believe him? On the other hand if they responded that John's baptism was from men, they knew the people would be upset with them. John was regarded as a great prophet by the people. So Jesus put them in a position in which they had tried to place Him on this and many other occasions. They finally responded that they did not know the answer to Jesus' question. In keeping with His word, Jesus refused to answer their question.

John had prepared the way for Jesus and if the rulers had received John's ministry, they would have received Jesus. Instead, the leaders permitted Herod to arrest John and then to kill him. If they would not accept the authority of John, they would not accept the authority of Jesus; because both John and Jesus were sent by God.

The religious rulers had rejected the truth preached by John, and therefore Jesus could not teach them new truth. Both He and John were under the same authority.

Now, as was his custom, Jesus tells them a story about a vineyard to bring home his point of their rejecting the teaching of John the Baptist, and therefore really rejecting the instructions of God.

The vineyard, of course, speaks of the nation of Israel (Ps. 80:8–16; Isa. 5). The two sons represent the two classes of people in that nation: the self-righteous religious people, and the publicans and sinners. In Jesus' parable the man asked his two sons to go . . . work in the vineyard. The first son said he would not go but later he changed his mind and went. The other immediately said he would go and work but he never showed up. When John came ministering, the religious crowd showed great interest in his work, but they would not repent and humble themselves and be baptized (Matt. 3:7–12; John 1:19–28). The nonreligious crowd, however, confessed their sins and obeyed John's words and were baptized.

The leaders committed two sins: They would not believe John's message and they would not repent of their sins. Of course, the leaders felt that they had no need to repent (Luke 18:9–14). But when they saw what repentance did for the publicans and sinners, they should have been convinced that John's message was true and salvation was real.

Jesus then asked: Which of the two did what his father wanted? The obvious answer was that the first son obeyed. Jesus immediately applied this to the religious leaders. While some seemingly accepted the ministry of John the Baptist (John 5:35), their actions (Luke 7:29-30) proved they were like the second son. On the other hand many tax collectors and prostitutes received the message of John and did the will of the Father. Therefore they would be allowed entrance into the kingdom of God. But the religious leaders who did not repent and believe would be denied entrance. These religious leaders stood condemned. They must have been stunned by Jesus' words that despised, immoral people such as tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom and they, the religious leaders, were not!¹ Again and again, the religious rulers rejected the clear evidence God gave them.

Their rejection of John was actually a rejection of the Father who had sent him. But God is gracious, and instead of sending judgment because of their reject of John, God sent His Son.²

The meaning of this parable is crystal clear. The Jewish leaders are the people who said they would obey God and then did not. The tax-gatherers and the harlots are those who said that they would go their own way and then took God's way. However, did you notice that this parable does not really praising either group? Neither son in the story was the kind of son to bring full joy to his father. Both

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:69

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 21:23

were unsatisfactory; but the one who in the end obeyed was a little better than the other. The ideal son, which neither was, would be the son who accepted the father's orders with obedience and with respect and who unquestioningly and fully carried them out.

But since we were not there at Jesus' side when he told this parable, are there other things that we can learn?

It tells us that there are two very common classes of people in this world. First, there are the people whose profession is much better than their practice. They will promise anything; they claim piety and fidelity; but their practice lags far behind. Second, there are those whose practice is far better than their profession. They claim to be tough, hardheaded materialists, but somehow they are found doing kindly and generous things, almost in secret, as if they were ashamed of it. They profess to have no interest in the Church and in religion, and yet, when it comes down to it, they live more Christian lives than many professing Christians.

We have all met these people, those whose practice is far from the sanctimonious piety of their profession, and those whose practice is far ahead of the cynical, and sometimes almost irreligious, profession which they make. The real point of the parable is that, while the second class are infinitely to be preferred to the first, neither is anything like perfect. The real person of faith is the person in whom profession and practice meet and match.

Further, this parable teaches us that promises can never take the place of performance, and fine words are never a substitute for fine deeds. The son who said he would go, and did not, had all the outward marks of courtesy. In his answer he called his father "Sir" with all respect. But a courtesy which never gets beyond words is a totally misleading thing. True courtesy is obedience, willingly and graciously given. On the other hand the parable teaches us that a person can easily spoil a good thing by the way they do it. A person can do a fine thing with a lack of

graciousness which spoils the whole deed. Here we learn that the Christian way is in performance and not promise, and that the mark of a Christian is obedience graciously and courteously given.³

This is the way that John Bergland interpreted and imagined today's lectionary scriptures in the Abingdon Preacher's Annual.

The place where most of us make bold statements about our allegiance to Christ is in the church on Sunday morning. We say it in our hymns. "I Surrender All." We say it in our prayers. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Sometimes we say it in prayers that dedicate our offerings. "With these gifts we offer our very selves to thee."

It is not true for most of us, that our promises in church surpass our ability to serve our Lord. Our commitments through hymns and prayers often don't change anything about the way we spend our days, conduct our personal lives, and manage our business. But, we go out of church believing we are loyal sons and daughters of the divine parent.

Jesus did not address problems philosophically, but rather, had a quality of character that involved him in actual relationships and actions. In the final analysis, he taught more by what he was and what he did than through mere words.

There is a sobering word in these lessons that suggests drunks and harlots may have a better time of it at the judgment seat of God than those who promise love and loyalty but do not live it out.⁴ We can make all the promises to God that we want, but to fulfill those promises we must step out in obedience and serve with joy.

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 257

⁴ Bergland, John, editor: *Abingdon Preacher's Annual 1993*: Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992, 302-303