

21:28 ¶ "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' 29* "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 "The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go. 31 "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They *said, "The first." Jesus *said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. 32 "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

Here in Matthew 21 Jesus returns to teaching in a series of parables.

This parable's main theme is the kingdom of God.

The parable is introduced by Jesus after a series of events where He is again in conflict with the religious leaders of the day. They are the chief priests would have been Sadducces and the elders. Before we look at the parable we must understand the context in which it is given based on the question that Jesus was asked in vs.23:

23 ¶ When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"

Now we need to know what He was doing and that is found in vs. 12 concerning something that occurred the previous day:

¶ And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.

When Jesus is confronted by the question as to where His authority to act in such a manner comes from, He asks them a question about John the Baptist.

There was a show of propriety in their question. He was making great changes in the affairs of the temple, and they claimed the right to know why this was done, contrary to their permission. He was not a priest; he had no civil or ecclesiastical authority as a Jew. It was sufficient authority indeed, that he came as a prophet, and worked miracles. But they professed not to be satisfied with that.

So Jesus responds:

v.24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 "The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?'" 26 "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet." 27* And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know." He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Why would Jesus pose such a question to these men? Because their response proves that they knew who John was. We must remember that John's preaching was just as much despised by these men as was Jesus' teaching. If they knew who John really was, if they knew he was the one who would precede the Messiah, one who was like Elijah, then they also had to acknowledge that John spoke as a prophet whose authority came from God.

If John is the ordained prophet who precedes the Messiah and gives acknowledgement to Jesus with words like, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, then they must accept the fact that the authority that Jesus has also came from God.

They realized that the people regarded John and Jesus as prophets from God. Of course this does not mean all the people in absolute terms. But they saw large numbers of people who were being affected by the preaching of John and Jesus.

Both John and Jesus are a threat to their power and false righteousness. The way they are immersed in the theater of piety is constantly being exposed by the truth and reality of what God’s true righteousness demands.

They regarded Jesus’ question and they reasoned correctly. If they said, From heaven, Jesus would directly ask why they did not believe Him because they professed to hear all the prophets. If they said Of men, their reputation was gone, for all the people believed that John was a prophet.

When they answer, they lie, deliberately. “We cannot tell”. They could have said “we will not tell” but the craftiness of men is not always sufficient in every circumstance.

Jesus purpose is accomplished. Their answer, although false, shows confusion to any others who would have heard this dialog.

This response leads to the parable. Parables are not meant to be understood in their complete meaning by anyone who has not been given ears to hear and eyes to see by the Father in heaven.

This kingdom parable like all other parables has a central theme. It is the kingdom of God. It has a particular emphasis concerning what kinds of people will be in the kingdom of God and as we have seen by the context of the information that precedes Jesus giving this parable the idea of true righteousness and understanding of God is a particular truth that the parable teaches.

It is interesting to note that Jesus teaches this parable by asking his opponents “what do you think?”

Jesus has refused to state by what authority He does the things He does because they refuse to give a truthful answer. Now He places the burden of the interpretation of a parable on them. This parable is an illustration of everything that is wrong with them in their understanding of God and what it means to live in a manner that is pleasing unto God. These men believe they are the righteous ones of God. It is obvious that through all the encounters Jesus has had with various religious leaders and especially those in Jerusalem and the

immediate area around Jerusalem that their hearts are growing , at this time, harder and harder against Jesus because He threatens their power and authority.

The parable says:

A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.'²⁹ "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went.

The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go.

Here we have two sons and each has a different disposition toward the father's request. The first approached, traditionally, would be the elder son but this has no bearing on the meaning of the parable.

The central truth of this parable is repentance and its consequences.

The first son has a repentant heart toward the father and does what is necessary to work according to the father's standards in the vineyard. At first there is a rebellious response, a bad heart attitude. But after some time the son regrets his attitude toward the father and goes to the vineyard to work, regrets here is meaning repents. The son is not just sorry but he has a definite change of heart. He regrets how he first reacted to the father's request.

The second son says without hesitation that he will do what the father requires and even shows some form of respect with his words by adding sir to his response.

But his attitude and his words are false. He does not go as the father requested.

Now on the surface, it would be easy for the priests and the elders to properly respond to Jesus question: and they gave the right answer.

"Which of the two did the will of his father?" They *said, "The first."

But Jesus continues and gives them the meaning of the parable.

31. Jesus *said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.^{32*} "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

Jesus does not want any confusion or lack of understanding as to what He is saying to these religious hypocrites. They knew who John was just as they know who He is. They are not willing to live according to the true standards of God's righteousness. People like the tax collectors (the Publicans) and the prostitutes traveled to the Jordan River to be baptized in the Jewish baptism of repentance as a pre cursor to the coming of Messiah. There were those tax collectors and prostitutes who were repenting of their sin and looking for the truth of Messiah. They were responding to the preaching of Jesus. Matthew and Zaccheus are just two examples. These, who were despised as sinners by the hypocritically self- righteous pietists,

were doing as the Father said. They were being prepared to go into the kingdom with hearts that would obey the Father and do the vineyard work. These were the ones whom Jesus said “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

It is quite interesting how consistent the Scripture is in the Gospel of Matthew with showing this disregard for God and His prophets by the self righteous:

Mt.23:34* ¶ "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city,^{35*} so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

It is just another evidence that the heart that despises God cannot be self convicted of its sin. These self righteous leaders who engage in the theater of piety are presented the truth of God’s kingdom time and time again with direct confrontation and the opportunity to be convicted of their sin. But it does not happen and it cannot happen unless Jesus draws men to himself. It is an indictment against these leaders and proves man’s inability to do that which God requires. It also proves that men will rest in their own sense of religion and piety with no regard for the truth especially when true repentance demands and brings sorrow and regret for what you believed that was against God and for how you lived against God and hated him. We must realize that the same circumstances exist today.

God demands the same from His sons in the kingdom today. True kingdom sons repent and believe and go to work in the vineyard. True kingdom sons show forth the fruits of repentance. True kingdom sons realize that God is not pleased with mere lip service, He never has been. True kingdom sons realize that the heart is what matters with God.

Ps.51:17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

God does not care about what words we use or what outside pretense of holiness and piety we practice. He demands that His people demonstrate by word and deed the changed heart of a true kingdom son.

A person can come to worship services and prayer meetings and bible study and carry and read a bible and take notes and do all manner of service in the church. But, if there is resistance when challenged by God’s Word to do what is right in the sight of God and when there is rebellion against God’s way of doing things then the person proves false concerning the kingdom of God.

We cannot live in a dichotomy as a believer. We either reason from the Scripture or we reason from ourselves. One brings life, the other death. There is no acceptance of supposed believers saying “I do things this way no matter what the word of God says.”

That is what the hypocrites did. That is what the Pharisees and scribes and elders and Sadducces were doing. They thought they knew better than God about what the Scriptures taught and Jesus said this to them,
Mt.23:28 "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness33. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?"

When the Scripture is clear as to how we are to live for God, we are on very dangerous ground if we deny what the Scripture tells us what to do and people who claim to be believers do this every day and do not realize first, how foolish they sound and secondly how dangerous their words are in the presence of a holy God.

We are to preach salvation the way Scripture presents it with all of the challenges that are present. We are to progress in our sanctification as God demands according to His principles not our reasoning. No personal preference about anything can take precedent over the clear and plain truth of Scripture. Any person who claims to be a believer and habitually refuses to obey what Christ demands puts their salvation in jeopardy. The Scripture does not deny that we struggle with sin. However, the Scriptures demands the evidence of a changed heart, in and through the struggles. The Scripture demands a desire to please God.

The scriptures demand in Jas 4:17 Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin. This is addressing a number of bad heart habits in James' letter and is a warning that this kind of continued bad heart attitude will prove one false as a believer.

No matter how much one struggles as a believer, their must be a desire to obey Christ and when confronted with the truth their must be repentance and regret for having offended God and others. Jesus made these things very clear in the Sermon on the Mount. There is no bending, no giving way. There is only what Christ demands of us because God has equipped us to do that which is pleasing to God. To deny that we have the capacity as believers to do as God requires and to continually make excuses or to be continually like the son who says I will, only to cover a bad heart, makes us like the false righteous unbelievers that Jesus is talking to in this parable. And they know it because after he teaches them two more parables their hearts are again revealed as being God haters:

v.45*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them.46* When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.

Therefore we must be continually looking to ourselves and measure our lives compared to the word of God. This parable has a clear message and like many other Scriptures is a warning

passage. It is warning that a consistent bad heart attitude makes one distinct as a non-member of the kingdom.

Steve Lehrer, one of our sister church elders in Phoenix has written this about warning passages.

“The point of a warning passage is to warn people. Sometimes that which is the most obvious can be the most helpful. When I am addressing people who are stuck in sin (this works the same way when one of my brothers addresses me when I am stuck in sin) I need to encourage them to follow Christ because he is the perfect savior and merciful God. But sometimes I also need to warn them. It doesn't matter whether I think the professing believer I am caring for is a real believer or not. It doesn't matter how much wonderful service to the body he has given and how faithful he has been to Christ. If he does not repent of the sin he is presently stuck in, then he will suffer the eternal wrath of God in hell. It is true that if he does not repent of his sin, he was never a real believer in the first place. But real believers need these warnings. We all get stuck in our sin at times and we need God's clear warning in Scripture to turn our eyes away from sin and back to the God we love.

The hypocrites had no love for Jesus, they had no love for God. They loved their position and their power. When you read Matthew chapter 23 and read the woe to you hypocrites, woe to you scribes and Pharisees passages you are presented with a very horrible picture of deliberate wickedness and lying all for the sake of putting on a religious front.

The sad reality is that there are people in bible believing assemblies all over the world who are no more true believers, for one reason or another, than these hypocrites.

There are professing Christians who cannot really tolerate the narrow gate and the narrow path and they demonstrate it all too well when the demands of true Christianity start being made on their lives.

Everything is comfortable and acceptable until something demands a real and personal response to the Scripture in some are of living or being confronted with sin.

In the end the demands of true discipleship and love and obedience to our gracious God and Savior prove to be too hard because they are not equipped to respond as God demands.

Rather than seeing the purposes of God as something to be embraced they are rejected and when a person rejects the purpose of God they reject Christ.

To habitually refuse to obey the Scripture is to habitually refuse Christ.

Only those with an unregenerate heart can refuse Christ.

He has adorned us with His grace and we are to adorn Him with our love and our obedience. We are to strive to love him with all of our heart. His law is written on the heart of the true sons of the kingdom and obedience is inescapable, unless you are not a son of the kingdom. We need to seek the beauty of our Savior. We need to adore Him without hesitation. In Him is all our righteousness and in Him alone are we made complete unto the glory of God.

Which of the two sons are you?

Have you repented and regretted your attitude toward the Father?

Are you outwardly showing one thing but inwardly are a liar and a God hater?

God already knows. Others may think they know. You may not be sure.

How do you respond when God gives clear warnings about the differences that should be evident in the lives of the true sons of the kingdom when compared to the self-righteous hypocrites?

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