



Matthew 21:28–32

28 “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.’ 29 “I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. 31 “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they an-

swered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 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.

Reflection

Jesus is teaching in the huge Court of the Gentiles that dominates the temple precinct on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The temple building itself is relatively small, as are the two small walled courtyards that adjoin it. These small courts are for ethnic Jews only. But surrounding the

temple building and these two smaller courtyards is the huge Court of the Gentiles, around thirteen hectares in size. The population in Jerusalem is rising rapidly with devout Jewish pilgrims flooding in from all over the Mediterranean for the Passover festival next week. And they're all coming to the temple precinct to offer sacrifices, and congregating in the Court of the Gentiles, to listen to some of the greatest preachers of the Jewish faith who are there teaching the crowds.

Jesus is drawing the largest crowds. Word has spread of the scenes when Jesus entered Jerusalem, riding in on a donkey just as Zechariah had prophesied that the Messiah would. Then like one of those fiery prophets of old, Jesus had caused a huge commotion in the temple market

place, driving out the merchants, claiming that they were a stain on God's house. Then there had been talk of miraculous healings, one after another, after another in the very courts in which the people are now standing. Many in the crowds are eye-witnesses to the events of the day before. But perhaps what is drawing the most attention in this moment is the official looking delegation who only moments before had interrupted Jesus' teaching. This delegation from the Sanhedrin consisted of the chief priests (some of the highest officials of the temple) and the elders (heads of some of the Jewish ruling families). From a distance it had looked like they were coming to arrest Jesus. But in a moment it was all over, the balance of power completely shifted, and right now they look none too pleased about it. There'd been some kind

of debate with Jesus that had only lasted an instant. Red faced and confounded they were outmatched, after only the briefest of conversations, and seemingly to the very great delight of the crowd.

After they've been silenced, Jesus simply picks up where he left off, as if nothing has happened. Some of them had probably marched off in a huff but it appears that most of the chief priests and elders stayed, perhaps hoping to regain face. We know this because Jesus now begins to direct his teaching towards them. Perhaps they'll do better answering his questions a second time around. Here's what Jesus says to them next,

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the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 29 "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. 31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

By way of background, grapes were one of the most important crops in ancient Israel, and so the 'vine' or 'vineyards' had become one of the most important metaphors in the Old Testament for God's people. So working in the vineyard is a picture of ministry. Jesus tells a story of two sons who are asked to work in a vineyard. One says 'no' but then does. The other says 'yes' but then doesn't. 'Which of the two did what his father wanted?' Jesus asks

the religious leaders directly. They answer quickly enough this time,

‘The first.’

Can you imagine this scene? If the Jewish religious leaders’ faces were red with embarrassment from before, what Jesus said next turned them deep scarlet.

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It's hard to imagine a more offensive statement. Jesus has just said to representatives from the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, some of the most influential leaders of the Jewish religion, made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees as well as members of some of the leading Jewish families – he has said to them, in the heart of the temple in Jerusalem and in front of huge crowds, that tax collectors and prostitutes are better followers of God than they are. Is it any wonder that these men had Jesus killed in a matter of days?

What's Jesus' reasoning? They're the second son. They said they'd obey God and even make an outward show of obeying him, but inside they're self-righteous hypocrites serving themselves and not God. John came preaching repentance for the

forgiveness of sins but they didn't repent because they were too good to need to repent. But the tax collectors and sinners – the first son, who said no to God but then came around – they responded to John and to Jesus and are entering the kingdom of God ahead of these so-called leaders of the faith.

Woven into the fabric of the culture of Jesus' day was honour and shame. It was more important to them than truth and falsehood, more important in many instances than even life and death. Which meant nothing was more important than honour and nothing worse than shame. So it's hard to overstate the shock value of Jesus' words in this passage when in the middle of the temple in Jerusalem he says directly and publically to these Jew-

ish religious leaders, esteemed for their service to God, that prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before them. But on the flipside no doubt amongst that huge crowd there would have been be former prostitutes and tax collectors, eyes filling with tears at Jesus' words, standing all the taller in that moment as living testimony to the truth of what Jesus was saying.

Think

Which one are you? A proud religious person, or one of those standing in the crowds with tears in their eyes, sinners saved by grace. If it's the latter then celebrate this morning the work that God has performed in your life. The kingdom of heaven will be filled with humble, repentant people like you. Praise Jesus this morning for the

change that he has wrought in your heart and our life by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Or perhaps you're the other son. Are you saying 'yes' to God but living 'no'? In what ways are you publically saying yes to God, but privately not having a bar of him? What are your secret sins? Will they be your undoing? What shocking word does God need to say to you this morning to break you out of these patterns before it is too late? Sometimes we can go to church and live a good moral life and do all those things that people expect to see a Christian doing but be very far from God. Is this you? Do you feel very far from God? When was the last time you laid everything before him? Confessed all your sins with a repentant heart? Prayed intimately with your Father? And experienced the joy of

his forgiveness?

Pray

Why not do so now? Whether you have something to celebrate this morning or are in desperate need of becoming close again with your Father please spend some time now confessing your sins and celebrating your saviour. Ask for the courage and grace and resolve that you need to live today in honour of him and pray that none of us would be proud and lost like these religious leaders. Pray instead that we would have the humility of those who have been forgiven much, and that we would love much in return.