

I read an article about a very wealthy man who had been recently married, and he was lamenting about how upset his wife was with him, and he couldn't understand why. His anniversary had just passed, and he didn't forget it. He bought her a beautiful charm necklace, expensive flowers and chocolate, and even a dinner reservation at this romantic, expensive restaurant. But he couldn't make it. He was a businessman and he had a really important deal to finalize that day, so he couldn't make dinner. But he bought her all those nice things, why was she mad? It's obvious- he gave her everything that she could ever want, except himself.

In Jesus' day, this was essentially the way that the religious leaders of God's people approached their relationship to God, and Jesus exposes their religious hypocrisy using a parable and this question:

**“Who did the Father's will?”**

- 1. The chief priests sought power, not truth.**
- 2. God seeks repentance, not religiosity.**

1. They sought power, not truth.

In Matthew 21, we are in the week of Jesus' death and resurrection. Just before this, Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem on what we call “Palm Sunday.” Remember, Jerusalem was the political capital of the nation of Israel, but also the religious capital for all of God's people, Jewish and non-Jewish, and once a year all who could would come to the temple, where the presence of the Lord was, and pray and offer animal sacrifices, which was their way of expressing their faith in God's mercy and forgiveness. But this meaningful practice of faith began to be commercialized- merchants were taking up space in the temple courtyard peddling animals for sacrifice for ridiculous prices. This meant that people weren't really worshiping the Lord, but going through the motions, doing the sacrifices because “that's what good believers do,” and so Jesus goes throughout the temple courts, flipping over tables and driving out the animals making a mess so that people can pray and sacrifice without merchants peddling animals in their face.

The next day, the chief priests and teachers of the Law- the highest ranking religious leaders of Israel, the Bible experts, the people everyone considered to be the pastors of all God's people, approached Jesus while he was teaching and what they ask is astounding to me. “By whose authority did you do this?” You'd expect that they would say, “Why did you do that? What's your reason?” But they aren't concerned with spiritual truth, or whether God's people are worshiping the correct way, but that he did something on their turf without their permission.

Jesus knows this, and instead of playing their game, he decides to expose the fact that they don't care about the spiritual well-being of the people, just power. He says, “I'll answer your question if you answer mine. John's Baptism- was it from God, or from man.”. You see, John the Baptist was the prophet who came right before Jesus and he preached that all people, good or bad, need to repent of their sins and lean only on the grace of God for forgiveness, and he called out the religious leaders and said, “you too!” And this was Jesus' message as well: “Don't trust in all of your good works, trust in me.” And what he's saying is that if they know the answer

about whether John's teaching was from God, they will know where Jesus' authority comes from as well. John's teaching of repentance and free forgiveness came from God, and so did Jesus' authority to clear out the temple. If the chief priests acknowledge John the Baptist, then they must acknowledge Jesus.

And they know this. So they huddle together and say, okay, if we say that John the Baptist's message was from God, then he's going to expose us because we don't believe him. But if we say he's a liar, like we think he is, then all these people are going to riot against us because they all think he's a prophet- and they'll reject us as their spiritual leaders- we'll lose our social standing." So they go to Jesus and say, "we don't know." Cowards- and not just cowards, but frauds and hypocrites. They are called to be the spiritual leaders that represent God to the people- they are supposed to guide their people to God, to teach them about God's mercy, to teach them the truth! If they really cared about the spiritual state of their people, and if they really believed that John the Baptist was a false prophet, wouldn't they mention that to the people so they aren't led astray, even if it puts their lives at risk? And wouldn't they compare John's claims to the Scriptures and realize that everything John, and Jesus, were saying were completely in line with the Word of God and realize that they need to repent as well? But no- they weren't interested in the truth. They wanted power over the people- they liked the fact that when they walked in the streets, everyone got out of the way, people would stand in their presence, and everyone considered them to be "holy men." They wanted to keep their power over people, but also, their power over God.

Consider Jesus' parable - he second son, when asked by the father to go work in the field, that son says the perfect, "Yes, sir! I'd love to, of course I will, Father!" But he doesn't go. He doesn't really care about his father. He just wants to keep relations good, probably because the Father is a rich landowner and when he dies, he'll get the inheritance. Do you see the parallel between the lying son and the religious pious lies of the chief priests? The lying son doesn't actually love his father and he certainly isn't interested in actually doing what he asks, but he wants to keep power over his father, so he lies and says, "yes, Sir, I'll go work." That's exactly what the priests were doing with God. They were obsessive with the Old Testament scriptures and memorized it word for word, they did all the religious rites, said all the prayers, fasted and abstained from food, kept all the rules and actually added their own rules to the Old Testament- why? Because in doing so, they believed that they would put God in a position where he would have to accept them. They weren't serving God because he loved him, but because they wanted his stuff. They were willing to give everything to him except themselves. In their religious rule keeping, they were saying "yes sir," but they didn't truly love him or trust him, and therefore, they were skipping work in the vineyard.

Do you see what's going on? Usually, we think that bad behavior is what keeps you away from God. Which is true, but good behavior, going to church, donating your time and money to church, living the right way, it can be just as, and even more spiritually dangerous, because if you're doing it so that God has to accept and love you, then you're not really doing it for him, you're doing it for you! You don't really love or trust him. The Second son didn't do the Father's will. But ironically enough, the first one did.

## 2. God seeks repentance, not religiosity.

As modern Americans who are somewhat used to rebellious children, I don't think we truly understand the shock that the first son would have caused to the listeners of this parable. It wasn't only socially expected that sons should obey and honor their parents, it was, according to the Old Testament, punishable by death to dishonor or curse your parents. First of all, the father should have never had to ask his son to work in his vineyard- that's your job as a son. But he does, and the son doesn't even make an excuse or pretend to be respectful, but denies his own father to his face and says literally in the Greek- "I don't want to." That would be unheard of in Jesus' day. But that first son realizes how wrong he was- the word for "change his mind" isn't a great translation, the word in Greek is related to the word for "repent." He feels horrible, and he realizes how wrong his actions were and he goes and works and does what he's supposed to do. So which son did his father's will?

The chief priests know the answer- it's obvious. The first- yes, he was deeply disrespectful and dishonorable, but it's better to do that and then repent and do your Father's will than to lie, pretend that you love him, and not do his will. And Jesus says to them, "Don't you understand? The tax collectors- the men who cheat and marginalize the poorest people in our country and the prostitutes- the women who dishonor their bodies and ruin men and destroy marriages and households- they are entering the kingdom of heaven instead of you! The worst sinners in our culture, the most depraved offenders among our people are going to be accepted by God while you, the most religious, most morally elite will be thrown to suffer in the pits of hell forever! Why? Not because they are good, because they realize how evil they are and they know better than anyone that if they are going to be accepted by God, it must be only because of his mercy, and they repent and fall on his mercy and they are accepted. They heard John's message and they believed, they repented, they embraced God's free grace and left their lives of sin. But you are too good to repent. You are too good for God's grace. You don't need it. Then you won't get it."

Do you understand what Jesus is saying? God doesn't need your money in the basket. God doesn't need your hour on Sunday mornings or Wednesday night. God doesn't need your singing. God doesn't need your religious behavior. He wants your heart. God doesn't need your religiosity, he wants your repentance. He wants you to feel sorrow over your evil and realize that you can't earn his love, and he wants you to trust only in his sacrifice. Don't you see? Why could Jesus say that the most evil people can be accepted, but the best of people are far away from God? Because later that week, Jesus himself would go to the cross and be punished for their sins so they could be perfect before God, even though they had done so many wrong things. It's not about what you do for God. It's not about what you offer him. It's about what he's done for you.

Please don't misunderstand me. Coming to church, giving generous offerings, being an active member of God's people, singing the hymns, praying, are necessary things for Christians to do. But if you're only doing it to earn something from God, you aren't doing it for him, you're doing it for yourself. It's nothing but empty religiosity. What good is all your religion to God if he doesn't

have your heart? Who cares? If the reason you go to church is because “that’s what good, respectable people do,” then don’t come. Christianity isn’t about religious rituals, but trusting in Jesus- that he did all the right things for you, and that because of him, you are perfect in God’s eyes. And the irony is this- when you believe that, then you want to come to Church to repent and receive forgiveness, you want to pray because you love God, you want to give because you’re thankful for the generosity God has given to you! That’s what God wants. True repentance and true peace, true joy, and therefore, true religion- not hypocrisy.

Two children. One made terrible mistakes, spat in God’s face, rebelled, but then she repented, fell on her knees and trusted that because of Jesus’ sacrifice, she is now forgiven and in joy she works in that field with vigor. The other child says all the right things, and from the outside looks like the faithful, obedient child. She doesn’t need grace. She doesn’t need mercy. Which one will know for sure, without a doubt, that she is loved and cherished by her Father no matter what? Which one can live and labor with joy, not fear or pride. Which can boast, “I may be broken, but he has made me perfect forever?” What do you think?

Amen.