

Pentecost 18 Matthew 21:23-32 The Authority of Jesus Questioned NLT

23 When Jesus returned to the Temple and began teaching, the leading priests and elders came up to him. They demanded, "By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right?" 24 "I'll tell you by what authority I do these things if you answer one question," Jesus replied. 25 "Did John's authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human?"

They talked it over among themselves. "If we say it was from heaven, he will ask us why we didn't believe John. 26 But if we say it was merely human, we'll be mobbed because the people believe John was a prophet." 27 So they finally replied, "We don't know."

And Jesus responded, "Then I won't tell you by what authority I do these things. 28 "But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' 29 The son answered, 'No, I won't go,' but later he changed his mind and went anyway. 30 Then the father told the other son, 'You go,' and he said, 'Yes, sir, I will.' But he didn't go. 31 "Which of the two obeyed his father?" They replied, "The first."^[a]

Then Jesus explained his meaning: "I tell you the truth, tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. 32 For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn't believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to believe him and repent of your sins.

Q.1. Read Matt 21:1-16. When Jesus appears in the Temple the next day the local authorities ask him about his 'right to do these things' v.23. What are they referring to? Why were they concerned?

Q.2. In the common Jewish expectation about the coming King/Messiah, what did the people believe he would do?

Q.3. Why does Jesus not answer their initial question about his authority? What answers could he have given? How might his answer have trapped him?

Q.4. How did Jesus' counter-question about John the Baptist raise the issue of authority? V.25

Q.5. The local authorities discuss Jesus' question v.25. Explain their dilemma in your own words?

Q.6. Jesus tells them a parable of two sons. How does this link with the previous discussion in vv.23-27?

Q.7. How do you suppose the religious authorities would have understood this parable?

Q.8. In vv.31b-32 Jesus explains his meaning of the parable. How does he link the parable to 'the leading priest and elders'? Which 'son' are they like?

Q.9. Think about John and Jesus' previous ministries. Can you give any examples of them ministering to people like those mentioned in v.32?

Application: for reflection, prayer and action

Q.10. Which son's story is most like your own? Why?

Q.11. Jesus confronted the 'authorities' by speaking truth to them. What are some issues of truth that you are passionate enough about to write a letter, sign a petition, walk in a rally, see your local members or?

Matt 20:1-16 (my suggested answers)

NB. Please answer the questions yourself. We all have different ways of answering; God may give you greater insights than mine. Put '*John thinks*' ... before each answer.

A.1. Earlier in Matt 21 Jesus enters Jerusalem to the cheers and accolades of the crowds (welcoming him as the coming king and stirring up the city) vv.4-10. Then he goes into the Temple, overturning money-changers tables and accusing them of turning God's house into a den of robbers vv.12-13. These are the 'things' the chief-priests & elders were deeply upset about because they didn't believe he had any right to do them. They're the authority in Jerusalem not him.

A.2. A common belief about the Messiah was as a military leader (like king David) who would remove the Romans. He was also a cleansing figure who would purify the Temple of corrupt religious practices (sacrifices) and restore God's beauty, light and peace as was meant to be revealed to the world.

A.3. Jesus didn't really want to debate them about his authority – nothing he could say would convince them he was God's messiah. And at this stage he wanted to go under the radar as such – to continue to heal, teach and cast out demons.

A.4. The counter-question asks them about John's 'authority to baptise'. It's a question of the origin of John's (and Jesus') right to have a public ministry.

A.5. Your answer. Their dilemma in answering is due to their unwillingness to give John (or Jesus) any right to have a public ministry. They wanted total control of the Temple, the city's celebrations, the crowds and the purse-strings. If John or Jesus are given any authority they have quickly realised they will be the big losers.

A.6. Jesus' parable makes us think – who is he referring to? Am I one of these two sons? Which one?

A.7. They certainly wouldn't have seen themselves in either of the two sons. They would prefer to dismiss the parable all-together and go back to the question they raised in v.23. The parable is uncomfortable.

A.8. Jesus links the parable with the chief-priests and elder by v.32 – suggesting they are like the 2nd son – seeming to be godly, helpful and seen; however their deeds are the opposite, unlike the tax-collectors and prostitutes who are like the 1st son. They don't look and seem to act the part – yet they have repented and turned to God and are welcome into the kingdom.

A.9. Your answer. I mentioned several on Sunday – The 'Samaritan woman at the well' Jn 4; the woman caught in the act of adultery' Jn 8; The man running amuck in the graveyard Mark 5; the Canaanite woman in Matt 15; Zacchaeus Luke 19; the sinful woman Luke 7, Mary Magdalene Luke 8

A.10. Your answer

A.11. Your answer