

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

Matthew 21:23-32

It is we who are sitting in church who SAY (and sing and pray) many things. But this text puts the focus on what we actually DO. Just exactly what is it that we do after we leave church on Sunday? Ouch.

Year A

Pentecost 15

September 25, 2011

Sunday Between September 25 and October 1 Inclusive

Proper 21, Ordinary Time 26

Worldwide Communion Sunday between October 1 and October 7 inclusive.

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Matthew 21:23-32, The Message](#) or [Matthew 21:23-32, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click here, [Matthew 21:23-32](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "."

Today's text ought to make all of us who are in church very nervous.

It would be a misreading to hear this text as Jesus condemning Jews and Judaism. Instead, if we ask, "Who would be the chief priests and elders today," the answer is, "Us!" For we are the religiously observant people today. We are the ones who go to church. We are the ones who read our bibles.

If we begin at the end of this passage, Verses 28-32, we hear a story that every child (that is, everyone who is or ever was a child), and all parents can relate to.

Talk with children about parents asking them to do chores and you will hear echoes of the same inner and outer conflict that is expressed in the parable of the two sons and their father.

Obedience and rebellion. Wanting to do what needs to be done, yet resenting authority, resenting not being autonomous - not being free to do what one chooses, when one chooses. Knowing that there is a voice, a calling, beyond our own inner voice, that will shape and constrain our own inner desires if we are to do what is asked of us.

The key to the passage is in the question Jesus asks, "Which of the two did the will of the Father?"

The question addresses what the sons **DID**, not on what they **SAID**. And thereby cracks open the disparity between what is said and what is done.

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

Now, it is we who are sitting in church who **SAY** (and sing and pray) many things. But this text puts the focus on what we actually **DO**. Just exactly what is it that we do after we leave church on Sunday? Ouch.

The parable is a teaching about integrity, about putting our money where our mouth is, and offers a comment on the preceding exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders of the day.

Their question to Jesus, "By what authority," or "Who gave you the right," is a challenge to Jesus' status. But his question to them is a challenge to their integrity. Will their words match their actual convictions? Will their deeds match their words? Lacking integrity, Jesus has no need to defend his authority to them, for they have lost face, lost trust, lost moral standing with the people. Ouch.

And that is still Jesus' challenge to we religious folk today. Do our words match our convictions, and our deeds match our words? Ouch.

David Ewart,
www.holytextures.com

Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, pages 108-109.

* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSV)

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, 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 tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. [Used by permission](#). All rights reserved.

Matthew 21:23-32 (The Message)

²³ Then he was back in the Temple, teaching. The high priests and leaders of the people came up and demanded, "Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?"

²⁴ Jesus responded, "First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I'll answer yours. ²⁵ About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?"

They were on the spot and knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered, "If we say 'heaven,' he'll ask us why we didn't believe him; ²⁶ if we say 'humans,' we're up against it with the people because they all hold John up as a prophet." ²⁷ They decided to concede that round to Jesus. "We don't know," they answered.

Jesus said, "Then neither will I answer your question.

²⁸ "Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, 'Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.'

²⁹ "The son answered, 'I don't want to.' Later on he thought better of it and went.

³⁰ "The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, 'Sure, glad to.' But he never went.

³¹ "Which of the two sons did what the father asked?"

They said, "The first."

Jesus said, "Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God's kingdom. ³² John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn't care enough to change and believe him.

Scripture quotations from THE MESSAGE. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. [Used by permission](#) of NavPress Publishing Group.