

The Parables of Jesus Lesson 23

The Parable of the Two Sons

In this parable we will once again see another example of the 'separation' (or 'harvest' – Matt. 3:12) happening in Israel in Jesus' day. There is a growing distinction in Israel between those who believe, repent, and follow Christ, and those who reject and refuse to believe in Christ. This distinction is important because the people of Israel's acceptance or rejection of Christ will determine who will be a part of God's Kingdom and who will be a part of God's covenant people under the New Covenant. The Pharisees believed that their entrance into God's kingdom was based upon their national ethnicity (Matt. 3:9), but the message of repentance declares that only those who are 'born again' will enter the kingdom (John 3:3). Here Jesus will give a scathing truth to them, that will cut them to their heart.

The Text of the Parable

Matthew 21:23-32 "Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"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 answered. 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.

Background and Context of the Parable

This parable immediately follows Jesus' prophetic act of curing the fig tree. The fig tree cursing represented the rejection of Old Covenant Israel, led by their corrupt religious leaders, by God for their lack of fruit and repentance. This parable is followed by two parables concerning the Pharisees and the Kingdom. All of these instances, including this parable has to do with God's rejection of national Israel, based on their rejection of Him.

The audience for this parable is Jesus is speaking directly to the chief priests and elders who questioned His authority (Matt. 21:23). "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" They are questioning His legitimacy since He has not been trained in their rabbinical schools or received authorization from the Sanhedrin. Instead of giving a direct answer, Jesus asks them about John the Baptist's authority: *Was it from heaven, or of human origin?*" The leaders now are trapped no matter which way they answer. They can't admit His authority is from heaven, because they refuse to submit to it. They can't admit it's from earth because of Jesus' following and the public backlash. So they refuse to answer, and their response is a 'we don't know' answer. Therefore, Jesus responds that he will not reveal His authority to them. Immediately after their evasive answer, Jesus launches into the Parable of the Two Sons. He turns the question of authority back on them by showing that true authority is validated by obedience, not mere words. The leaders, who claim to represent God, expose their hypocrisy by rejecting both John the Baptist and Jesus.

Interpreting the Parable

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.

By the first phrase ‘what do you think?’ Jesus is inviting the religious leaders into self-judgment.

Jesus uses the analogy of ‘the vineyard’ which symbolizes His Kingdom (as we will see in other parables). The two sons are those in Israel which represent two groups: The outwardly rebellious but repentant sinners (tax collectors, prostitutes), and the outwardly obedient but disobedient leaders.

The call to the first son is “go and work today in the vineyard.” The initial response is shocking, “I will not”. This phrase shows outright rebellion, showing the outward sinfulness of the son. However, after the initial refusal, the son changes his mind (repentance) and goes to work. Obedience now is proven by his action of going to work.

³⁰ “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

In the next scene with the second son we see the exact opposite reaction. The father goes to the second son and asks the same thing “go work in the vineyard,” and the first response of the second son is, ‘I will sir’. He answers respectfully and he responds positively, showing an outward piousness. However, this is only superficial, it is lip service. For even though he responds that he will go and work, we find out that “he did not go.”

This is willful disobedience despite respectful words. This second son symbolizes the religious leaders who outwardly pledged loyalty to God but refused to obey through repentance. They refused John the Baptist, and they refused Jesus. This response echoes Isaiah 29:13 (and Matt. 15:8): *“This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.”*

³¹ “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

Now Jesus goes back and asks their response, as he asks which one obeyed and did the will of the Father. Of course, the answer is obvious, and even the leaders must admit the first son did the will of the father. And with this answer Jesus has drawn them into pronouncing their own judgment.

Jesus then responds with a solemn pronouncement of judgment, “Truly I tell you”, the “tax collectors and prostitutes” (shorthand for sinners and social outcasts) will enter the kingdom ahead of the Chief Priests and Elders of the people. This group of ‘sinners’ are despised by the religious elite, and initially rebellious against God, but when confronted with the truth of Jesus, they are repentant. This is a shot to the heart of the religious, who deem these sinners as ‘less than’ and look down upon them. However, they will have a place in the Kingdom before the religious elite. This also goes back to the theme of ‘reversal’ where the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

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.

Jesus ends the parable confronting the religious elite with the truth of their refusal to repent and believe. He goes back to John the Baptist (who he questioned them about earlier) to remind of their refusal to believe John who was showing them the way of righteousness. However, the sinners did hear John, believe, and repent. And even after seeing and being confronted with this truth, they still refuse to believe. Proving the hardness of their heart.