

TAX COLLECTORS, PROSTITUTES AND OTHER SINNERS

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME

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First Presbyterian Church of Marianna

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MATTHEW 21:23-32

It has been said that the rabbis of ancient times never answered a question with anything but another question. It has also been said that they never tried to find a solution to a problem, but rather tried to find two people with two problems that would solve each other. For example, a man might have grass that needed mowing, but no scythe with which to cut it, while another man has a cow that needs to be fed, but no grass. Put them in touch with each other, and the cow eats the grass, the grass gets mowed, and maybe fertilized at the same time!

The temple was the place where problems got matched up, where questions got questioned, where teaching took place, as well as debate and discussion, and more than a little plotting, intrigue, and gossip. Sometimes, it would be the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, who were there. In this story, it was the chief priests and the elders.

They were downright rude to Jesus, if I read the text correctly, interrupting Him as He taught, questioning by what authority He was teaching, and who gave Him that authority.

Jesus followed the form and logic of the rabbis by asking a question of His questioners, a question that is a two-edged sword, cutting both ways. If the leaders of the temple answer that John's authority came from heaven, then they gave Jesus room to ask why they did not heed John. And if they said that it didn't, they would offend the crowd, the people gathered in the temple. And so they took the easy way out: "We don't know." And Jesus essentially ended the debate by saying, "If you won't answer my question, then I won't answer yours."

Of course, their question was a trap for Jesus. If he said "By my own authority..." then they might ask "And who are you?" Jesus would not have answered "The Messiah", but He could have. He might have answered "By My Father's Authority," but then they would have asked, "And who is your Father?"

The implication, the conclusion that the crowd would have drawn, is that the authority of John the Baptist and the authority of Jesus of Nazareth both came from heaven, and that the chief priests and the elders of the temple were not going to admit it about either one of them. And those common folk, who loved Jesus so much, for whom He had done so much, would probably have laughed at the chief priests and elders, slapped each other on the back, and said, "Our hillbilly prophet from up in Galilee sure told them, didn't he?"

But Jesus didn't let it go there. He asked them that question about the two sons, the one who first said I won't go work in the vineyard, and then did, and the one who said that he would, and then didn't. And when Jesus asked them, "Which one did the will of the father?" their answer condemned them, for they were the ones who had been given the promise of the kingdom of God, and had not heeded the call. It was the tax collectors and prostitutes, the despised, the rejected, the unclean, the outcasts of society, who embraced the message of repentance that John brought, who were baptized by John for the remission of their sins, and who now clamored to hear the words of Jesus, and to embrace the teachings that He offered them.

The ones who were called to be faithful children weren't. And the ones who had strayed from the ways of righteousness heard the call, and answered. Oh the irony of it all!

Now there are some religious traditions today within the Christian church that almost seem to teach that if you haven't been a miserable wretch of a sinner, and experienced a dramatic conversion experience, your Christian experience is not complete. Tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners are certainly welcome in those churches. On the other hand, there are people who are convinced of their own righteousness; convinced that they are saved from sin so much that nothing they could ever do would ever be a sin in the sight of God. Those churches tend not to embrace tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners.

The first perspective would seem, like some of the Gnostic heresies of the first centuries of Christendom, to encourage sinning for the sake of repentance. The second would seem to justify anything done by those who were the elect or the sanctified. I'm not sure which one is more dangerous.

George Buttrick, in his commentary on this passage (in *The Interpreter's Bible Commentary, volume 7, pp. 510-511*) warns of the danger of assigning the importance of this text to the time of Jesus. He says: "the story has applications for our time. The second son is token of low religion. He was not insincere: he probably intended to obey. That is our case. Christianity appeals to our reason, especially...when we see the tragic issues of an unchristian way of life. Christianity appeals to our emotions: we are drawn to Jesus as he dies pierced in lonely love. Worship kindles our dormant souls. So we vow obedience. But today is too soon, and the discipline of trying to live our faith is so hard. So

though we have pledged our response to Christ, we do not go...What of our... promises? What of the vows we have made when God has not dealt with us after our sins, or when un hoped for joys have come? (We say) I go, sir. But we have not gone. There is some evidence that the disciples of Jesus may have been drawn from 'the people of the land'—those multitudes who kept not the law. Yet they obeyed, and became the heralds of a new kingdom. But the custodians of the temple, ever promising obedience (if only by their ritual) but never obeying, were judged and convicted. The story holds promise: we need not be slaves to an insolent past. It holds warning: even while professing Christ we may become castaways."

Several years ago, the pastor of a large church in another denomination in another state was charged with the murder of his wife. The story made both network and tabloid news programs, as well as headlines and magazine covers across America. Did he do it? Could he have done it? And why would he? When one after another accuser came forward, it became obvious that he had been unfaithful to his wife for years, and had finally fallen in love with one of his many lovers, and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. To get a divorce, in his tradition, would have spelled the end of his career. So he plotted to murder his faithful wife of many years, so that he could begin anew with his paramour.

Professing Christ, preaching Christ, leading the church, he was a liar, an adulterer, a murderer, and flagrantly unrepentant.

His crimes are more grievous than ours, but are his sins any more numerous?

To do the will of the father is what separates the faithful from the unfaithful, the righteous from the unrighteous. It doesn't matter how you start out. It is how you finish. Disobedient, rebellious, recalcitrant, resisting God's will, God's purpose, God's authority, if one repents, believes, follows, does the Father's will, that is the way of salvation.

But make all the promises you want, and do not of the Father's work, disobey the Father's will, and the gates of the kingdom of heaven will be closed before you.

Remember the old proverb about the road to hell being paved with good intentions? It could be a footnote to this text. Perhaps old Willie Barclay said it best: "...(T)he Christian way is in performance and not promise..." (*Matthew, Volume 2, p. 288.*)

May we not make promises with our mouths that we can't keep with our lives, and may we repent of our sins and become obedient servants, doing the Father's will.

Amen. And Amen.