

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 21:23-32

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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?
Who gave you this authority?”

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.
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?’
But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd;
for all regard John as a prophet.”

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.

“What do you think? A man had two sons.
He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’

He answered, ‘I will not.’
But later he changed his mind and went.

The father went to the second and said the same.
And he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go.

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.
For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did 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.

The context of this story is that the chief priests and elders were angry with Jesus because of his prophetic action in cleansing the Temple. So they question him about authority. The source of their question—“By what authority are you doing these things?”—is that Jesus had no official authority and they did.

Their question had a lot of animus. As with their later question about paying taxes to Caesar, they are trying to get Jesus in trouble. If he says, “From God,” he will liable to charges of blasphemy and if he says, “From men,” he may be guilty of a crime or, at least, will be discredited in the eyes of the people. Their question is a response to Jesus’

demonstration in the Temple that was highly critical of the chief priests and the elders who administered the Temple complex. Jesus' action is clearly a prophetic demonstration. It wasn't really breaking the law, but it was a public attack on the authorized administration.

Jesus responds to the chief priests and elders with his own question: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Their unwillingness to answer the question is because the people thought that John's authority came from God. The implication of Jesus' question is that he does as well. But he doesn't want to say that outright because they could then charge him with blasphemy.

Another thing to notice about his story as a follow-up to the Temple cleansing story is that while Jesus clearly confronts his opponents—those with whom he strongly disagreed about the nature of the kingdom of God—neither his action nor his words are violent. Unlike many times in the history of Israel when priests who corrupted the Temple were deported, killed or violently criticized, Jesus' action is a non-violent prophetic demonstration of opposition.

The story is structured in two parts, with a concluding comment linking them. Part one is the discussion of authority and part two is the parable of the two sons. Each of the two parts consists of four episodes, the concluding comment—Jesus' summary—making episode nine.

The episodes in part one, the story of Jesus' conflict with the Temple leaders, are linked together by one major verbal thread: "by what authority." In part two, a verbal thread of "yes" and "no" links the episodes of the parable. The father said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today" but the son answered, "I will not" but later went. To the second he said the same and the son answered, "I go, sir" but then didn't go. In each case a reversal occurs. If you remember that, this is an easy story to internalize. The concluding episode is in a way the most complex. Verbal threads to recall are "tax collectors and prostitutes" and "believe/not believe."

The parable has an angular relationship with the conflict described in part one. Clearly the implication is that the chief priests and the elders are like the second son who pretended to do the will of the father but then didn't. In contrast, the tax collectors and the prostitutes by implication are like the first son, who said they wouldn't do the will of God and obey the law but then do, because they believed.

This parable invites you, the listener, to consider the chief priests and the elders in relation to what its implications are for them, but also to consider the implications for each of us. To what degree are we like the chief priests and elders? Do we say, "Yeah, yeah, sure we'll do whatever God wants," and then don't follow up in action? It is the dilemma of righteous people. That's what this parable addresses in a very direct way. In telling it, it is important to make the contrast between the first and second son, the second

son's response being that of a pious person and the first son's response being that of a rebellious person.

The chief priests' question about Jesus' authority is somewhere between critical and hostile in tone. They are challenging Jesus' lack of credentials. Jesus' counter question is responsive but probably not hostile. The priests' discussion about their response is secretive, perhaps in whispers to one side. The parable is a typical parable of Jesus with lots of folktale touches. The responses of the two sons can be told with exaggerated disdain for the first and extreme piety for the second. The tone of the second son may mirror the pious tone of the chief priests in the story of their challenge to Jesus' authority.