

Bible Study Guide: Week of 9-21-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 21:23-32

23 When [Jesus] 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 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.

23 When [Jesus] 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?"

This week we skip ahead a chapter from last week's Gospel lesson, but Jesus has been very busy in that one chapter! At the beginning of Chapter 21, he entered Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Then he entered the temple area, drove out the sellers and customers, and overturned the tables of the money changers and merchants. He then left the city. On the way back into the city the next day, he cursed a fig tree, causing it to wither. (Note that fig trees were symbolic of the nation of Israel; in cursing this tree, he symbolically spoke out against the ruling authorities of the people of Israel at that time. Thus, when Jesus entered the temple courts to teach, the question of the chief priests and elders, "By what authority are you doing *these things*?" refers not just to Jesus' authority to teach, but also his authority to do these other things—to enter in the name of the Lord and as the Son of David, to clear out the temple, and to curse the fig tree (and by extension to speak out against the chief priests and elders). We should be able to relate to the concerns of the chief priests and elders here. It can be helpful sometimes to read ourselves into the story in the role of those we might otherwise want to dismiss—in this case, the chief priests and elders. How would we react if someone came into our sacred space and acted as Jesus acts here? If someone came into our church building claiming to be divine, started disrupting our ministries, and condemned our leadership, we too might ask, "Who do you think you are? Who told you that you could act this way?" Of course, we know Jesus' true identity and we know that he does indeed have authority to do these things.

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?"

Implied in Jesus' words here is the fact that Jesus' authority and John's baptism have the same source. In other words, Jesus is not just asking them a random question, but the question he is asking implies, "If y'all recognized God's work in John's ministry, you would recognize God's work in my actions, as well."

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Notice that the chief priests and elders have no interest in getting at the truth here. Their debate is not about the origin of John's baptism, but rather about how their public statement will be received by others.

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."

Here the leaders of the people would rather admit ignorance than admit to the truth about John's baptism. Jesus has reversed the trap on them and they are caught in their hypocrisy.

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 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."

Jesus uses this brief parable (the first of three parables he delivers to the religious leaders in Jerusalem) to break through their refusal to answer his question. Rather than letting their tactic of remaining silent work to their advantage, Jesus presses them, saying, "What do you think?" In this parable, it becomes clear that the first son represents the tax collectors and prostitutes. Outwardly, before the coming of John the Baptist, they lived unrighteous lives. But when John came and demanded repentance, they reformed their ways and lived more godly lives. The second son, meanwhile, represents the chief priests and scribes. They claimed to live in covenant with God when they went out to hear John preach and see him baptize. Yet they refused to listen to John's message and, therefore, missed out on following God's messengers John and Jesus. The leaders answer Jesus' indirect question about characters in a story, further indicting themselves. This is similar to the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 where Jesus asks, "Which one was a neighbor to the person in need?" The answer, of course, in that case was, "the one who showed him mercy." The trap is sprung. The guilty ones condemn themselves by answering a simple question about seemingly fictional characters in a parable.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. How do we decide who has authority in our lives and in the church?**
- 2. Which character do you most relate to in this parable? Why do you think this is the case?**
- 3. Jesus tells the chief priests and elders, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Does it make a difference that Jesus says, "they are going in *ahead* of you" rather than "they are going in *instead* of you?"**