

Following His Lead
Psalm 78:1-4
Matthew 21:23-32

Talk about tension! This question comes on the heels of the intense events of the day before! The day before, Jesus had walked into the Temple in Jerusalem, drove out the buyers and sellers and knocked over the tables of the money changers! He even had the nerve to call the place a “den of robbers”. No wonder the chief priests and elders were on high alert! They were probably pretty upset with Jesus for his actions. They knew he was popular, yet they believed he did not have the right to march into the temple and cause such devastation. After all, they were the leaders of the temple and he was an outsider!

So they get right to the heart of the matter and ask him by what authority did he have to do what he did! In their own eyes, the chief priests believed they were the only ones to have authority on matters of the Holy Temple. Power had gotten to their heads and they had no intention of letting this rogue teacher try and mess up their position of power. But Jesus knew better than to give them a straight up answer. They sought to trap him and catch him guilty by his own words. So instead he reverses the question and in turn actually answers it. He answers their question in two parts: first by asking them about who they thought gave John his authority, and second by sharing a parable.

Jesus asks them, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” Trapped by their own trap! So they debate how to answer him. If they answer, “from Heaven” then Jesus will accuse them of not listening to him. Yet if they were to respond, “Of human origin” then the crowds would become upset since they believe that John was a prophet.

So their final answer was: “We do not know.” To which Jesus replies, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” Ironically by not answering, he is answering. His answer is loud and clear: his authority is the same as the authority that John had: God. We know this because the gospels clearly state this. The chief priests knew this because John was known as a prophet of God. But for them to admit so would be to admit that they were guilty of not following John’s words. John’s popularity made it difficult for them to deny his authority in a public setting. They had their own power and authority at stake and did not want to risk losing any of that power.

This is where the second part of the story comes in: the parable. The parable is about two sons. Their father asks the first son to go into the vineyard and work. The son refuses, but later changes his mind and goes out and works. When the second son is asked the same thing, he promises that he will go, but fails to actually do so.

So one son says no but then goes. The other son says yes, but fails to go. The son who actually does what his father wants is the one who initially said no, not the one who agreed to go but never went. Taking this parable, we can interject the characters in relationship to John. John, using God's instructions, tells the people what they are to do. Some say no, but then later do what God instructs. Others say yes, but never actually do what they promised. The ones who actually listened and did what they were supposed to were the tax collectors and the prostitutes who changed their lives. The chief priests and elders may have said "yes" but they did not act upon their promise.

When we learn that God's authority is spoken through Jesus, we are also reminded that to follow Jesus is to take his teachings seriously and act upon what we learn. We can say we believe all we want to, but it is our actions that really show our true faith. It's like the saying, "Actions speak louder than words."

James reminds us to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.¹ He also reminds us: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?... If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.²

The chief priests and elders of the church could say all they wanted that they believed in God. They could carry out all the rituals in the world, but if they didn't actually do what Jesus was telling them to do, then they were simply like the son who said yes, but never went into the vineyard. They made the promise and failed to fulfill it.

My favorite quote comes from the mouth of St. Francis of Assisi. He said, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary use words." This quote reminds me that I am preaching the gospel with my actions and not just with my words. It's a heavy task to bear, but one that truly demonstrates my faith and trust in God.

Legend has it that a missionary, lost at sea, was by chance washed up out of the sea on the edge of a remote native village. Half-dead from starvation, exposure, and sea water, he was found by the people of the village and was nursed back to full health. Subsequently, he lived among these people for twenty years. During the whole of that time he confessed no faith. He uttered no songs. He preached no sermons. He neither read nor recited any Scripture. He made no personal faith claim. But when people were sick, he attended them, sitting long into the night. When people were hungry, he gave them food. When people were lonely, he was a source of company. He taught the ignorant. He was a source of enlightenment to those who were more knowledgeable. He always took the side of those who had been wronged. There was not a single human condition with which he did not identify.

¹ James 1:22

² James 2:14-17 NRSV

After twenty years had passed, missionaries came from the sea to the village and began talking to the people about a man called Jesus, and after hearing of Jesus, the natives insisted that he had lived among them for the past twenty years. “Come, we will introduce you to the man about whom you have been speaking.” The missionaries were led to a hut, and they found their long-lost fellow missionary whom they had thought dead.³

Regardless of what we first told Jesus, let us be the ones who go out and follow his instructions. Let us be the ones who trust in his authority and follow his lead. Amen.

Prayer:

Trustworthy Lord,
Help us not only to fully trust in your guidance, but to put our words into action and demonstrate our faith. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

³ James S. Hewett, Ed. *Illustrations Unlimited*. Tyndale House:Illinois. 1988. p. 362