

Words or Actions

Matthew 21:23-32

A few years ago, there was an interview with television psychologist and celebrity Dr. Phil. At one point the interviewer asked Dr. Phil, "If you could interview anyone in the world, past or present, who would it be?" Dr. Phil replied, without hesitation, "Jesus Christ. I would really like to interview Jesus Christ. I would like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life."

The chief priests and elders of Jesus' time would have said: "Oh no, you wouldn't! You would not want to sit down with Jesus, treat him like an interviewee, and ask him about the meaning of life. You would be crazy to do that. He would turn you upside down and inside out. He would confound all your questions and probably end up telling you to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me. No, Dr. Phil, you do not really want to interview Jesus. It would not go well." **Charles Campbell**

Our passage took place in the Jerusalem temple where the leaders did have an interview with Jesus. The previous day, Jesus had entered the city on a donkey ([Matt. 21:1-11](#)) and promptly headed to the temple—the center of Jewish religious life—where he overturned the tables of the money changers, much to the glee of the blind, the lame, and children ([21:12-16](#)). After spending the night outside the city, he cursed a fig tree on his way back into town, withering it instantaneously ([21:17-22](#)). Those in charge of the temple, were still reeling from the outrageous spectacle of the previous day, were in no mood to coddle this countryside rabbi; but because of his

motley band of followers they felt constrained to deal with him carefully. Argument seemed to be their only option, and Jesus, in spite of being a temple nobody, was feeling equally argumentative.

The chief priests' first question, "By what authority are you doing these things?" (v. 23), was reasonable enough. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (v. 23): this is the crux of the conversation! Their question was an important one, as these religious leaders attempted to figure out who Jesus really was and how he thought he gained the authority to do and say what he did. His questioners seemed to expect Jesus to name some teacher, some source of authority, that would help them understand the basis of his actions.

As for the leaders, their own authority in Israel, after all, had been given to them by God in the time of Moses and passed down for generations; thus, for Jesus to say, "By God's authority," would have been to offer an answer easily refuted on biblical and traditional terms. Perhaps more to the point, the *real* answer would have been, "My own." Jesus himself embodied authority, without any external help. However, for Jesus to claim divine status openly would have been entirely unacceptable to most of his audience, so—like a good rabbi—he answered the question with a question.

What is most striking about the question Jesus chose as his retort was the close identification it created between himself and John the Baptizer. He could presumably have chosen from among dozens of people to whose authority he might compare his own, but he chose John—a marginal character, ripped straight from the pages of Israel's prophetic history, who met an untimely death for challenging one of Israel's *actual* authorities (Herod). Such a choice signaled to his audiences (both those in the story and those hearing and reading it now) that Jesus' authority was likewise

marginalized. He did not aspire to traditional forms of power, whether "religious" or "political" in nature. Since the leaders believed *they* were the ones who truly had the authority, they were ready to challenge whatever Jesus said. What they were not prepared for was Jesus' authority coming not from another human being but from heaven. As Jesus returned a question for their question, he suggested that the question about John the Baptist's authority was essentially the same as the question about his own. To identify one was and is to identify the other. But unlike John, though, Jesus was not content to stay out in the desert; his message must be preached in the holy city, and even in the temple itself.

That message, which he also shared with John, was one of turning away from evil and toward God. John had called for repentance as the true mark of God's reign. "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor';" said John, "for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (3:9). Jesus shared John's conviction that the children of God are not necessarily those born into the right family or running in the right circles. "What do you think?" he asked the chief priests. Is the child who does the will of his father the one who *says* he will do what his father asks, or the one who actually *does* what the father asks, even if he might have said no in the first place? True righteousness is in the doing, rather than in the saying or confessing.

This parable Jesus told of the two sons (vv. 28-31) is illustrative of his encounter with the religious leaders. The first son, who appears mouthy and rebellious, emphatically answers, "I will not go," to the directive from the father to go and work in the vineyard, but then he changed his mind (repented) and went. The other son, who appeared to be dutiful and obedient, answered that he would go, but then he did not. Then Jesus asked his

questioners which of the sons did the will of his father. The chief priests had an easy time answering this question. It is obvious to everyone that, although both sons say one thing and do another, the repentance of the latter is preferable to the hypocrisy of the former.

According to this parable, those who are seemingly "in the know" are not the ones who are doing the will of God. The question here does not seem so much centered on what is the will of God but on the deeper question of who belongs in God's realm or kingdom? Who is in and who is out? This is not a question only from Jesus' time. We continue to pose that question today, sometimes in the silence of our own hearts and minds, and sometimes in our actions.

There is something very important here about the changing of one's mind or repentance. The first son changed his mind and went. The tax collectors and the prostitutes believed that John came in the way of righteousness, but the chief priests and elders did not change their minds—even after seeing how these others believed. What causes us to change our minds? What allows for our hearts to be changed, to be broken open? So, what blocks us from allowing ourselves to be changed? These questions are at the heart of the matter.

The question of Jesus' authority is important. If his authority is from humans, then the church is just another human institution among other human institutions. What Jesus is saying, both in his question to the religious leaders about John's baptism and in his question about which of the two sons did the will of the father, is that the God of Israel who gave Jesus his authority is the same God of Israel who welcomes sinners and prostitutes.

Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn

In case his hearers had or we have any question as to the interpretation of the parable, Jesus stated it plainly: The tax collectors and prostitutes were the ones "going into the kingdom of God ahead of you," because of their response—repentance—to John and later to Jesus himself. John preached the way of righteousness and the sinners believed him, while the religious authorities did not. In spite of their professed allegiance to God, they had showed no actual allegiance in terms of *doing* God's will.

The implication of the parable seems to be that the traditional leaders of Israel had forfeited their authority through unrighteousness, while religiously marginalized Israelites had wisely recognized true power. The authority of John and Jesus had been ratified by the people, who were making the kingdom of God a reality through their good works; meanwhile, these same people had undermined the authority of those leaders who had ceased to lead them in the paths of righteousness.

It is not uncommon within our faith communities to hear people discount others they deem unworthy. Our churches have struggled with this attitude since the beginning. Do the Gentiles have to be circumcised? Are women allowed positions of leadership? Are people of other races and skin colors really made in the image of God? What about homosexuals? What about the mentally ill? The unemployed and homeless? People living with disabilities? An interesting question to ponder is this: Who will I be standing beside in the kingdom of God? We will, I suspect, be surprised to find out. Who belongs in God's realm has everything to do with who God is and who is beloved of God. Jesus welcomes the righteous and the lost. Christ welcomes all. Benedict, in his monastic rule, exhorted his brothers to welcome all as Christ.

Each of us who hear this parable should be asking herself or himself, which son do I most resemble. The only real issue here is will I humble myself, profess faith in Christ's authority and act in repentance, changing my behavior to match my words. **Kathryn D. Blanchard**

Jesus' question for us in this interview is whether we will give him authority in our lives and allow him to clean us inside and out – and whether we will allow him to change our words of faith into actions of faith.

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