

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
27 September 2026

Matthew 21:23-32

The episode we have from Matthew today gives us a parable not seen in any of the other gospels. After Jesus deals successfully with the challenge from the chief priests and the elders of the people about his authority, he starts a parable with the following introductory question, “What do you think?” He then tells them a story about two sons who were asked by their father to work at the family Vineyard. The first says, “No, I won’t go,” but changed his mind later and went to work. The second says enthusiastically, “Yes, Sir!” but never went into the farm. Then Jesus asks, “Which of the two did the will of his father?”

When any of the four gospels gives us a parable or a teaching that doesn’t appear in any of the other three, you need to stop and pay attention. There are some questions we must ask: Why is this passage here? Who is the intended audience? What problem is it trying to solve? Etc. Once we establish this original context, we ask the today question: How is this passage applicable to us today? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the original audience and us? How does this passage answer a problem in our own context?

This episode in Matthew takes place after Jesus’ grand entrance into Jerusalem, on the last week of his ministry, just before the passion narratives. The first thing he did was to cleanse the temple and overturn the tables of the money changers. This was a gesture filled with theological and historic significance, but one that would have caused quite a stir. The chief priests, whose job it is to ensure the proper running of the temple, see this gesture as quite a threat to business. The elders of the people, most likely Pharisees, would have been worried about any disturbance that would draw the attention of the Romans. So, it is not surprising that these two groups challenged Jesus at the temple where he is teaching.

These same individuals have seen Jesus healing the sick and they have heard reports of other miracles, including the raising of Lazarus. They should have seen in these actions the work of God because no human would have been able to give Jesus the authority to heal and raise people from the dead. Yet, they fail to see God’s son in their midst. He is not wearing the right garments. He is not from the distinguished priestly class. He is not known by most people in Jerusalem and his pedigree cannot be easily checked. But this is not the first time they fail to see the work of God in their midst. They also failed to see John’s baptism for repentance as a divine sign that Messiah was on his way. Although the prophecies of the

Jewish scriptures were being fulfilled by him, they saw John as a lunatic. They failed to accept his baptism of repentance in preparation for Messiah.

Although these events took place before Jesus' death, towards the end of his earthly ministry, this story is recounted around the year 80, approximately 50 years after this interaction. By this time the Temple had been destroyed by Rome, the priestly class had been abolished, the elders of the people did not have as much power as they did during the time of Jesus, and the whole land of Israel was dealing with severe poverty because of the new "Jewish Tax" imposed by Rome as a punishment for the uprising. In the same way these two groups had failed to do the work of the vineyard during the time of Jesus, their descendants were failing to do the work of caring for the poor and desperate during the time of Matthew. Jesus' parable of the two sons and the vineyard is directed at them as Mat. 21:45 says, "The chief priests and the Pharisees... realized that he was speaking about them."

Let us review the parable. The first son who says, "No" but then changes his mind and goes to work represents the tax collectors and prostitutes who turned away from the Law and violated many of the commandments through their profession, but, when John came on the scene, repented and eagerly awaited for Messiah. Many of them have come to listen to Jesus, some of them have become his followers. They have done the work at the vineyard, although their beginnings were a bit shaky. Jesus says that they will be first in God's kingdom.

The second son says, "Yes" and never shows up at the farm. He represents the high priests and the Pharisees, who are the elders of Israel. Their profession is to mediate the cultic sacrifices at the Temple, to offer prayers on behalf of the nation, to teach people the commands of the law, and to care for the disenfranchised in the city. But although their outward appearance points to righteous lives devoted to God, they have failed to accept John and they have refused to accept Jesus. They have failed to treat the poor, the orphan, the widows, and the aliens with kindness and compassion. They have not produced the fruits required of a fruitful tree, because they are more concerned with the minutia of the law than they are with caring for the needy and the truly desperate. Their religious practices have become lines of separation between them and those considered unclean. Because of their behaviors, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits." (Matthew 21:43).

I suspect that the descendants of these two groups are acting in like manner in the year 80. The revolution against Rome had left a country in ruins and nowhere was this more apparent than in the big cities where high numbers of Judeans lived after leaving the devastation of Jerusalem. The new Synagogue

system, which replaced the Temple and the priestly class, was failing to do the work God expected from them. They have neglected the poor and disenfranchised, and they have expelled all followers of Jesus from their assemblies, even though many of the Judean Christians still followed closely the traditions of Judaism. Those in power both at the time of Jesus and at the time of Matthew were acting like the second brother in the parable and the story reminds them of the consequences Jesus talked about. The kingdom will be taken from them.

There are great similarities between this parable and the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. Both present a father and two sons. Both highlight the repentance or behavior change of the rebellious son (the first son in Matthew, the younger son in Luke). In both accounts, the father actively reaches out, appeals to, or pleads with both sons, showing us God's grace and desire for true relationship with us. The Pharisees, represented by the second son in Matthew and the eldest in Luke, appear compliant and devoted but their external compliance led them to spiritual pride, legalism, and a lack of love for others. Ultimately, they were disobedient to the father's wishes. The Tax Collectors and sinners in both parables, represented by the younger son in Luke and the first son in Matthew, showed a willingness to repent and obey the father's will. At heart, they showed a greater ability and desire to develop a loving and obedient relationship with the father.

Many people in the Church appear to be quite religious or pious but care very little for those who suffer. They fool themselves into thinking that their external compliance is earning them a place close to God and a relationship that bears the name "most-favored status." But they fail to do the work of the kingdom. Their ritualism is empty because they have no love for others. They hold fast to an idea of faith as contrary and enemy of works. But this is a convenient and faulty understanding of Paul that allows them to turn their backs on the poor and needy. Real faith produces fruit and this fruit is clearly seen in Mat. 25:34-38 ("Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for... you gave me food... you gave me something to drink... you welcomed me... you gave me clothing... you took care of me, and you visited me.") Paul presents the same message in Romans 12:9-10, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." It is true that salvation is a free gift of grace through faith, but it is also true that being a disciple of Jesus demands that we do the things Jesus did, that we treat others with compassion, grace, and love.

May we never let our religiosity impede our true humanity. Amen!