

Right Words or Right Actions?

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

September 27, 2026

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21:23-32



Be curious, not judgmental. I can see from the smiles, which of you are fans of the Apple TV Show, *Ted Lasso*. For those who are unfamiliar with the show, Ted is college football coach from Kansas who is hired to coach AFC Richmond, a fictional English Premier soccer club. But that really isn't the heart of the show or pertinent information for the sermon. What *is* important is how Ted's life embodies a spirit of curiosity. Ted sees people. He cares about people and asks good questions. While others are quick to pass judgment, Ted finds creative ways to cultivate curiosity which invites another way of living.

Jesus' interaction with the chief priests and the elders of the people in today's passage would have been very different if he thought their questions were coming from a place of curiosity. But Jesus knew that their questions, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" weren't coming from a place of curiosity, but rather from a place of fear.

This might be a good time to remember the context for our passage. Since the Laborers in the Vineyard parable that Sam so powerfully preached on last week, Jesus has had his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As Jesus rode into town from the east down the Mount of Olives on a donkey with the crowd shouting, "Hosanna in the Highest!", another procession entered Jerusalem from the west led by Pontius Pilate riding on a war horse projecting Roman dominance and imperial authority.

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem in Matthew's gospel, Jesus entered the temple not pausing to pray but flipping tables to cleanse the temple. Jesus is upset. He is upset with the religious leaders. He is upset because people are hungry, and they aren't helping to feed them. He is upset because people are sick, and they are more interested in criticizing Jesus for healing on the sabbath than in giving thanks that the person has been healed.

This isn't the first time the religious leaders have encountered Jesus during his ministry in Galilee, but he is now in Jerusalem. Jesus is now in their Holy City with the Temple—the place that gives these religious leaders their power and authority—and they are afraid. They are afraid that Jesus' authority will reduce their power. So rather than have a spirit of curiosity about Jesus, they are filled with fear.

Before we let ourselves jump to judgment, let's practice some curiosity ourselves. Was there a time at work when there was a new hire who seemed to know exactly what to say and do in any situation, making you fear that your authority or power or importance in the organization was slipping away? Or was there a time in school when a new student arrived who was smart, funny, athletic, and immediately deemed "the cool kid", causing you to be afraid that your friends would want to spend more time with them than with you?

The chief priests and elders are really asking Jesus, "What are your credentials? What makes you important?" But Jesus never answers their questions because they don't answer his question about John the Baptist. Instead, Jesus responds by telling them a story.

More precisely, Jesus begins by asking them a different question, one that invites curiosity. Jesus asks, "What do you think?" before telling them a story about a man with two sons who asked each of them to go and work in the vineyard. You recall that the first one said no but later went, and the second son told his father he would go but never did.

One son responded with the right words but doesn't follow through with the right actions. While the other son didn't initially have the right words but later responded with right actions. In this parable, we don't have to ponder which son did the will of his father, because the parable spells it out for us. The chief priests and elders of the people all agree that the first son did the will of the father.

While they agree that the first more fully carried out the will of the father, it is important to notice that neither son does it perfectly. We can talk about right words and right actions, but neither son says yes and then goes to the vineyard. We all fall short in word and deed, but God asks us anew each and every day, "Will you go and work in the vineyard?"

When we welcome new members which we have the joy of doing today, each new member is saying, "Yes, I will go and work in the vineyard with you!", and we, as a congregation, are saying to them, "Yes, we will go and work in the vineyard with

you!” We are all saying, “Yes, we will respond to God’s grace together.” We will worship and study and serve God together through this faith community. No doubt, we will respond imperfectly, but we are promising to respond together.

With all this talk about right words and right actions, let me pause to be clear. We are saved by grace not by works. There is nothing we can say or do to make God love us more or love us less. God’s love and grace is complete, unconditional, and for all. My reference to right words and right actions are never to earn God’s favor but always offered in response to God’s grace. Our grateful response is to go and work in the vineyard. But what does the vineyard look like?

A couple weeks ago, it looked like Wilson Hall as over 100 people came to the vineyard to work together during our Rise Against Hunger event. An amazing thing about vineyard work is that it is as diverse as the workers, and there is room in the vineyard for all our gifts.

On that Saturday morning with a lively playlist helping to create a joyful atmosphere, we needed lots of people doing a variety of jobs. We needed people standing at tables to measure dry goods and funnel them into bags, we needed people to carry those open bags carefully to other tables where people sat to precisely weigh each bag to make sure there was the right amount before sealing it, and then we needed people to take the sealed bags to the final table where people counted and packed them in boxes, so they were ready to be shipped across the globe where others will gather around tables to fill hungry bellies.

We needed everyone! We needed those who danced around overcome by joy and those who stood back to take it all in while praying for those gathered and for those who would be receiving the meals.

Vineyard work is a faith community coming together to pack over 15,000 meals for hungry people around the world, and vineyard work is taking a meal to a member recovering from surgery. Vineyard work is teaching a class or facilitating a Growth Group, and vineyard work singing in the choir and serving as an acolyte, liturgist, or hospitality team member. Vineyard work is being active in the larger community, seeing others as beloved children of God, and treating them accordingly.

Vineyard work is a congregation coming together when a pastor leaves to continue responding to God’s grace by offering their unique gifts both individually and collectively to be the church in this place. To be the church—to do vineyard

work—we need all the gifts from measuring to weighing to sealing to packing to dancing to praying. What gifts do you have to offer?

Our Father is asking each of us a question, “My beloved child, will you go and work in the vineyard today?” How will you respond?

Our world often portrays a dualistic approach to life, where things are either black or white, right or wrong, words or actions. But thankfully, God is much bigger than this. And God wants our whole selves—our words and our actions, our hearts and our lives. God knows none of us will get it completely right. God knows our hearts in all their imperfection, and God continues to invite us to offer our imperfect, yet faithful, “YES”—not just in what we say, but in how we live.

Be curious, not judgmental. When God asks us, “Will you go and work in the vineyard?”, let us respond with open hearts full of curiosity and gratitude as we offer our whole selves to God.

May we live our lives in response to God’s grace as we dance about the vineyard using our divinely given gifts to joyfully participate in God’s work.

May it be so. Amen.