

Just Do It
Matthew 21:23-32
John Breon

We're following a plan for reading through the Bible this year. If you didn't start in January or you've gotten behind in reading, you can pick it up now and move on. I thought about using sections of the readings we're doing for sermons during Lent and maybe a while beyond. As I looked at what we would be reading in these weeks, I was drawn to this section of Matthew's Gospel. The reading plan is taking us through the Gospels at a leisurely pace. It's making us slow down and read the Gospels a little bit at a time. I think that may be good for us.

This section of Matthew describes the last week before Jesus' crucifixion. A good bit of it includes Jesus' public teaching in the Jerusalem temple as well as private teaching to his disciples.

Today we're looking at a challenge to Jesus' authority and one of his parables about doing God's will, not just talking about it. God's grace isn't an excuse to do nothing. Faith and trust aren't simply passive. Life in Christ involves an active faith.

This scene is soon after Jesus entered Jerusalem with the crowds shouting his praise. He's driven the merchants and money-changers out of the temple area and now he's teaching in the temple court.

Some of the political and religious authorities, the chief priests and the elders, come to him and ask, "What authority do you have to do the things you're doing here? Who gave you this authority?" Jesus acts as a typical rabbi and answers their question with another question. Jesus tells them that if they'll answer his question, he'll answer theirs. He asks, "Was John's baptism from God or was it just a human impulse?"

If the religious-political leaders said that John the Baptizer's ministry was from God, they would have to admit that Jesus was from God because John clearly stated that Jesus was from God. But if they denied that John's ministry came from God, they would have to face an angry mob of people who believed that John was a prophet. Trying to set a trap for Jesus, they

get caught between their prejudice against him and their fear of the people.

So they give Jesus a lame answer: "We don't know." Of course they knew, but they were afraid to say what they knew. As members of the Sanhedrin—the ruling council—part of their duty was to distinguish between true and false prophets. Now they claim that they can't make such a distinction. Forced to admit their lack of ability as teachers, they're in no position to question Jesus' authority.

So Jesus refuses to tell them where his authority comes from. We can see Jesus' authority all through the Gospel. He teaches with authority. A Roman centurion recognizes his authority to heal. He embodies God's kingdom because he's the authorized King. He shares with his disciples authority to announce the kingdom and to heal. After his resurrection, as he sends disciples into the whole world to make more disciples, he reminds them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (28:18).

Now, after turning his opponents' trap back on them, he tells them a parable. Parables were one of Jesus' favorite ways of teaching. A parable is a short story or saying that uses familiar, every-day situations to communicate something about God, God's rule, and human response to God and God's kingdom.

Jesus gets people involved. He asks, "What do you think?" A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." "I will not," said the son. But later he changed his mind, had a change of heart, and went.

The father went to his other son and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." "Yes, sir, I will," said the son. But he didn't go.

Jesus asks, "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" The answer's obvious. When our daughter Rachel was five, I told her this story and asked her which son did what the father wanted. She said, "The first one." The son who did what his father wanted was the one who actually went out and did the work. The political-religious leaders answer Jesus correctly when they say, "The first one did what his father wanted."

Then Jesus says to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. John came to

show you the way of righteousness and you didn't believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn't change your minds, you didn't have a change of heart and believe him" (v 32, NIV and *The Message*).

The parable's pretty clear. The religious-political leaders said they would obey God, but they didn't. They didn't even recognize what God was doing and what God was asking them to do through John and Jesus.

But the tax collectors and prostitutes, representing all kinds of unrighteous social and religious outcasts, had said they would go their own way, do their own thing. But then they changed their minds, had a change of heart, changed their way and went God's way. Therefore, the outcasts will go into God's kingdom before, maybe instead of, the leaders of Israel.

One thing this tells us is that if we've said no, we can change our minds and do God's will. The future can have more power in our lives than the past, if we'll let it. If we say yes, but don't obey God, we miss what God's kingdom means, we miss what it means to follow Jesus. But if we hear Jesus and follow him, no matter how we've failed in the past, we experience God's kingdom, we share in God's kingdom, we will enter fully and fully receive God's kingdom. (On this, see Myron Augsburger, *Matthew, The Communicator's Commentary*).

Jesus repeatedly emphasizes actually doing God's will. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). In his story about two builders, the wise one who built on a solid foundation represents those who hear Jesus' words and put them into practice (7:24-27). This is a theme in the letter of James. He writes about how believing the right stuff without doing anything about it is useless. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (1:22). The apostle Paul joins in: "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (Romans 2:13). Paul will go on to show that obedience to the law is fulfilled through Jesus' faithfulness and the Holy Spirit's work in us as we put our faith in Jesus.

The point is that it's possible to know the right things to believe and not let them affect how we behave. It's possible to know the right words to say and sing and pray and yet not do what God wants.

Nike's slogan can remind us about God's will: "Just do it." I looked that up to see if Nike still uses it. They do. But the first thing that came up was a ridiculous video of Shia LeBeouf ranting and yelling, "Just do it!" Jesus isn't coming across like that. He's inviting us to enter into life with him in the kingdom of God where faith and love and action all go together.

One question some have asked about this parable is, why did the father have to tell his sons to work in the vineyard? It belonged to the family. They would inherit it someday Why wouldn't they be more interested in working it as a family?

We're God's children. Do we have to be reemployed in a calling that's ours since God chooses us? What motivates us to do God's will?

A man received a "Second Notice" from a collection agency about a debt payment that was overdue. Unless it was paid immediately, they would take legal action. The very next day, the man went to them with the overdue payment in hand and said, "I would have paid sooner, but I never received your 'First Notice.'" The clerk replied, "We ran out of 'First Notice' forms. Besides, we discovered that the 'Second Notices' are much more effective" (James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* 384-85).

Then there's the old one about the man who took a short cut through a cemetery late one night and fell into an open grave. He called for help and tried to climb out. But he couldn't get out and there was no one around to hear him. So he settled down for the night in a corner of the dark grave to wait for morning. A little while later another man came the same way through the cemetery, taking the same short cut home and fell in the same grave. He started clawing and shouting and trying to get out just like the first one had done. Suddenly, the second fellow heard a voice out of the dark corner of the grave saying, "You can't get out of here." But he did! (*Illustrations Unlimited* 385).

With the right motivation, we can do a lot of things we didn't think we could do. But God doesn't want us to obey because we are forced or frightened into it. God wants our free and willing obedience that flows out

of our relationship with God as our loving Father and Friend. We discover God's will through consistent communion with God.

God has revealed enough in the Scriptures and in the life of Jesus to keep us busy for the rest of our lives doing what we know to do of God's will. Start doing what you know, what you can do, and then you'll find more of what God has for you to do. If we start walking with God, and doing what we know, more truth will dawn on us as we travel.

What if we start with, "He has showed you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Or, the "Jesus Creed" we've talked about recently: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

For the practical-minded, here are three basics that show we're at work in God's vineyard, that we're involved in God's kingdom. These come from pastor and author Lloyd Ogilvie's book on the parables of Jesus.

1. We care about people and their needs. Until we pour our lives out for people who do not know the Lord, we haven't started working in the vineyard. How then can we ask for God to give us more knowledge of his will?
2. We are following the obvious implications of the gospel in our relationships, responsibilities and the needs of our community. Our families, homes, churches and places of work are the areas in which we learn how to cooperate with the Lord to get his work done.
3. We praise God for what he has shown us in our personal needs in the past and this opens us up to receive his fresh guidance. (*The Autobiography of God* 261)

As people of God's kingdom we're called not just to believe the right things, not just to say the right words or sing the right songs. We're called

by God to be people of action—to go where God says go and do what God says to do.

The will of God: don't just talk about it, but do it.