

Read: *Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.*

Pray: *Father as we come to listen to your voice, give us grace to submit to your authority. Reveal to us the life we have in your name and lead us away from rejection or religious complacency. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen!*

1. The chief priests and the elders are after Jesus again. It’s a bit like that old movie, ‘Dumb and Dumber,’ with Jim Carey.

- These guys continue to make fools of themselves!
- They think they’ve got what it takes to outwit the Messiah.
- They think they’ve got a bullet proof and cunning plan that will trap Jesus – but they end up being the ones with egg all over their faces.

Today they’re questioning Jesus’ authority – which has massive implications for life in the kingdom of God. So they ask Jesus where His authority comes from – heaven or humans. It’s a key question.

You’ll remember at the conclusion of Jesus’ sermon on the mount in chapter 7:28, it reads, ‘**When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and NOT as their teachers of the law.**’

Later in chapter 9, Jesus heals a paralytic in the presence of the teachers of the law. They’re muttering to themselves [not to Jesus] that he is a blasphemer because he is forgiving sins. Jesus, knowing their thoughts responds, ‘...but so that you may know that **the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...**’ then he said to the paralytic, ‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’

Now today Jesus has cleansed the Temple of money changers and restored it to its proper God ordained use as a house of prayer and healing. The indignant chief priests and elders having seen the wonderful things he did and the children singing ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ - are of course outraged.

2. The problem of course is that their hearts are exposed again – by Jesus. They think their trap is genius. If Jesus says his authority is from God and he is the messiah, then they will run to Rome and have Jesus charged for rebellion against Caesar’s authority. Or he could say his authority is human and lose the approval of the crowds following him.

In true rabbinic style, Jesus answers their questioning of his authority with another question: *“I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”²⁵ John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”*

This isn’t a stall tactic. John the Baptist’s ministry was a major revival movement in Israel prior to Jesus. These Religious leaders should have something to say about it. But what happens? They go off into their holy huddle to see if they can reason their way out of it to save their own backs. *“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”²⁷ So they answered*

Jesus, *“We don’t know.”* Then he said, *“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”*

These religious leaders hated John the Baptist. He called them names! (brood of vipers – which probably upset them) He dealt with their tall poppy syndrome. He cut them back to reality telling them they were no better than anyone else who came out to the desert to see him.

Their credentials, advanced theological degrees, and their Sanhedrin Gold Cards meant nothing to John – or God. John confronted their outwardly religious way of life. If they wanted to be saved, they had to submit to John's baptism of repentance the same as everyone else. But would they submit to John's baptism?! No these guys thought they *were the authority* – they wouldn't submit to anyone.

Being cowards at heart they can't admit to Jesus that they opposed God by not listening to John and they're afraid of John's disciples - so they opt out altogether and say to Jesus, *“We don't know. We don't know if John's baptism was from heaven or human origins...”*

“Well, then I'm not going to tell you about my authority, either” says Jesus.

The conversation is all but over except for a short parable of two sons...

²⁸ ***“What do you think?”*** [says Jesus] *There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’* ²⁹ *“I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.* ³⁰ *“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.* ³¹ *“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”* *“The first,” they answered.*

3. What do you think?

Something big is coming here. There are two sons. One honest son who says he doesn't want to go to work in the vineyard, but eventually gets off the couch and goes. The other son says all the right words but does nothing at all. *“Which of the two did what the Father wanted?”* What do you think?

The first son who didn't want to go into the vineyard, had a **godly sorrow** come over him because he didn't respond to his father's request. He was honest – but then had a change of heart! This son didn't have this godly sorrow come over him and then stay on the couch – he got off the couch and went to work for his father. He made a change as soon as he saw his error.

The second son had all the right words. He's Mr Smooth. He knew what to say to keep up appearances – but had no respect for authority and no intention of submitting to anyone.

Who does that sound like?

Jesus says to the religious leaders, *“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”*

They are that second son. In fact they're even worse. Jesus is addressing a bunch of dead corpses standing right in front of him with hearts of rock-hard stone! The very people these chief priests and elders wouldn't associate with are marching into the Kingdom of heaven while they stand on the

verge of hell. They're dead because they won't repent and believe in Jesus from the heart. They're dead because even though they say all the right words and have all the right forms of worship, their hearts are far from God.

It's like the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee prayed about himself, *“God I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evil doers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”* But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to Heaven, but beat his breast and said, *‘God have mercy on me a sinner.’* It was this tax collector that went home justified before God that day.

Did you know that you can be very religious and not have a saving faith?

4. These parables aren't just addressed to the Jewish religious leaders – Jesus is speaking this parable to the church today.

The church can be a lot like those religious leaders. It can be a *gold card, member's only club* where people you're not comfortable with aren't invited to worship or welcomed or even spoken to after the service.

Have you ever avoided a person at church because you didn't want to talk to them – or they made you uncomfortable? That's how the religious leaders felt about prostitutes and tax collectors. They were extortionists and the sexually immoral of society. We might call them socially challenged or people we couldn't trust or befriend because we have nothing in common with them. (or so we think!)

The MASSIVE problem is they are the same people that have a GREAT need for Jesus – only no-one will get close enough to tell them the good news! What's going on???

It took John the Baptist and Jesus Christ to do it in ancient Israel for the very same reasons.

God hasn't called anyone here to an exclusive card holder's club. God hasn't called you to be more concerned about keeping up appearances or saying all the right words – and then stopping there. Compare that to Luther's description of faith when he said: **“true faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing.”** *Isn't that great? He's right too!*

Instead God is calling you today to live in the faith you have received from the Lord. God has given you a living, busy, active and mighty thing in order that you might use it EVERY DAY for His glory.

- This kind of living faith isn't afraid to get beside someone and simply point them to the saviour.
- It's not preachy or long-winded, but encouraging and focussed on the needs of others.
- It invites people to come along to worship;
- It sees people created in the image of God and longs to see their great emptiness filled with Christ and flowing with the living water of the Holy Spirit!
- Living faith climbs over social barriers to reach the person - because love overcomes all fear.

5. God has exciting and momentous things in store for His church. Will the church step up and be obedient to the call?

Will you respond to Jesus flowing from His gracious dealings with you and with this larger group of disciples you're a part of?

Listen to God's words from Philippians 2 today,

¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

The religious leaders couldn't reach out to tax collectors and prostitutes because all they knew were rules and regulations. Their hearts didn't know God's grace! They couldn't hear when John the Baptist pointed to One coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

That's not the case for you who have been united with Christ in the waters of Christian baptism. That's not the case for you who have been given a living, busy, active and mighty Spirit filled faith in Christ!

- You who continue to receive heavenly encouragement in the Word and at His altar,
- Who continue to receive the comfort of cleansing and sins forgiven,
- the blessing of fellowship and community amongst the Royal Priesthood,
- Who know the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in every circumstance of life.

Today you're being called out to extend that healing Gospel flow to others. The flow that is yours because your saviour: *‘...humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!’*⁹

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess His Lordship. How will we respond to Jesus' authority and His call to go out beyond these walls? How will we respond to the prostitutes and tax collectors of our day?

Will we fulfil the words of Jesus' parable like the first son, or will we say yes, but do nothing like the other son?

"True faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing." Let's reach out to others this week from grace filled hearts in Jesus' name. Amen!